



# CHARACTER GOALS & CONFLICTS:

## How I Do It

From THE DOWN HOME ZOMBIE BLUES  
Linnea Sinclair – Bantam Dell Nov 2007

### Chapter 6

It looked like another bright, beautiful day in paradise—once Theo's eyes focused and his stomach stopped doing nosedives. If he could only stop scratching at his arms, the back of his neck, his... For the first time in several hours, he saw a small smile curve across Jorie's mouth.

"What's so funny?" He didn't intend that to be the first thing he said when they materialized in a secluded section of the park two blocks from his house. He intended to give her a briefing of what to expect from the cops and emergency personnel at the scene. *Keep your mouth shut, keep a low profile, and follow my lead*, was the gist of it. He would get to that in a minute. If he could only stop scratching. And she'd stop trying not to grin.

"Your stomach spins and a thousand flittercreepers dance on your skin, no?"

"Just a little itching," he lied. He had no idea what flittercreepers were, but his body felt as if it had gone through the spin-cycle on his washing machine. More than once. But he was not going to give her the satisfaction of knowing this nil couldn't handle it. **[this is Theo's minor personal immediate goal which also indicates characterization]** Not after his embarrassing performance on her ship the first time. He urged her forward toward the short stretch of brick-paved street and glanced carefully down at his watch. His head did another looping spin, then settled. Ten after nine.

"Normal. The body reacquaints itself after a brief separation."

Neither he nor his roiling stomach wanted to think any further on that explanation. "Does it ever stop happening?"

"No. But eventually you ignore it. Don't worry. We use shuttles to Paroo."

He wasn't worried. He had no intention of going through that transporter gizmo again. And he sure as hell wasn't going to be on any shuttle to Paroo. **[This is Theo's stated larger GOAL for the most of the book]** "Okay, this is what's more than likely going to happen when we walk up. We need to have our stories straight. You say as little as possible, let me do the talking. Understand?" **[This is Theo's immediate goal]**

She nodded. He described the different vehicles, their purpose, and personnel as simplistically as possible, though he noted her English—or her understanding of his English—was improving. Once he showed his ID, he told her, the cops would know him and most likely accept his story that he was out checking for anyone needing help after the storm. He'd recognized Jorie as a neighbor and he was escorting her back home—careful of the tree limbs and downed power lines. **[this is narrative summary]**

"They're not going to ask for names, specifics. I'm one of their own. I act concerned, you act concerned, we go inside and they leave. Easy. Simple. Understand?"

"When they ask which is my structure—"

"They won't. You're with me. But if they do, there's a mid-rise condo at the other end of my street just behind Coconut Grove Center. Grove Palms. Can you remember that?"

"Grove Palms," she repeated. "And a conto is...?"

"Condo. C-o-n-d-o. Tall structure, many levels, many small apartments. Residential. Like the ship, sort of."

"Ah. Conglom."

“Condo.”

“Vekran, conglom. You, condo.”

They left the park and walked down the shady side of the street, sometimes on the grass, sometimes, when the foliage grew wildly, on the street itself. There were no sidewalks. Late morning noises surrounded them—the slamming of doors, the barking of a dog, a child’s happy shout because it was Christmas break and schools were closed. Street traffic was light; only one car passed. It was after nine; most of his neighbors would already be at work.

Another minute and he could see the line of vehicles in front of his house.

For the third time during their trek, she pulled up one edge of her sweater, glanced at what looked to him like a longer, slightly wider PDA clipped to her belt. The magic button that would drop him, writhing, to the ground? He knew she’d stated that she and her captain would have to agree before she used it, but he wasn’t fully sure he bought that. He doubted that if he were to suddenly grab her and go for her weapons, she’d politely hold up one hand and say *Excuse me, I have to make a call*.

No, he was pretty sure she had full authority to end his life without a conference. All the more reason he had to appear completely cooperative until he knew exactly where that magic button was and its range. **[A restatement of the larger conflict]**

She released the unit, pulled her sweater down.

“Messages?” he asked.

“This?” She tapped her side. “Scanner. *Right now*, seeking energy changes that warn of a zombie.”

“All quiet?”

“All quiet.”

He nodded. *Right now*, she said. Right now that thing functioned as a scanner. It might have other functions as well. He wasn’t going to cross it off his list yet.

The low rumble of car engines at idle reached his ears, topped by the grinding sound of the fire truck’s diesel. The green-and-white patrol car sat at the curb in front of his house, one officer in a similarly colored uniform leaning against its trunk. Another uniform was probably around back or else behind the fire engine. Its large red bulk blocked his view of anything farther down the street. But the firemen were loading their gear, packing to leave. That was good. The less people who saw her, the better. He nudged Jorie forward, quickening his pace, falling into the role of Concerned Homeowner and Can You Believe What Happened?

Which was pretty much his opening line: “Hey, can you believe that storm?”

His shout made the uniform turn. He recognized the dark-haired woman as Carla Eddington, a patrol cop who knew him but not well enough to question his fabricated story or Jorie’s presence. A real stroke of luck. She was only on the job about eight months, having moved down from Massachusetts. Sometimes it seemed everyone from up north sooner or later migrated to Florida.

Even space aliens and zombies.

“Sergeant Petrakos?” Her voice carried clearly over the engine noises. “Damn, are we glad to see you!” She jogged toward him, inclining her head to speak into the shoulder mike clipped to her white uniform shirt as she did, hopefully advising the others on scene that no body bags were needed. He watched her gaze dart to Jorie in her oversize sweater, shorts, and hiking boots, then back to him again. He was glad he’d altered Jorie’s clothing. A woman—especially a woman cop—would have definitely have noticed they were not the norm. “Where in hell have you been?”

“Out checking for injured. Helluva storm.”

“Yeah, some kind of freak tornado. One of them microbursts, maybe. We thought it kidnapped you, Sarge. Couldn’t find a body, but your yard, your car... Hey, that’s what we have insurance for, right?”

“You sure it was a tornado?” He pasted a stricken look on his face.

Another glance at Jorie, then back to him again. “Must have been. We’ve got lines down all over the place. Progress has two trucks here, but power’s still out on the street.”

He shook his head, walking with her toward his house. “*That* I know. I went to check on the neighbors. Ran into Jorie.” He jerked his thumb to his left, where Jorie kept pace silently. Thank God. **[Theo showing concern about the continued immediate goal]** “She lives down the block. I know her from the, uh, gym.” Well, the slung over her shoulder did look like a gym bag.

“C’mon,” Eddington said to Theo as the fire truck gunned its engine loudly. “I’ll take you ’round back.”

He lightly grasped Jorie’s elbow, bringing her with him.

The scene that met his eyes was worse than he remembered. The fallen palms, shredded hedges, and battered remains of his unmarked police sedan did indeed look as if a tornado had touched down. Maritana County was prone to such freak storms. He remembered when a small tornado tore the roof off one house in Treasure Island, touching nothing else on the street. He'd seen water spouts on the Gulf hop and skip over the barrier islands, then reappear again in the channel, heading for the elite Tierra Grande island community.

If he hadn't seen the zombie with his own eyes, he'd believe a tornado did this too. And he was not only a cop but a detective. Damn!

"Damn!" he swore out loud, his hands shoved in his back pockets as he walked around the twisted wreckage of his vehicle, Jorie at his side. He needed Eddington to go back to her patrol car so he could shove the stripped T-MOD into the trunk of his car. "I must have been at the neighbor's when the twister did this. The lieutenant's not going to be happy. I'll call the wrecker—"

"The boss will just be damned glad you're alive, *amigo*," said a familiar male voice behind him.

Theo screwed his eyes shut. Shit! Zeke Martinez. Not him, not now, not with Jorie standing a hairbreadth from his side and Eddington yammering on about how this was one hell of a way to start his vacation. **[This is where the goal starts to be thwarted]**

He turned just in time to have Zeke clasp one arm over his shoulder. "Thought we'd lost you for good. I—well, hello there! Now I can see why you weren't answering your cell phone."

Zeke had noticed Jorie. Of course he had. Who could miss her? Though Theo obviously missed seeing Martinez's car. It must be behind the fire truck. "Jorie Mikkalah, Zeke Martinez." He stepped out of Zeke's embrace, realizing what it might look like. Did her galaxy have same-sex couples? "We, uh, work together in Homicide," he added hastily, praying Zeke didn't go all Latin and kiss him on the cheek.

"Jorie. A beautiful name for a beautiful lady." Zeke held out his hand.

*Panagia mou!* Did they shake hands in her galaxy? Or was it a rude gesture, some kind of major insult that would spawn an intergalactic war? He shot Jorie a tight smile, gave a quick, short nod of his head. *Take his hand, take his hand!*

**[Another immediate conflict is raised]**

"Thank you," she said and—*thank you, God*—she reached out for Zeke.

He clasped her hand. "So, known this wayward bastard long?"

Theo saw her frown slightly, knew she had no idea what Zeke asked. His mind blanked on any kind of amusing rejoinder to divert attention from her. And then something worse happened. Eddington answered for her.

"Sarge knows her from working out at the gym. He was checking on his neighbors and ran across her."

Zeke released her hand. A big grin crossed his face. "Is that so?"

Theo was in trouble now. Big trouble. **[Conflicts increase because as is stated a few paragraphs later, Zeke knows Theo doesn't go to a gym so Zeke knows this is a lie.]** He grabbed Jorie's arm, propelling her toward his back door. "I—we need to make sure all the appliances are turned off." Maybe then they'd leave and he could plant the T-MOD in the car.

"I'll help," Zeke said.

*Shit!*

"Might want to open your windows," Eddington called after them. "That cold front moved through and today's gonna be a hot one."

Things were hot already. He urged Jorie ahead of him, up the two steps, then stopped on the wide slab of his back porch. He plastered on his best good-buddy grin and faced Zeke. "Sorry to have worried you. Appreciate your coming over here. But, really, we can handle—"

"I'm sure you can." Zeke reached around him and opened the door. "Allow me, pretty lady."

Theo gave her a short nod when she glanced up at him. With a shrug, she stepped inside.

"Now, *that's* nice," Zeke said under his breath, punctuating his words with a bad imitation of a jungle cat's growl.

Oh, Christ. He was in deep shit now...