

# *REDEMPTION SKY*

*A REDEMPTION CHRONICLES Novel*

*JO ROLAND*

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This novel's story and characters are fictitious. Certain long-standing institutions, agencies, and public offices are mentioned, but the characters involved are wholly imaginary. If you or someone you know is in a two-way conversation with the constellations, you should probably get that checked by a professional.

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*To Sofia and Ethan, the two brightest stars in my universe.  
Andi & Rion have learned a lot from you.*

*For My Dad*

*The REDEMPTION CHRONICLES*

*Redemption Beach*

*Redemption Sky*

## DEAR READER —

*The book you are about to begin contains situations surrounding death, grief, and alcohol abuse.*

*If you need support with any of these situations, please contact a professional for help. You can find some resources on my website under the RESOURCES tab at [www.joroland.com](http://www.joroland.com).*

*You are not alone.*



*"Moments are as numerous as the stars in the sky, and the sands in the sea, and any of them could prove to be your most significant divine moments."*

*—Erwin McManus, Chasing Daylight*

She should have stayed home. After her fourth golden margarita, the Wacky Tiki was more than Andi could handle. "Ready to go?" she yelled at Nita. Screaming was a requirement since the DJ had been playing techno-pop at an obnoxiously high decibel level all night long.

Nita raised one jewel encrusted, cherry red fingernail in Andi's face while she let her hottie of the moment finish his sentence.

Andi needed copious amounts of alcohol to get through these escapades with her friend. Nita had an innate sun-kissed glow, and her figure was all curves accented by short skirts. Her fingernails and matching lipstick were like cherries on top of a

coffee ice cream sundae. She was the center of attention for every Y chromosome within visual range and Andi paled in comparison.

Literally paled in comparison.

Nita's skin tone was warm, creamy, café au lait, whereas Andi's was muted peach. Everything about Andi was straight — straight dirty blonde hair, straight slim frame, straight stick up her ass. She accepted her position as quiet sidekick, present at times only to save her friend from the sleazy guys. Her secret to survival was margaritas. Two loosened her up. Three took her to the edge, and four—after four margaritas, it was either time to go or find a man of her own. Tonight, it was time to go.

"What about the lumberjack over there?" Nita said. She pointed to the guy Andi had just told she was leaving.

"Nobody's home in his cabin." Andi thought her comment worked well with Nita's woodsy theme, but Nita stared at her, confused. Andi pointed to her temple and made a cutting motion across her neck. She pointed to her watch. "Time. To. Leave."

Nita shook her head no.

She pulled Nita around the corner where the music was buffered.

"I'm not ready. Get an Uber."

"Seriously?" Andi found it surprising that Nita would suggest such a thing.

"Yeah, I think I'm going home with Trent, anyway."

"Who's Trent?" Andi asked.

Nita leaned back so she could facilitate introductions. "Trent, Andi." She pointed as she yelled their names to each other.

Trent nodded his excessively gelled head in her direction. "Hey," he silently mouthed, not bothering to make himself audible.

Andi nodded in return. She looked at her friend. "If you're sure. I'm gonna call my dad then. No way I'm taking an Uber by myself."

"I don't understand you. Drivers bring drunk women home all the time without exploiting the situation. You'll be fine," Nita said.

"Maybe so, but I'm not risking it. My dad's always good for a ride."

"You know how weird that is at your age, right?" Nita asked.

"Who's calling who weird?" Andi smiled and hugged her. "See you tomorrow," she shouted, but Nita had already returned to Trent.

Andi left the club and stood under the thatched awning in front of the restaurant entrance, giving her ears a few minutes to stop ringing before she called her dad's cell.

He answered on the first ring. "Andi, you okay?" he asked without saying hello. He was whispering, so her mother was probably asleep next to him.

"Hi Daddy. Can you come pick me up? I'm at the tiki bar downtown." She swayed in place as she spoke to him. Either that, or the world was spinning faster than usual.

"Sure Meatball. I'll be there soon," he said.

She heard the springs of her parent's bed creak as he stood.

"What's going on?"

Andi's mother's voice rang through the phone. Andi was hoping her mom would sleep through the call, even though she was the lightest sleeper on the planet. Her radar was always on, especially when it pertained to her children. Andi and her siblings referred to it as the "Belinda-meter." Because of it, they rarely got away with late night comings and goings as they were growing up.

"I'm going to get Andi. I'll be right back," he said, and then she heard him kiss her.



"Thanks Dad. I'm out front," Andi said before disconnecting the call.

She scanned the area and spotted a welcoming bench outside the range of the blazing street lights on which to perch herself while she waited. When she sat, the spinning settled into soft waves. They were more tolerable, so Andi reclined and tilted her head up to stare at the stars. The fall constellations of Pisces, Cetus and Cepheus lit up the clear November sky. Unfortunately, Andromeda and Cassiopeia also joined them. Their names forever tied her to her sister in more ways than blood. Observing these constellations, Andi couldn't escape thoughts of her family and their eternal bond.

"It's a beautiful night." A jovial male voice addressed her from her right.

She turned her head slowly to find a handsome, middle-aged man who reminded her of a young Denzel Washington. He wore blue jeans, an extremely tacky Hawaiian shirt, and a huge pearly white grin.

He pointed at the sky. "Celestial views enthrall me, as I rarely witness such a stellar spectacle back home. Too much light pollution."

"Where are you from?" she asked. This man had an easy way about him that must put everyone he met at ease.

"New Jersey, just outside the bright skyline of Philadelphia. Oh, forgive my manners," he said, walking closer to her and extending his hand. In the soft light, Andi observed the man's arm shining, making him almost glow. "My name is Dr. Dwayne Conrad."

Andi hauled herself to a more upright position and reached her hand towards his. When their palms touched, there was a shock of static electricity exchanged between them. Andi jerked her hand back.

"My apologies," he chuckled. "I tend to do that to people. My only explanation is my northern body is doing its best to acclimate to the mild southern temperatures."

Andi nodded slowly through her alcohol-induced haze.

They locked eyes briefly, his friendly gaze expecting a response that Andi's intoxicated mind couldn't comprehend.

"So, do you spend many nights outside clubs staring intently at the sky?" he asked.

The direct question brought her one step closer to coherence. "I stare intently at the sky all the time. I'm an astronomer at SkyBridge Planetarium." Though he hadn't asked for all of that information, she felt compelled to share.

"Wonderful. That must be a very exciting line of work, Miss..." He left an opening for her to offer her name.

"Oh, sorry. I'm Andi," she said. She couldn't take her eyes off of him. Unsure if she had even blinked since he started talking to her, she forced them to shut and open twice.

"Andi. Is that a nickname, possibly for Andrea or something similar?"

"Actually, it is. My full name is Andromeda Louise Luna." Why did she offer all that information? She wasn't usually so forthcoming with strangers.

"My, that is beautiful and unusual. With a name like that and your field of work, it makes sense why you seem at home among the stars."

"My parents met at a Star Trek convention and my dad's always studied the stars. They went a little overboard with me and my siblings." *Just. Stop. Talking.*

"Oh, how do you mean?" Dr. Conrad's eyes narrowed and his brows raised.

"My sisters are Cassiopeia and Carina, and my brother is Orion. And the family dog is Procyon, but we all call him Pro. Understandably, we all use nicknames." *No one cares, idiot.*

"I commend their choices. There is nothing better than being given a name with deep meaning. If, for no other reason than as a source of stimulating conversation with strangers." He poked fun at their current situation. "Well, Andromeda Louise Luna, it has been a pleasure. I hope we run into each other again sometime." He bowed his head at her before smiling and wandering off to the parking lot across the street.

As she watched him go, the foggiess of her brain lifted ever so slightly. Perfect timing because her father's black Kia Cadenza pulled into the valet loop.

He lowered the window and called out to her. "Princess Andromeda, your chariot awaits."



## 2

*"I would like to die on Mars, just not on impact."*

*—Elon Musk*

Andi sank into the leather bucket seat and pulled the door shut. She turned to her father with a grateful smile. "Thanks for picking me up. You know how I hate to take Ubers by myself."

He lifted the right side of his mouth and narrowed his eyes. "Likely story. I believe you secretly enjoy time alone with me, even though you're aware I'm going to give you another one of my 'Lessons With Dad.'" He shifted the car into motion.

She collapsed in on herself sheepishly. "There's nothing secret about me enjoying solo time with you, dad, though you tell me the same thing every time you pick me up. Could we please skip it just this once?" She adjusted her skirt so the length would hit its appropriate spot just above her knee.

“Well, when are you going to save me from repeating myself and start listening?” He wasn’t yelling at her. His question came with the deep emotion that infused every part of Gus Luna’s character.

She couldn’t come up with a suitable response. As they drove back toward the family home, she watched her dad attentively. She’d spend the night there, in her childhood bedroom, in the same way she did each time he picked her up. In the morning, her mother would rise early enough to scowl at her across the kitchen table before Andi asked for a ride back to her apartment, which was just over a mile away.

Her dad’s thinning hair crested like a rooster’s comb on top of his head, a telltale sign he had rushed from his bed to get her. Unlike Andi and her siblings, Gus was a picture of his Sicilian heritage. His olive complexion and dark features caused many questions about his role as their father over the years. If her brother Rion hadn’t inherited their father’s hazel eyes, and Cassie his prominent nose, they would’ve wondered about their mother’s interactions with the mailman.

“I only wish the best for you. Your mother and I have worked so hard to give you the things we never had the chance to have ourselves. I’m so proud of you being an astronomer and I know one day soon you’re gonna get your break. We only want you to be ready when it shows up.”

Italian guilt served up with a sweet cannoli chaser. She was familiar with this lecture, delivered innumerable times throughout her life, in different variations. Her parents had given up their dreams so that Andi and her siblings could pursue theirs. That was part of the motivation for Andi to become an astronomer. Her father had always aspired to be one himself, but they couldn’t afford the extended schooling once Belinda started having babies. Under this umbrella of family pressure, Andi chose to stay close to

home and accept a position at the local planetarium that was well beneath her skill level. They all hoped that one day she'd receive a better offer.

"I hear you Dad." She sighed. "Sometimes it's hard to deal with the fact that I spend most days in the gift shop instead of the planetarium, though. What's the point if I have almost no chance of moving up? Brian is happy being Lead, and he's got seniority. I'll never advance as long as Jerry keeps him there. He's only throwing me a bone with one or two shows a month to keep me primed in case Brian ever takes vacation or a sick day. It's frustrating."

She pressed the button to recline a few inches and stared out the passenger window. They had left the main road and curved onto a darker side street.

Gus huffed. "I understand. Be patient. It'll happen."

She could feel his eyes on her from the driver's seat. Andi pivoted, about to thank him for his confidence, when she spotted the headlights of another car headed straight at them. They approached an intersection that had a two-way stop. The other driver wasn't stopping—wasn't even slowing.

"Dad, look out!" Her father's knuckles turned white on the wheel. He slammed on the brakes and the car skidded into the intersection.

Everything spun around Andi. Her father's yell mixed with the crunching sound from the impact. They were spinning toward a stand of trees in slow motion. Another louder crunching sound and an explosion in front of Andi. Something punched her chest and face, throwing her against her seat. She threw up and blacked out.



*"A philosopher once asked, 'Are we human because we gaze at the stars, or do we gaze at them because we are human?' Pointless really. 'Do the stars gaze back?' Now, that's a question."*

*—Neil Gaiman, Stardust*

She came to in a fog of gunpowder and sick.

"Did anyone call 911?" her father asked.

An unfamiliar voice responded, "I did. They should be here any minute."

Andi's eyes fluttered. "What happened?"

"Good news. She's alive."

"Of course I'm alive." Andi didn't recognize either of the voices or faces she could see out the windows. An audible, swift intake of breath came from somewhere overhead.

"Yes, you're alive. Help is on the way," one onlooker said.

“We saw the guy who hit you, but he took off before we could read the plate.”

Andi sat still, allowing the world around her to stop spinning before she asked, “Dad, are you all right?” He sat in his seat, alert and blinking rapidly.

“Yep, I’m okay, kiddo. Just letting the dust settle.” His voice was shaky, but he looked uninjured.

Andi assessed her body, moving fingers, toes, then limbs and finally stretching her neck. Vomit covered her, but everything seemed to work without too much pain. She took a deep breath and released her seat belt.

“Maybe you shouldn’t move until the paramedics get here,” Guy Number One said to her. He was of medium height, well groomed, with a full short beard. Concern for her, evident in his tone.

“Yes, she should remain in the vehicle until authorized medical assistance arrives. That is wise advice,” came another voice. This one carried a proper British accent. Andi was looking at the two men beside the car, but neither of their mouths had moved to match those words. “Okay, I’ll stay ‘until the authorized medical assistance arrives,’” she agreed, but feeling a little annoyed by the instruction, sarcastically matched the intonation.

“Oh, are you a tourist?” Guy Number Two asked. He was shorter and bulkier than the other, though equally well groomed.

Andi gave a frustrated chuckle. “No, only lightening the mood by matching that guy’s accent.”

“What guy?” Number One asked.

“What accent?” Number Two asked.

Her father glanced in her direction. He panted, but the questioning look was for her.



"Whoever just agreed with you about me staying in the car." She did not need this frustration right now. Sirens and flashing lights approached from behind.

"Uh oh. She heard you, Cent." This fresh voice sounded as if he came straight out of the Bronx. Each word dripped with New York attitude she'd encountered in any variety of television shows and movies. Again, the body that matched the statement was nowhere to be seen.

"Of course I heard you. I'm sitting right here and I'm not deaf." Andi stared at them.

"My stars, silence friends."

*There's that British dude again.*

"No one said anything, sweetheart." Her father's tone was soft. He touched her hand.

Two paramedics approached either side of the car and all conversation about the strange voices ceased.

A pudgy thirty-something female directed questions at Andi as she stuffed her fingers into blue nitrile gloves. "Hi there. Can you tell me your name, please?"

"Andi." The pounding in her head mimicked a slow drumbeat.

"Andi? What's your full name?"

"Andromeda Louise Luna. What's yours?" She glared at her inquisitor.

Eyebrows raised, the EMT said, "That's very interesting."

Andi lamented that her name always drew such responses. "Thank the guy next to me for that one."

Her father chuckled, but without his usual enthusiasm.

"Okay, Andi, we'll keep things simple. I'm Erica. Can you tell me where you are?"

"The very cramped front seat of my dad's Kia and covered in puke. Erica, may I get out of here?" She did not enjoy the discomfort and vulnerability of her current position.

"Sorry, not yet. We're going to assess any trauma first, then we'll clean you up a bit. Have you tried moving your fingers and toes?" she asked.

"Yep. Everything works."

"I smell some alcohol on your breath. Have you been drinking?" she asked.

"Yes, that's why I'm in this seat and my dad is driving." Despite her current situation, the questions perturbed her. "This accident wasn't our fault. My dad's sober. Some guy ran the stop sign and took off."

"I understand," Erica said. "We'll make sure all of that gets into the police report. However, I need to clear some of this glass so we can check your vitals before we transfer you to the ambulance. Do you follow?" Erica asked. She stated her steps clearly and waited for Andi's responses before acting, which Andi appreciated.

Once that was out of the way, Erica carefully ran her hands around the back of Andi's skull. "You've got quite a bump there."

"Ya think?" Andi's patience was running thin.

Erica apologized and handed Andi a few paper towels to wipe herself off. Then she brought a stethoscope to Andi's chest. "Can you take a deep breath without it hurting?"

Andi completed the task with a twinge of soreness. She winced.

"Not so good?" Erica asked. "Might be a bruised or broken rib. Probably from the airbag."

"I thought those air baggies were supposed to protect her, not hurt her." An unfamiliar high-pitched female voice showed concern, but Andi couldn't see who had spoken.

"Please do be quiet." The Brit was back.

Andi needed to leave the car and determine how many people were outside milling around. This was getting ridiculous now.

Why were so many people out and about after midnight in this neighborhood, anyway? Crowds loved a good show, she supposed.

"We'd like to take you to the regional hospital and have them check you out. Before we move you, we're going to put a cervical collar on to stabilize your neck. Let me know if you experience any discomfort."

Andi prepared herself as the gray and white contraption came into her line of vision. She placed it without issue, but as Erica pulled away, Andi yelled, "Ouch!"

"What happened? Where did that pain come from?" Erica froze, gloved hands hovering.

"You yanked my hair. You should probably check for a bald spot while you're at it." Andi attempted to reach her own hand to the back of her head, but the paramedic stopped her.

"Oh, sorry about that." Erica's cheeks reddened.

"Can we just get on with this, please?" She balled her fists. Multiple hours in the hospital loomed in front of her. At least she'd be with her dad.

"How's my father? Honestly? He looks pale," she whispered.

"My partner Mike is working with him the same way I am with you."

Erica helped Andi out of the vehicle toward the back of the waiting ambulance.

"Since you're feeling well enough and able to walk, would you have any objection to sitting on the bench so your father lies on the stretcher?"

"Of course I don't mind. Is he okay?" she asked. She didn't like the sound of Erica's question.

"His blood pressure is pretty high, so it's best if we keep him as relaxed as possible. Having him on the gurney will help," she said.

"Hey Erica? Will you grab my purse and phone from the car? I need to call my brother Rion." Andi watched her father being wheeled toward the open rear doors of the ambulance. With her neck mobilized, she shot her eyes skyward and caught unexpected movement in the beautifully clear twilight expanse. Three constellations aligned perfectly above her. She squinted when she realized they were out of place.

"Oh, thank goodness. She asked for her brother. Much preferred over those sisters of hers."

*Did the entire collection of stars in Virgo just shine brighter?*

"Quiet your mouth, will you?"

Was that Centaurus, in the northern sky? She must really have gotten a good knock on her head.

"Oops. Sorry."

Andi scanned the surrounding area, looking for the source of the voices that puzzled her. The men who had originally called for help stood much too far off in the distance to have spoken so clearly. The firefighters hung out near their truck since they didn't really need to be there, and no one else was around. "How would you know my siblings?" She asked the EMTs.

Erica and Mike exchanged worried glances as they loaded her father inside.

"Once we get to the hospital, we'll contact your family," Mike promised. He sat on the bench next to her and placed a blood pressure cuff on her arm as well.

"Thanks," Andi said. Confusion ran rampant in her brain. Erica slammed the doors shut, cutting off any more noise from the outside.



*"Houston, we've had a problem here."*

*—James Lovell, Apollo 13 Astronaut*

In the emergency room, Andi sat on her cot, waiting for something to happen. After rushing through the doors in a wheelchair, they placed her in a private area separated only by curtains that ran along a curved track on the ceiling. A nurse had cleaned her up, given her an overly starched gown with unwelcome rear ventilation, and bagged her dirty clothes. After she checked her vitals and assessed her injuries, she told Andi the technician would be by shortly to take her for X-rays.

Thankfully, the hospital didn't seem too busy, even though raised voices echoed all around. At least she had her phone. When she called her brother, he promised to pick up their mom and get to them as soon as possible. She hadn't seen or heard from her father since they arrived. His color was off in the ambulance on

the way over, and she figured that had to do with his blood pressure. She refrained from asking too many questions in front of him in case the answers would upset him, so she'd just held his hand and chatted about the stories they would have to tell once this was all over.

From somewhere down the antiseptic laced hallway, an alarm sounded, causing a flurry of activity. A short, heavysset female nurse with a severe bun atop her head peeked into her curtained area and asked, "How are you doing in here?"

"I have a headache and my chest is sore."

"That sounds about right for your situation. The techs are a little backed up, but someone should be in here soon." She smiled, turning away from Andi.

"Nurse?" Andi called. "Can you tell me anything about my dad? He came in with me, but I haven't seen him."

"What's his name?" she asked.

"Augustus Luna. The EMT said his blood pressure was high in the ambulance."

A brief hesitation followed a visible draining of color from the nurse's face. "Oh, umm. The doctors are with him now. I'll tell someone you're expecting an update. I'm sure they'll be over as soon as they can." She grabbed a magazine from the slot on the wall outside Andi's cubicle. "Here's something to read while you wait."

*Seriously? A magazine? Unbelievable.*

Her cell phone rang. The display read, "Belinda."

*Here we go. "Hi Mom."*

"Andi, what happened? And where's your father? He's not answering his mobile," her mother snapped, panic clear in her voice. Understandable and yet...

"I'm not that bad off, Mom. Thanks for asking." She rolled her eyes for no one to see. "Dad is here somewhere, but they haven't

told me anything other than the doctors are with him now. He was okay in the ambulance, just pale, and his blood pressure was high.”

“Oh, thank God. All right. We’ll be there soon.” And she disconnected.

Maternal love at its finest. Andi had never been her mother’s favorite child, probably because she was her father’s, but she’d expected a bit more care in her current situation. Thinking back though, Andi had habitually relied on her father for support when she was hurt, emotionally or physically. She’d climb into his lap, wrap her arms around his neck and tell him all about whatever bothered her. He was invariably there for her when she needed him, ready with a hug, boo-boo kiss, a story to teach her a lesson, and a treat to distract her. Always a treat.

How many nights over the years had they sat up late with glasses of milk and an entire box of Mallomars? By the time Andi had told him all her troubles, he’d have finished one side of the package and she’d be mostly through the other. She cherished those moments with him, even more so because she knew it was their special thing. Gus had other ways of connecting with her siblings, but that one was just for her. When this was all over, she would buy two boxes of Mallomars and they’d have a lengthy chat.

“Andromeda? I’m Ben. I’ll be taking you on your ride for X-rays,” he said.

Andi focused. “Hi Ben. My name’s Andi, if that’s okay.” As long as she was coherent and able to speak for herself, she’d ask for that consideration.

“Sure thing, Andi, though you may have to keep reminding people around here. We usually go by what’s on the chart.” He locked the wheelchair in place next to her cot.

Ben helped Andi out of the bed and secured her foot rests. "Do you want this magazine? You might have to wait a bit once you're down there and you can't use your phone."

"I guess so, thanks." She dropped the booklet into her lap. "By any chance, do you know what's going on with my dad?" she asked. "No one's told me anything about him."

"He was with you in the car? Oh, sorry. Nope. They only tell me who to pick up and where to bring 'em. Maybe you'll get an answer when you return." He pushed her swiftly down the hall.

She glanced around the ER as they left, but all she saw was a group of people in scrubs gathered at the other end. She had no way of knowing who the patient was.

With nothing else to do as she waited her turn, Andi mindlessly flipped through the travel magazine. Typical articles and stories about vacationing in Florida. Not new information to her since she'd lived there her entire life. She turned a page and faced an ad for the Kennedy Space Center. The Falcon 9 rose on fired engines toward a sky filled with stars. She'd seen ads like that thousands of times, and yet there was something strange about this one.

As Andi stared, constellations began collecting their stars on the paper. She blinked, attempting to clear her vision. It was definitely Virgo, Orion, and Centaurus blinking their lights back at her. She'd know those figures anywhere, even if she hadn't received a master's in astronomy. But it made no sense for them to be in the same part of the sky, let alone seeming to move across the page.

Andi squeezed her eyes shut. "I'm just hallucinating. It's an after-effect of the accident mixed with an over-active imagination and too much tequila." By saying this aloud, she might convince herself of the only rational truth. When she opened them and



looked at the glossy color image again, the clusters were still there.

A door swished sideways, and a new face emerged. "Andromeda Luna? You're up," he said, smiling.

In a daze, she asked, "Are you taking X-rays of my head? I think something's wrong with it. The stars on this page aren't supposed to be there." She thrust the magazine toward the medic, who backed away before it hit him on the nose.

He barely glanced at it before saying, "Well, we're focusing on your chest right now. Based on the report, my guess is you have a CT Scan in your future, but I'll let the staff in the ER know that your vision is playing tricks on you," he promised.

"Might want to tell them I need a sedative, too. A big one," she said. Andi took a final peek at the page before dropping the periodical on the side table like a hot potato.

She left it there for its next victim when Ben surfaced to return her to the ER. Once settled on her cot, she questioned the nurse about her father again.

"Why isn't anyone telling me what's going on with my dad?" Andi asked her.

"I believe your brother is outside waiting for you. I'll send him back." She drew her mouth into a tight-lipped line, not quite a smile or a frown, but definitely not happy.

Rion was at her side in under a minute. Every muscle in his usually relaxed and confident face was drawn and tight.

"Hey," she said with hesitation. "That look's not for me, is it? I'm knocked around, but basically okay."

Rion shook his head and swallowed. "It's dad. He had a heart attack. He's going into surgery right now."



## 5

*"The universe is under no obligation to make sense to you."*

*—Neil de Grasse Tyson*

Less than twenty-four hours after the car accident, Andi left one area of the hospital, only to walk straight to the intensive care unit. Rion spent some time sitting with her, but her sisters remained with their mother, who never appeared at Andi's bedside. Now, they all gathered in the waiting room, hoping for good news.

"The triple bypass was successful. He was lucky to be here when he had this episode." Dr. Yunkin, a forty-something cardiologist, stood before the family. "He should be up and around within a day or two, and home by the end of the week." The doctor locked his bulging eyes on Belinda. "He has a good amount of work ahead of him. Most importantly, he will need to

change his dietary habits, and once he recovers, add exercise to his daily routine. Shedding some of that weight is crucial to his improved health.” The doctor nodded as he spoke in an unidentifiable accent that produced clipped words.

“It’s not gonna be easy to convince Daddy to cut back on the pasta,” Cari said.

Andi silently agreed with her sister, and she knew they would all have to reinforce the importance of this menu modification. How do you make a bull-headed Sicilian stop eating pasta and cheese?

“Well, I just won’t cook it. Nothing but healthy foods from now on,” their mother said. How long would that fierce determination last, Andi wondered. Belinda’s love language was making others happy through a delicious meal.

“We’ll all help, Mom,” Cassie added. Andi was most surprised to see how hard Cassie was taking all of this. Dark circles under her eyes and no make up indicated that the shell of her usually unbreakable manner showed signs of cracking.

“It seems you are a dedicated family. The more people assisting him, the better his chances for recovery and a long life.” The doctor continued to nod as he spoke, causing Andi to wonder if he had a neurological disorder. “Since there were only minor injuries from the auto accident, the current pain medications will cover any soreness he may have experienced,” he said, before focusing on Andi. “I understand you were in the car with your father.”

She sat in a chair leaning against Rion for the support she needed, more emotional than physical. Slowly straightening upon being addressed, she said, “Yes, I was.”

His nodding continued. “You must allow the others to handle your father while you heal.”

"I'm doing all right. I'll be good as new in a day or two." Speak it into existence. "We only need to focus on him."

"Since you are here, go first to see him. Then someone should take you straight home to rest. Stay put there and by the time he is released, you should be much improved," Dr. Yunkin directed her.

Andi caught movement in her peripheral vision. Rion was nodding along with the doctor and she had to control the laugh that bubbled up inside her. She pinched his arm discreetly, and he startled out of the hypnotic daze.

"Ouch," he whispered.

"Can Rion come with me?" she asked the group at large. Then she turned to face him. "Will you take me home after? Please?" He was her only choice for companionship at this moment. Neither of her sisters would want to anyway, and her mother was out of the question.

"Why can't we all go in?" Cari asked. Andi studied Rion's twin. Her hair in a ponytail, the same mousey blonde color all the children shared with their mother, wide blueish-gray eyes lighter than Andi's perpetually dusky shade, oversized flannel shirt, blue jeans and Converse high tops. She looked like she belonged back at Palm Bay High School instead of behind an agent's desk at the insurance company.

Cari was quite the opposite of her twin. Rion stood at six feet tall, broad shouldered, with sparkling hazel eyes. He was a blond, slim version of their father. He even shared his happy-go-lucky personality, though Rion possessed little of their dad's occasional angry fire. Not too much bothered either of the Luna men, but when something serious happened, Gus got loud where Rion remained reserved and introspective.

Now that she considered this characteristic, it probably had a connection with their father's heart issues. Gus's fire meant higher blood pressure, for sure. Andi's heart filled with gratitude as she

realized Rion had been spared this particular trait from their father. Cassie would have to watch out, though.

“Don’t be stupid. We can’t all visit together, Cari. It’ll be too much for Dad to handle.” Cassie rarely snapped at Cari, so this coarse response set them all on notice.

“Girls, enough. Let Andi and Rion go see him and then leave.” Belinda’s harsh words put an end to the bickering before it went further.

Andi rose slowly, leaning on Rion for support, and approached her mother. “I’ll check in on you later, mom.” She hugged her and kissed her cheek. But instead of a strong squeeze and kiss in return, Andi got a limp noodle that looked something like the woman who raised her. She backed away, surprised.

Their mother turned to hug Rion. “Drive carefully.” She touched his face with her hand.

“Of course.” He caught Andi’s elbow in his hand and led her to their father’s ICU room behind Dr. Yunkin.

“Your father will be in and out of sleep today, so do not expect too much conversation from him. Just let him know you are there. You should only stay for five minutes. Once you are gone, your mother and sisters can spend time with him as well. If you have questions, please ask at the nurse’s station.” Andi pictured a bobble head on the dashboard of a car. How did this guy remain upright with all of that nodding going on? She’d be dizzy even without a head injury.

Rion and Andi entered their father’s area, and she gasped. She’d never seen her father in such a vulnerable situation. He lay on the bed, his enormous belly sticking up from under the white sheet. A surreal soundtrack of hisses and beeps emanated from various machines. There were IV lines in his arm, heart monitor wires protruding from every direction, and an oxygen plug up his nose. His short, dark, wavy hair crowned his head against the

stark whiteness of the fabric, the backdrop for his pasty skin. Usually, Gus sported the light bronze hues of a natural southern Italian complexion accented by a sunny Florida glow.

They stopped at their father's bedside and Andi spoke to him softly. "Hi Daddy. It's me and Rion."

A slow smile blossomed, and he mumbled, "Double trouble."

"Hey Pop. How's it going? Anything new?" Rion joked.

"Smart ass," Gus said.

The fact that her father understood the humor and returned it thrilled Andi. Maybe everything would be okay after all.

"We can't stay too long because everyone else is waiting to see you, too. We just wanted to tell you we love you," Andi said. She squeezed his hand gently. His skin felt clammy in her fingers.

"Yeah, and don't you worry. I've got business handled at the office and for mom till you get back," Rion reassured their father.

"Make it so," Gus said. They all smiled at the Star Trek reference. Definitely a good sign.

"Love you Daddy," Andi said. She leaned over to kiss her father's forehead and fought a wave of vertigo. She swayed and Rion grabbed her around the waist.

"Time for us to go, Dad. I'll be back later, but Andi needs her rest too. We'll all be together at the house this weekend."

The only sound coming from the bed at this point was a light snore. A wave of gratitude washed over Andi as she realized her father had slept through the last part of their conversation. She didn't want him worrying about her, even subconsciously.

"Come on you. Let's get you home," Rion said, ushering Andi through the sliding glass door of the ICU room.

"Fine, but are we able to go out a different way? I'd rather not say goodbye to mom and the girls again."

Rion furrowed his brow. "Sure. We'll take the elevator down on the other side. It'll be a little more walking, though. Think you can handle it?"

"Easier than I can handle our family at the moment." Andi rolled her mother's conduct around in her mind. Was she purposely spurning Andi, or was Andi just imagining it? Her mother was under a lot of stress between the accident and her father's new health situation. Some strange behavior was understandable. She'd give her time and talk to her in a day or two. Things should be better then.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jo was born and raised in the northeast United States. As the daughter of first generation Americans, she realized the power words held. Though she trained in photographic arts and education, the written word has consistently been one of her passions.

Her first published work was a poem featured in *New Teacher Advocate*. Over the years, Jo has continued to write, journaling with her students in the classroom and with her children in their homeschool. This experience led to the publication of *The Empowered Homeschool*, a practical guide for parents navigating the world of homeschooling.

Another non-fiction endeavor has been participating as a contributing author in *This Is My Story* published by CenterPointe Church. She's also recently dipped into the world of short stories as a contributing author in the Space Coast Writer's Guild Anthology, *Adversity*.

Jo's debut novel, *Redemption Beach*, launched the *Redemption Chronicles* series in October 2022. The second book in the series, *Redemption Sky*, was released in July 2024, with more installments planned for the future.

Jo lives and works in Central Florida, but the world is her playground.