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SPYING IN HIGH HEELS

by

GEMMA HALLIDAY

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Chapter One

I was late.

And I don't mean the kind of late where I spent too much time doing my hair and was now stuck in traffic. I mean I was *late* late. The kind of late where the 99% effective warnings on the side of condom boxes flashed before my eyes as I white knuckled my way down the 405, silently screaming, why me? Why, oh why me? I'm a new millennium girl. I took copious notes in 6th grade Sex Ed. I carry just-in-case condoms in the zippered section of my purse. And, after that first singularly awkward experience in the back of Todd Hanson's '82 Chevy after junior prom, I have been meticulously careful. Me. I was late. And I was not taking it well.

"Dana?" Silence. "Dana, I need to talk to you." Silence. "I swear to God if you are screening me I am never speaking to you again."

I switched my cell phone to the other hand as I changed lanes, narrowly avoiding a collision with a pick-up that had "wash me" carved in opaque dust, before continuing my desperate pleas into my best friend's answering machine.

"Dana, please, please, please pick up? Please?" I paused. Nothing. "All right, I guess you really aren't there. But please, please, please call me back as soon as you get this message. I mean pronto. This is a serious code red, 911 emergency. I need to talk to you *now!*" I punctuated this last word by laying on my horn as a bald guy in a convertible cut me off then had the audacity to give *me* the finger. Welcome to L.A.

I flipped my phone shut, breaking a French tipped nail in the process, and counted to ten, trying to remember some of that calming yoga breathing from the one class Dana had dragged me to last month. Unfortunately, at the time I'd had my full attention focused on not falling flat on my face during

a downward facing dog, and I think I was beginning to hyperventilate.

I merged onto the 10 freeway, glancing down at the digital readout on my dashboard clock, and realized with a twist of irony that I was now not only late, but late. As in not on time to meet my boyfriend, Richard Howe, for lunch. He'd made one o'clock reservations at Giani's and it was now twelve fifty-eight. I eased my suede ankle boot (which had maxed out my Macy's card, but was so worth it!) down just a little harder on the accelerator, after checking the rearview mirror to make sure the highway patrol was nowhere in sight. Not that I was speeding. Much. But considering the day I'd had so far, an encounter with the CHP was not on my list of to-do's.

As I checked for motorcycle cops, I also gave myself a quick once over in the mirror. Not bad considering I was having the freak out of my life. My ash blond hair was still tucked into a flattering half twist, a few flyaways but the messy look was in, right? I pulled out a tube of Raspberry Perfection lip-gloss and applied a thin swipe across my lips, ignoring the obscene gestures from the guy behind me. Hey, if a girl in a crisis doesn't have her lipstick, what does she have?

I'm proud to say I only got flipped off two more times before pulling my little red Jeep (top up today as a concession to my hair) into the parking garage on the corner of 7th and Grand. I fastened The Club securely on my steering wheel and prepared to hoof it the two blocks to my boyfriend's firm where I was supposed to meet him... I looked down at my watch... damn. Twelve minutes ago. Well, on the up side, as soon as I told him about being *late*, I had a feeling he'd forget all about my being late.

A conversation I was seriously dreading. In my mind it went something like this: Hi Richard, sorry I'm late, by the way I may be having your child. Insert cartoon sound of Richard hitting the door at roadrunner-like speeds. Ugh. There was just no good way to ease into information like that. We'd only

been dating for a few months. We hadn't even made it to the shopping at Bed, Bath and Beyond stage yet, and suddenly we had to have *this* conversation? I adjusted my bra strap as I walked, tucking it back under my tank top, trying like anything to present the appearance of a woman with it all together. And not a woman trying to remember which pregnancy test commercial touted early results with digital readouts.

Exactly fourteen minutes behind schedule I walked into the law offices of Dewy, Cheatum and Howe. In reality the firm was called Donaldson, Chesterton, and Howe. But I couldn't resist the nickname. Considering the type of clientele they represented (the Chanel and Rolex crowd) it fit like an imported, calfskin glove.

Beyond the frosted front doors maroon carpeting yawned across the reception area, muffling the sound of my heels as I made my way to the front desk. The large oval of dark woods stretched along the back wall of the spacious room, flanked on either side by more frosted doors leading to the conference rooms and offices beyond. The faint clicking of keyboards and muffled conversations billed at three hundred dollars an hour filled the background.

"May I help you?" asked the Barbie doll behind the desk. Jasmine. Or as I liked to call her, Miss PP. As in plastic parts. Jasmine spent two thirds of her salary every month on cosmetic procedures. This week her lips were collagen swollen to Angelina Jolie standards. Last month it was new boobs, double D of course. As usual, her bleached blond hair was moussed within an inch of its life, giving her an extra two inches on her already annoying height of 5'6". I'm what could be referred to as a petite person, topping out at an impressive 5'1 ½" on a good day. I was lucky if I made the height requirement on half the rides at Six Flags.

"I'm here to see Richard," I informed Miss PP.

"Do you have an appointment with Mr. Howe?" Her blue eyes blinked (with difficulty due to the brow lift two months

ago) in an innocent gesture that I knew was anything but. Jasmine's sole entertainment here at Dewy, Cheatum and Howe was wielding the power of entry to the sacred offices beyond the frosted doors.

I narrowed my eyes at her. "Yes. As a matter of fact I do."

"And you are?"

I tried not to roll my eyes. I'd met Richard here for lunch every Friday afternoon for the past five months. She knew who I was and by the tiny smile at the corner of her Angelina lips, she was enjoying this all too much.

"Maddie Springer. His *girlfriend*. I'm here for a lunch date."

"I'm sorry, Miss Springer, but you'll have to wait. He's with someone in the conference room right now."

"Why didn't you just say that in the first place?" I mumbled as I sat in one of the tan, leather chairs punctuating the waiting area. Jasmine didn't answer, smirking instead (which looked a lot like an Elvis lip curl in her new super-sized lips) as she opened what I'd guess was a game of solitaire on her computer and pretended to look busy. I picked up a copy of *Cosmo* from the end table and began flipping through the pages of drool worthy designer clothes I could never afford. Or fit into if I was actually pregnant. Oh God. What a depressing thought.

After what seemed like an eternity of listening to Jasmine's acrylic nails click against her keyboard, Richard walked into the reception area. Despite the anxiety building in my stomach, I couldn't help a little yummy sigh at the sight of him. Richard was six foot one and all lean muscle. He was a religious runner, doing 10k's for all the charities in his spare time. Muscular dystrophy, autism, even the breast cancer run last April. When we first started dating he tried to get me to run with him once. Just once. My idea of a cardio workout was elbowing my way through Nordstrom during the half-yearly super sale. Running was something I didn't do. Besides, I figured if the heels were high enough, walking the

two blocks from my apartment to the corner Starbucks burned almost as many calories as running, right?

Today Richard's blonde hair was perfectly gelled into place in a casual wave, a la early Robert Redford. He was wearing a dark gray suit, paired with a white shirt and tasteful paisley printed tie. He looked downright delish and I resisted the urge to throw myself into his arms, unloading all my worries onto the shoulder of his wool suit.

Another man exited the offices with him, the two of them deep in conversation. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but whatever it was had Richard's sandy brows drawn together in a look of concern.

The other guy was dressed in Levis, worn with faded patches along the thighs and seat, and a navy blazer over a form fitting black T-shirt. His shoulders were broad and he had the sort of compact build that made you instantly think prizefighter. A white scar cut into his eyebrow, breaking up his tanned complexion. Dark hair, dark eyes and the sort of hard look about him that usually went along with prison tattoos. I hoped Richard wasn't branching out into criminal defense.

I waited until they'd shook hands and the other guy had walked out of the lobby before approaching Richard.

"Hi honey," I said, standing on tiptoe to place a kiss on his cheek.

"Hi." He was still staring after the felon, his tone distracted as if I'd just interrupted him during football season.

"Who was that?"

"Nobody."

The way Richard was still staring after Mr. Nobody led me to believe that wasn't exactly true. However, I had bigger things to think about than Richard's latest client. Like being late.

"You're late."

"Huh?" I whirled around, panic rising like bile in my throat. Good God, could he tell already? Insanely I looked down to my abdomen as if it might have grown six inches in the last thirty seconds.

"We had reservations for one."

Oh. That late.

"Sorry, there was traffic on the 405. We'll just go somewhere else. How about the Cabo Cantina?"

Richard was still staring at the closed glass doors where Mr. Nobody had exited. I wondered again who the man was. He didn't look like Richard's typical clients and he certainly didn't give off that new car scent of another lawyer.

"I, uh, don't think I'm going to make lunch today after all. Something's kind of come up."

"Oh, that's too bad." Am I a totally bad person that I was actually a little relieved? At least we didn't have to have *that* conversation now. At least now I had a little time to come up with a better way of dropping the bombshell than, "Richard, we've got to buy stronger condoms." Hmm... I wondered if I could sue Trojan over this?

"Sorry, Maddie. I'll call you later, I promise."

"That's okay. I understand. I'll talk to you tonight then?"

"Sure. Tonight." He gave me a quick peck on the cheek before disappearing back through the frosted doors and into the bowels of Dewy, Cheatum and Howe. Jasmine looked up just long enough to give me an Elvis smirk before going back to her solitaire game.

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I walked the two blocks back to my Jeep and left another message on Dana's answering machine. If she didn't pick up soon I was going to have to start taking résumés for a new girlfriend. I started my Jeep with a roar that echoed in the parking structure and instead of getting back on the freeway,

made my way up Grand to Beverly Boulevard. I hit a drive-thru Mc Donald's and ordered a decadent Big Mac, large fries and a strawberry shake. This was not a day to be counting carbs.

I parked in the lot, enjoying my comfort food in the privacy and full blast air-conditioning of my Jeep. As I slurped the last of my shake, I wondered what to do now. I *should* go back to work, something I'd neglected ever since staring in horror at my calendar this morning. However, the thought of being creative right now didn't seem quite realistic.

As a little girl I'd always dreamed of being a fashion model, parading down a Milan runway in the latest designer creations as the world ooh'ed and ahh'ed. But by the eighth grade it was abundantly clear I was not going to achieve fashion model height. So, I settled for the next best thing, being a fashion designer. After four years at the Academy of Art College in San Francisco, I was ready to make my mark on the fashion scene. Only I hadn't counted on it being almost as hard to break into fashion as it was to break into modeling. After begging, pleading and promising to wash every fashion exec's car in the greater Los Angeles area, I finally landed a job. Designing children's shoes for Tot Trots. Okay, so it wasn't Milan, but it paid the bills. Most of the time.

The perks were I set my own hours, I worked from home and I was happy to say that my work had been featured on the feet of fashionable tots everywhere, including the Barbie Jellies last spring and the SpongeBob slippers in the fall collection. Currently I was working on the Strawberry Shortcake high-tops – available in both iridescent pink and sparkling purple, thank you very much.

However, at the moment the idea of spending a day with tiny tot fashions didn't hold enormous appeal. Kiddie shoes made me think of kids, which made me think of babies, which led to thoughts about condoms that for no good reason at all

sometimes broke and led to women being in my current position.

I looked down at my dash clock. One forty-five. Dana was probably getting to the gym right about now for her step-and-sculpt class. In addition to being my best friend, Dana was an aerobics instructor at the Sunset Gym. That is, in between auditions and bit movie roles. Like 90% of Los Angelinos, Dana wanted to be an actress. Though she swore as long as she didn't moonlight as a waitress, she could keep from becoming a cliché. I figured if I took the 101, I might be able to catch her between classes.

I set my shake down and put the car in gear, pulling up in front of the huge concrete and glass structure of the Sunset Gym in record time. I parked in the lot, declining the valet parking. Yes, in L.A. people actually avoided walking the two yards from the parking lot to the gym before doing their three-mile run. Go figure.

As I entered the gym, a tall guy with a buzz cut and Popeye arms stopped me at the front desk. He looked me up and down, taking in the two-inch boots, Ann Taylor skirt and lack of Nike bag slung over my shoulder. I wasn't fooling him. We both knew I only used my membership for a swim in the pool on those hundred degree plus days.

After whipping out my ID card and satisfying the steroid gatekeeper, I entered the main floor, scanning past rows of exercycles for any sign of Dana. I spotted her at the front of a class by the windows, stepping and sculpting their little hearts out. I had a brief moment of guilt over my gazillion calorie lunch, but it didn't last long. Certainly not long enough for me to actually suit up and jump on a stepper.

Instead I grabbed a dog-eared copy of *Elle*, settling onto a bench along the wall to wait. It didn't take long for the gyrating steppers to finish, breaking into a self-congratulatory round of applause. The teacher of the step class came jogging toward me, her strawberry blonde ponytail swishing back and

forth. A perfect size two, she looked like she'd just stepped off the pages of *Sports Illustrated*. And not the swimsuit edition, but the women-who-lift-and-the-men-who-love-them edition. I would hate her, except for the fact that Dana, a.k.a. aerobics queen, was my best friend.

"What's up?" she asked, looking down at my high heeled boots with a frown.

"I just ate," I said by way of defense.

Dana shot me a dubious look but let it go. Instead she began doing a little jogging in place thing as she talked. "So, I got your message. What's the big emergency?"

"I, uh..." I looked over my shoulder as if I almost shouldn't be saying it out loud. "I'm late."

"Okay, we'll talk fast. What's up?"

"No, no. Not late. *Late*."

Dana cocked her head to one side, taking this in before the meaning hit her. "Oh my God. You mean you missed your period?"

"No. I didn't *miss* anything yet. I'm just a little late."

"No wonder you're freaking out."

"I'm not freaking out. I'm... just a little late."

Dana shot me the yeah-right look she'd been using on me ever since we bonded over our love of New Kids On the Block in seventh grade. "Right. And that's why you left four messages on my machine this morning."

I cringed. Did I really leave four? "Okay fine. I'm freaking out. But just a little."

"Did you take a test yet?" she asked, switching to a jumping jacks routine.

"Like a pregnancy test?"

"No, an algebra test. Geez, anyone would think you've never been late before."

Truth was, I hadn't. And that's what was scaring me even more about my predicament. Ever since my monthly visitor began arriving, I'd been twenty-eight days like clockwork.

Which is why I'd panicked and left a near stalker amount of messages on my best friend's machine. Hey, wait a minute, if she got my messages, how come she didn't call me back?

"Why didn't you call me back?"

Dana got that wicked smile on her face that said she was either dating someone new or about to give someone twenty push-ups.

"I wasn't exactly alone."

"Do I want to know who?"

"Sasha Aleksandrov," she said, switching to a little two-step footwork in place.

"Excuse me?"

Dana giggled. Yes, grown women with 1% body fat still giggle like middle schoolers with braces when it comes to men. "He's a Russian body contortionist. Sasha's the bottom of the human pyramid in the Cirque Fantastique."

I tried not to roll my eyes. Dana had an uncanny ability to pick guys who were destined for short-term relationships. "So where did you meet Mr. Pyramid Bottom?"

"Here. He came in with the Spanish trapeze artist to work out last week. I offered to show him how to use the Cybex machine. He doesn't have them in Russia."

"Of course not."

"And, we hit it off. He asked if I wanted to see him perform."

Considering the many meanings behind that statement, I'm betting Dana said yes. She never passed up an opportunity to see a muscular man "perform."

"That's it. I don't want to hear any more," I said, covering my ears. Dana giggled again.

"Okay, so how late are you?" she asked instead.

"Three days."

"And you called me before noon for that? Honey, three days is nothing."

"Dana, I've never been three days late before."

"Lucky for you, I've got an emergency preggers test at home. I have one more class then we'll go to my place and make a pitcher of margaritas while you pee on a stick. It'll be fun, okay?"

"No. No margaritas, Dana. I can't drink that stuff, I might be pregnant."

At this, Dana actually abandoned her aerobics, standing perfectly still. She stared at me, her pert little mouth hanging open. "You're not actually thinking of having a baby are you?"

Was I?

"No. I mean, I don't know. I don't know what I'll do if I... if... you know."

"We see a pink line?"

"Yeah."

"Fine. No margaritas for now. But you are so peeing tonight."

* * *

Luckily I convinced Dana that peeing on a stick was a solo mission and left her to her Kickboxing for Seniors class. I did stop by the drugstore and pick up a test, the most embarrassing purchase of my entire life including the first time I ever bought condoms and accidentally grabbed super ribbed for her pleasure. I also purchased a Big Gulp, so by the time I pulled into the driveway of my second-story studio in Santa Monica, I was ready to pee. Physically that was. Mentally, I was a wreck.

I locked my Jeep, climbed the wooden stairs to my apartment, and let myself in, dropping the drugstore package on the kitchen counter. Despite the fact I had to pee like a racehorse, I couldn't quite get up the courage to take the pregnancy test into the bathroom with me. Somehow now that I was faced with an entire array of IF's, that test had become scarier than a Wes Craven movie. I mean, what if it did turn

pink? Did I really want a baby? I looked around my cozy (translation: dinky) studio apartment, filled to max capacity with a fold out-futon and my sketch table. Where the hell would I even put a baby?

I guessed I'd always assumed I'd have kids someday. But even though I was closing in on thirty (and I refuse to say just *how* closely) someday still seemed far, far into the future. When I was more settled, domestic. Married. Oh God, would Richard think I wanted him to marry me? Did I?

I think I was hyperventilating again.

I went to the bathroom, sans stick, then checked my answering machine. No messages. Namely, no Richard. I picked up the receiver and dialed his number, waiting as it rang on the other end. His machine kicked in and I left what I thought was a relatively breezy message, considering the circumstances.

I plopped myself down on the sofa and clicked on the TV, settling for *Seinfeld* reruns while I waited for Richard to return my call. By *Letterman*, I still hadn't heard from him. Which was annoying and also a little worrisome. He *had* said he'd call me tonight. And it wasn't like Richard to ignore my messages. I tried not to freak out, instead promising myself I'd take the pregnancy test just as soon as I heard from Richard.

A promise that would soon come back to haunt me.

Chapter Two

Three days later, still no Aunt Flo. And still no Richard.

I was beginning to worry. About Richard, though the unopened pregnancy test on my kitchen counter didn't help matters. Richard had never ignored my calls like this. Usually he checked his messages every hour on the hour, returning mine with at the very least a text messaged smiley or "hi beautiful." Only I'd left about a gazillion messages and gotten no smileys back.

I left a second breezy message Saturday morning: Hi, how are you, guess you got too busy to call last night. At lunch I called his office, only to be bumped to voicemail. I held off calling again until almost five, when I then left another message on his voicemail, cell phone, home phone and emailed him a message full of my own smileys and "where are you?"s.

Dana intervened at that point, promising to tie my hands behind my back if I didn't give the man a little space. She was right. I was beginning to be bunny boiling scary. So, I didn't call all day Sunday until the time the perky newswomen on the channel two late report came on chatting about a burglary in Reseda and the day's record highs. Then I left three more messages. Still no answer.

This was really unlike Richard. And try as I might I couldn't shrug off the feeling that Richard's commitment radar had somehow picked up on my lateness and he'd headed for the hills.

So, Monday morning my over active-imagination and I woke up determined to track down the MIA boyfriend. I showered, dressed in my favorite jeans, green silk sleeveless top and strappy emerald slingbacks. After a quick turn under the blow dryer and a little requisite lip-gloss, I was ready to go. It was only ten when I parked in the garage down the street from Dewy, Cheatum and Howe, but already the sidewalk was

beginning to haze from the heat. Nothing like a smog layer to add a little sizzle to your July.

Two blocks and three homeless guys later, I entered the cool, air-conditioned interior of Richard's building. Predictably, Jasmine was standing sentinel over the reception area.

"May I help you?" she asked, looking anything but helpful.

"I'm here to see Richard."

"Do you have an appointment?"

I swear that should be this woman's epitaph. Here lies Jasmine "do you have an appointment" Williams. May she rest in peace.

"No. But I'm sure he'll see me if you'll just let him know I'm here."

"And you are?"

I narrowed my eyes at her. "Maddie Springer. His *girlfriend*." I emphasized the word.

"I'm sorry, Miss Springer, but Mr. Howe isn't in. He's taking a few personal days. But, I'll leave a message that you stopped by." She seemed to take inordinate pleasure in the fact.

"Why didn't you just tell me he wasn't here in the first place?"

Jasmine's over-sized lips curled into a smile. At least I think it was a smile. Maybe a sneer. "You didn't ask."

I took a deep breath. Rationalizing that if I reached over the mahogany desk and scratched her eyes out I might ruin another manicure. "Fine. Did he say where he was going?"

"I'm sorry," she said with what was clearly a sneer this time, "but I'm not at liberty to divulge-"

"Never mind," I cut her off. I'd already given Jasmine way too much enjoyment today. Instead I spun around, digging my heels into the maroon carpet and stalked off toward the elevator, leaving Jasmine to her solitaire.

Clearly Richard wasn't at the office. Next stop – his condo.

Richard lived in a two-story condo in Burbank, nestled in a gated community of tall stucco buildings on Sunset Canyon. The condos were all painted a pale taupe that hid dirt and on high smog index days matched the exact color of the air. Richard's was the third structure on the right.

I parked across the street, thankfully finding a spot on the same block after circling only twice, and clubbed my steering wheel.

I keyed in the entry code on the electronic pad next to the iron gates and made my way through the mini garden courtyard, consisting of yucca trees, leafy green bushes and flowering agapanthus. I paused as I reached Richard's door, took a deep breath, and stuck my key in the lock.

I was halfway expecting Mafia thugs to jump out at me, or the place to look trashed as if Richard had been dragged away against his will, kicking and screaming, "Wait, just let me return my girlfriend's call first!"

I was disappointed. The condo looked exactly as it always did. Sleek, black leather sofas were set in the sunken living room, offset by chrome and glass end tables. The alcove kitchen to the right was clean, the green granite counters gleaming as morning sun filtered through the sliding glass doors to the second story balcony.

"Hello?" I called into the silence. But almost instinctively, I knew I wouldn't get an answer back. The house had the feel of disuse, the air slightly stale as if the windows hadn't been cracked in days. Which did nothing to reassure the anxiety building in my belly.

Richard wasn't here. He wasn't at the office. I was running out of places to look for him. Was it possible that he'd been called out of town suddenly? Maybe a family emergency? His mother lived alone in Palm Springs, maybe she was sick?

I crossed the room, angling down the narrow hallway that led to the marble tiled bathroom, Richard's bedroom, and the spare room Richard used as a home office. I opened the office door, gingerly peeking my head in first. No Richard. But the answering machine on his desk was blinking like mad. Feeling just the teeny-tiniest bit intrusive, I pressed the play button.

Would you believe all twelve messages were from me? Yikes. Quickly I erased all but one. There, that sounded more like a rational, sane girlfriend.

I took a quick look around the rest of the office. No plane tickets to the Bahamas, no telegrams saying, "Mom's sick, come now." I moved on to the bedroom, my heels echoing on the polished hardwood floor.

Like the rest of the house, the bedroom seemed untouched. The bed was made, the burgundy duvet unwrinkled. The dresser held only the usual bits of clutter: a tin of loose change, pair of old sunglasses, book of matches, packet of vitamins, and two Bic pens. Feeling a little like Colombo I checked the address on the matchbook. It was a club he'd taken me to last week. Drat. So much for my brilliant detective skills.

I opened the top drawer of his dresser. Rows of rolled up socks and Hanes briefs didn't provide any clue to his whereabouts either. I had a sinking feeling I was just snooping at this point. I searched through the drawer, grimacing as I found a pair of purple argyle dress socks. I opened another drawer. T-shirts and gym shorts. I shuffled them around a bit and came across a pair of neon blue spandex running shorts. Egad! Those had to go. I tossed them in the direction of the wastebasket, sure that Richard would thank me later.

I was just moving on to the pajama drawer when I heard a sound other than my own clucks of disapproval. The sound of the front door opening.

My first thought was that it was Richard and Obsessive Woman was caught red handed. Then I heard something else.

"Hello? Richard, are you in there?"

I froze. It was a man's voice, but not Richard's. Good Lord, what would I do if it was one of his friends? Sure, Richard had given me a key, but not so I could come in while he was gone and inspect his wardrobe. At the risk of forever being labeled "that crazy chick who went through your drawers," I quickly jumped into Richard's closet, securing the sliding paneled doors behind me. Just call me the obsessive chicken.

I heard the front door close, footsteps echoing through the condo. Cupboards opened and closed in the kitchen, leather squeaked against leather as I listened to him move cushions on Richard's sofa.

Footsteps clicked down the hall, then came to an abrupt stop, presumably at the door to Richard's office. They continued again, dimming as he entered the room. I opened the closet door just a crack and peeked out. I couldn't see anything. Ever so quietly, I tiptoed to the doorway of Richard's bedroom. I heard the message machine beep, then my voice filled the condo.

"Hi, Richard, it's me. Just wondering what you've been up to. I haven't heard from you in a while. Well, not a while really, but I thought you said you'd call me last night. Not that I was waiting or anything. But maybe you forgot. Or just got really busy. Which I *totally* understand, 'cause, duh, you've got lots of cases and stuff to think about. I mean, not that I think you *don't* think about me. I'm sure you do. But, you know, you just have a lot on your mind, so I can see why you forgot to call. So, um, anyway, call me when you can. 'K?'"

Oh God, did I really sound like that? No wonder my boyfriend had gone AWOL.

I thought I heard the man chuckle as the machine beeped off Thank God I'd erased the rest of the messages.

I heard the sounds of desk drawers being opened and closed, papers being shuffled. I would swear it sounded like this guy sounded like he was going through Richard's stuff too.

What kind of friend was he? I just hoped he found whatever he was looking for before he got to the bedroom.

No such luck.

Footsteps echoed again, drawing closer. I let out a little "eek" and I jumped back into the closet, quickly closing the sliding door as the footsteps grew louder, entering Richard's bedroom. I crouched on the floor wedging myself between a pile of winter sweaters and Richard's Bruno Magli loafers.

I heard the man opening dresser drawers, rummaging like I'd been doing just moments ago. What *was* this guy looking for? My curiosity got the better of me and I eased the closet door open a crack to take a peek at him.

I recognized him almost immediately. The solid frame hunched over Richard's dresser, the worn jeans, the dark hair. It was the same guy I'd seen with Richard the other day. Mr. Nobody. He was in denim again, this time wearing a black T-shirt, sans jacket as a concession to the heat. The sleeves of his shirt were stretched taut over biceps that bulged like Nerf balls on his arm. I thought I caught the glimpse of a black tattoo just peeking out beneath the hem, but I couldn't quite make out what it was.

And then I saw it. A gun.

I froze, my eyes glued to the bit of gleaming metal shoved into the waistband of his jeans, the butt flat against his tight stomach. My breath came out in quick shallow gasps, my brain racing to come up with any good reason why a man with a gun should be searching through Richard's personal belongings.

Mr. Armed and Dangerous mumbled to himself again as he opened Richard's underwear drawer. I strained my ears to pick up what he was saying.

"Come on, come on... I know you left something... what the...?" He paused, holding up the pair of purple argyles. He shook his head, making a sound somewhere between a snort and a chuckle, before throwing them back in the drawer. Well,

at least the bad man had good taste. I watched as he continued on to the next drawer. "...come on, come on... don't tell me the sonofabitch packed everything."

Wait – packed?

My eyes had adjusted to the dark and I looked around the closet at the rows of hanging suits, polos and pressed slacks. Sure enough there were noticeable gaps. I felt my stomach clench up in a way that warned of morning sickness. Missing clothes, missing boyfriend. A man with a gun rummaging through Richard's underwear drawer. And me crouched in a pile of seasonal sweaters hoping like anything that the dizziness hazing my vision was just fear and not pregnancy hormones. This was not good. I didn't know what was going on here, but good it definitely was not.

And then things got worse.

Mr. Nobody stepped toward the closet doors. I bit my lip, hoping he would turn around. Nope. He headed straight toward me. I shut my eyes tightly, making myself as small as I could. I said a silent prayer, promising to attend church more often, give half my salary to the poor and really work in a soup kitchen this Thanksgiving instead of just telling my mother I was to avoid her dried out turkey.

I heard the wooden door slide on its tracks and eased one eye open, saying a silent thank you that he'd opened the other side of the closet and I was still in shadows. I held my breath, certain that my every inhale was as loud as a jackhammer in the silence.

Mr. Nobody looked at the clothes hanging in the closet. He squinted his dark eyes at them almost as if he were mentally counting.

"Shit." He breathed the word on an exhale, then turned around and stalked out of the room. His boots continued to echo all the way down the hall and out the door, which he shut behind him with a crash that sent my teeth chattering. Or maybe they were doing that all on their own. I realized I was

shaking and wrapped a wool sweater around myself as I sat in the dark closet for a full two minutes before venturing back out into the room.

I don't know what Mr. Nobody would have done had he seen me there, but the gun poking out of his Levi's was not reassuring.

I slowly ducked my head out the bedroom door. No sign of the bad man. I tiptoed as quickly as I could down the hall, slinked out the front door and sprinted across the street to my car as if I were dodging gunfire. Once inside I locked the doors, removed the club and revved up the engine, my hands still shaking as I adjusted the air conditioning controls.

I closed my eyes, taking deep breaths as I took stock. I was in one piece. Mr. Nobody hadn't seen me. No bullet holes and I hadn't wet myself. All was well.

Okay not *all* was well. Richard had obviously packed for a trip. That much was plain to both Mr. Nobody and me. A trip where? And why? Richard hadn't mentioned a trip, and by the way an armed man had broken into his place, I didn't envision it was a planned Club Med getaway. Was he hiding somewhere? Was he in trouble? Considering Richard thought claiming lunch with me as a deduction was unethical, I found it hard to believe

I wondered if I should call the police. But I wasn't entirely sure Mr. Nobody had actually committed a crime. Breaking into a man's house and going through his underwear drawer. In fact, I wasn't even entirely sure he *did* break in. Had I locked the door behind me? I'd been a little preoccupied to notice.

God, I hoped Richard was all right. What would I do if he wasn't? What about our potential unborn child? Again I felt that bout of possible morning sickness swell over me. I swear to God if Richard was just in the Bahamas, I was going to kill him.

Just then my purse rang. I jumped so far into the air I almost hit the roof of my car, adrenalin pumping through every

limb of my body. I reached into my bag and flipped open my Motorola. My mother's number popped up on the caller ID. If it was anyone else, I would have ignored it. But knowing Mom, she'd send the National Guard looking for me if I didn't pick up by the fourth ring.

"Hello?"

"Maddie, you haven't forgotten have you?"

"Of course not." I racked my brain. Forgotten what?

"Good. Because we made reservations for five and Ralph's canceling his last appointment so he can join us."

Right. Ralph, a.k.a. Faux Dad, the owner of Fernando's, the hottest place on Rodeo, and my soon to be step-daddy. I still wasn't 110% convinced Faux Dad was straight, but I *loved* the discounted manicures.

Mom had hooked up with Ralph when, after twenty-five years as a single parent, Mom had discovered the wonders of internet dating and signed up for Match.com. Desperate to make a big re-entry into the dating scene, she'd gone to Fernando's for a full make-over, where Ralph chopped, styled and colored her hair into a near masterpiece. After three months of flirtatious cut and colors, Mom was surprised to learn that not only was Ralph straight (allegedly), but his interest in her went way beyond her curly locks. Five months later they were planning a beautiful ceremony in Malibu, overlooking the ocean cliffs for a week from Saturday. I was to be the maid of honor and tonight Mom was laying official duty number three thousand on me. Planning her bachelorette party.

I debated fabricating an excuse to skip dinner. My hands were still shaking and, though my heart had slowed from NASCAR to L.A. freeway, I still had that jittery feeling in my chest like I was ready to fight or take flight any minute. However, knowing Mom (see National Guard reference) canceling dinner would lead to more questions than I currently had answers for. So I gave in.

"Right. No, I'll be there. Five thirty, right?"

"Five!" my mother yelled into the phone.

"Right." I looked down at my watch. Four forty-seven.

Considering traffic on the 134 at this hour, I'd be cutting it close. "I was just getting in the car, Mom. I'll meet you there."

"Good. And don't be late."

I pretended not to hear that last comment. "You're breaking up, Mom. Sorry, gotta go."

* * *

At exactly five twenty-nine I pulled up to Garibaldi's restaurant in Studio City. I might have been on time had I not spent the entire drive over looking in my rearview mirror for any sign of Mr. Nobody lurking behind me. Thankfully, I saw none. But, paranoia lesson number one, that didn't mean he wasn't there.

I found a spot on the street and parallel parked between a Jag and a Dodge Dart on its last leg. Luckily I was wearing my ready-for-anything Spiga slingbacks, so the block and a half hardly even hurt my feet at the near sprint. Faux Dad was outside talking on his cell phone, a frown of concentration on his tanned face. Faux tan of course. When he hit Beverly Hills Ralph transformed himself from mid-western farm boy into Fernando, the European hair sculptor. He figured the chances of 90210's elite frequenting a salon called "Ralph's" were slim to none. Unfortunately, Ralph's family was Swiss German, so to keep up with faux Spanish roots he indulged in magic tan sprays twice a week.

Ralph's face broke into a smile when he saw me and he lifted a hand in greeting, gesturing inside.

The hostess, dressed in all black right down to her black eyeliner and gothic chic black lipstick, directed me to a linen sheathed table in the middle of the room where my mother sat, looking down at her watch and pursing her thin lips.

"Maddie, you're late."

I wished people would stop pointing that out.

I leaned down and gave her an air-kiss. "Sorry, Mom, there was traffic."

Mom rolled her eyes. While they were the same hazelish green as mine, hers were framed in that familiar pale blue eye-shadow she'd been wearing since before it became fashionable again. She had on a pair of black stirrup pants straight from 1986 and a sweater tank embroidered with a calico kitten on the front. I silently thanked the gods I hadn't inherited her fashion sense.

"You completely forgot, didn't you?" she said.

"I would have remembered."

"Right." Neither of us was truly convinced. "Anyway," she continued as I sat down, "I have a preliminary seating chart I want you to take a look at. And," she added, her eyes taking on an evil twinkle, "I found the perfect place for my bachelorette party."

Uh oh.

"Where?" I asked, truly fearing the answer.

"Beefcakes."

The fear was justified.

"Beefcakes?"

"It's full of..." Mom leaned in close, whispering. "Male strippers." She wiggled her eyebrows up and down in a way that made me queasy again.

"You sure you don't want to have a spa day with the girls instead?" I pleaded.

"Oh come on, Maddie. Lighten up. It'll be fun. Besides, I'm getting married, I'm not dead. I can still appreciate the male form in all its glory."

Yep. I was going to throw up.

"Oh, and we need a final count for the reception. I only ordered one tent for the buffet so I only pray it doesn't rain." Mom made a little sign of the cross.

"This is L.A., Mom. It never rains." Slight exaggeration on my part, but since Los Angelinos considered three inches a monsoon, we were probably pretty safe. Not to mention this was July. The weather gods wouldn't dare dump rain in the middle of tourist season. Charlton Heston would be after them with his shotgun.

"So," Mom asked, scanning the patrons behind me, "where's Richard."

That's what I'd like to know.

"He couldn't make it tonight," I answered instead. Hoping she'd leave it at that. I still wasn't sure what to think about Mr. Armed and Dangerous in Richard's apartment, but I knew I didn't yet have an edited-for-Mom version.

"Oh that's too bad," she said.

Luckily I was saved further comment on my boyfriend's dubious whereabouts as an aproned waiter brought three plates of salad to the table.

"What's this?" I asked, realizing I hadn't eaten since this morning and was suddenly famished.

"Ripe summer pears and crumbled gorgonzola over fresh baby greens," Mom quoted.

I took a bite. Delicious. Okay, so maybe I had to hear about the dreaded bachelorette party, but at least this beat the Hamburger Helper sitting in my kitchen cupboard.

I was stabbing a second pear and making little yummy sounds when Ralph finally joined us. He stooped down and deposited a kiss on my cheek before taking the seat beside me. "Sorry ladies, I had to take that. Perm emergency."

"Perm emergency?" Mom asked.

"I told Francine not to re-color her hair for forty-eight hours after her set, but did she listen to me? No. Now she looks like an auburn haired French Poodle. She's coming in tomorrow morning for damage control."

Mom and I both nodded appropriately.

"So," Mom said, folding her hands in front of her and sitting up straighter in her chair. "Now that you're both here, I have an announcement." She looked pointedly at me. "Guess who's pregnant?"

A ripe summer pear stuck in my throat.

There was no way she could possibly know, could she? Was I showing a belly already? Were my boobs swelling? Did I have that rosy pregnant glow? I knew I should have powdered in the car before coming in.

Luckily before I could blurt out that I was just a little late, Mom ended the guessing game. "Molly!"

I swallowed the pear, relief washing over me. Of course. My cousin, Molly. Or as she was known in our family, The Breeder. She'd already popped out three rug rats in four years. I think she was going for some sort of record. Which of course made my grandmother very happy. There's nothing an Irish Catholic family loves more than a prolific breeder.

"That's really great," I said with about as much enthusiasm as a lithium addict.

"Great? It's fabu!" Faux Dad shouted.

Okay, so I was 80% sure he was straight.

"Oh," he said, waving his hands in the air, "One of my clients does the most darling little baby baskets. She takes a bassinet and fills it with organic teddy bears and hand knitted little booties. Stuff so sweet it makes your teeth rot."

"Oh, that sounds perfect! We have to get her one of those," Mom gushed. "What do you say, Maddie? Want to go baby shopping with me?"

Actually I didn't. In fact this whole conversation was making me break out in hives. The more I thought about Molly and her three and a half little munchkins, hand knitted baby booties, and most of all the unopened pregnancy kit sitting on my kitchen counter I wanted to bolt out of the room and scream some choice obscenities at my boyfriend for buying defective condoms. Only I couldn't. Because I had no

idea where Richard was and more likely than not I'd just be leaving more messages on his answering machine that Mr. Nobody would later play for his own personal amusement.

"Hey, aren't we missing someone?" Faux Dad asked, looking across the table at the empty seat. "Where's Richard?"

That, as I was about to find out, was the million dollar question.

Chapter Three

Somehow I survived dinner even with Faux Dad getting all googly eyed at the thought of a new baby and Mom getting all googly eyed at the thought of shoving twenties in some young stud's G-string. I still wasn't sure which scenario made me more nauseated.

I took the 405 home, checking the entire way for signs of bad guys, and slowly climbed the flight of stairs to my studio apartment, where I promptly collapsed on my velvet upholstered futon. I didn't even glance in the direction of the EPT. Much. Instead, I called Richard's machine one more time for good measure. I didn't mention that I'd been there earlier or the man with the gun.

I flipped on *Seinfeld* and vegged out as Jerry and George tried to come up with a plot about nothing. I fell asleep fully clothed, trying to fight images of black tattoos, shiny silver 38 specials, and my mother holding a basinet full of pink baby booties.

The next morning I awoke with a renewed sense of purpose. It appeared I wasn't the only one looking for Richard, which meant I had to step up the search. I was his girlfriend, which theoretically meant I should have the edge, knowing him better than anyone. The trouble was Richard and I mostly just did couple stuff when we were together – dinner and a movie at the Dome, cruising the Venice boardwalk hand in hand, snuggling under the stars on symphony night at the Hollywood Bowl. Honestly, I didn't really know any of his friends and now that I was thinking about it, I didn't really know what he did outside of "us" time either. It was a troubling thought.

So, I started with the short list of people in Richard's life I did know. Namely, his mother. The only problem was I didn't know her number, and didn't even know her first name to call information. Chances were good it was back at Richard's condo somewhere, but after the run in with Mr. Nobody that

wasn't a place I was especially looking forward to visiting again.

That left Richard's office. I knew he kept a complete address book on his palm pilot and another on his computer at work. The only obstacle to getting that would be Jasmine. But I was confident I could come up with some way to get around her. The woman had the IQ of a squash.

So, I put on my kick butt clothes. Black DKNY cargos, ice blue baby T, and my prize black two-inch Jimmy Choos with the rhinestone details. I capped it all off with some thick, black eyeliner and I could have doubled for a Bond Girl.

I parked in the garage and by nine-fifteen I was standing in front of Jasmine's desk pleading my case.

"I think I left my cell phone in one of the conference rooms last time I was here. Can I go in and get it? Please? I'll just be a minute."

Predictably Jasmine was enjoying this, her penciled in eyebrows twitching with amusement. "I'm sorry. But I can't let you go in there."

"Please? I'd ask Richard, but I can't seem to get a hold of him. Really, I'll be super quick."

"I'm sorry, but only lawyers and clients are allowed back there," she said, pointing to the frosted doors. "We can't have just *anyone* roaming around."

"But I really need that phone," I whined. Jasmine shrugged her shoulders as if to say, tough luck, chickie.

I pouted, then faked a thoughtful face as I stared at the frosted doors. I paused, counted to three Mississippi, then opened my eyes wide as if I'd had a light bulb moment. "I know! Jasmine, you could go get it for me."

She looked doubtful, glancing at her computer screen. Before she could argue the importance of her solitaire game, I rushed on. "Oh please, Jasmine? I really, really need that phone. You'd be doing me such a huge favor. I'd really owe you one."

She bit her oversized lip and stared at me so long I thought maybe she'd forgotten the question. Finally she let out a long suffering sigh. "Fine. I'll go check. But stay right here."

I held up two fingers. "Scout's honor."

That was almost too easy.

I waited until she'd disappeared into one of the conference rooms before bolting through the frosted doors and fairly sprinting down the hall to Richard's office. I quickly slipped inside and closed the door after myself.

As expected, there was no sign of Richard. Though the scent of his Hilfiger aftershave still hung in the air. I inhaled deeply, suddenly all the more desperate to find him.

The office held three bookcases, filled with impressive looking volumes, and Richard's honey oak desk, situated in the center of the room. His desktop held an oversized, leather bound calendar, a computer monitor, a telephone with about a gazillion little extension buttons, a penholder, and a stack of bulging file folders. The message light on his phone was blinking double time. Not a good sign.

I gingerly sat down behind the desk, flicking the monitor on. Luckily, Richard hadn't logged out of the system the last time he'd been here, and it only took a couple minutes of clicking around until I found his address book with his mother's phone number in Palm Springs. I pulled a sticky pad out of the desk and wrote the number down, slipping it in my back pocket. I flipped the monitor off again and stood up. Mission accomplished. I was actually pretty good at this cloak and dagger stuff.

I pushed the chair back in, put away the sticky pad and was just about to leave when I caught sight of the stack of files again. Bulging with forbidden documents. I took a quick look over both shoulders in a totally unnecessary move that somehow made me feel safer. Nope. Nobody watching. Just me and the files. Alone.

I tried to resist... but I was only human.

I picked up the one on top, knowing that if Richard ever saw me looking at these he'd have a cow, then give me an endless lecture about client-attorney confidentiality. But this was an emergency. I was late. And there was no way I was going to take that damn test and deal with the results without him. He got me into this mess, he was damn well going to be there while I peed on the stick.

So, fully justified, I opened the first file.

Worthington v. Patterson. To my disappointment it contained one legal sized document after another that I could have sworn were written in a foreign language. The only words I understood were "the" and "party." So much for juicy stuff.

I dropped that one back in the pile, hoping that at least one of these included a blackmail demand, death threat, or secret cover up. I hated to think my snooping was just nosiness.

I picked up Elmer v. Wainsright.

"What are you doing?"

My head snapped up so fast I feared whiplash.

Standing in the doorway was none other than Mr. Nobody. My heart froze in my chest and I quickly checked his person for a gun. Fortunately I didn't see one. And considering how tightly his navy t-shirt and Levis were hugging the form in the doorway, there wasn't much chance of hiding it from view. He looked like he worked out. A lot. Dana would have been proud of him.

"Well?"

Well what? Oh, right. What was I doing here.

"Looking for Richard," I squeaked. Suddenly at the sight of him I'd turned into Minnie Mouse. I cleared my throat, trying to convince myself that this guy didn't scare me. We were in a lawyer's office for crying out loud. He couldn't very well kill me here. Right?

I took a step backward anyway. Better safe than sorry.

"What a coincidence," he replied, his voice much deeper and smoother than I'd imagined. "So am I. Any luck?"

I shook my head no, afraid I'd sound like a mouseketeer again if I spoke. This guy seriously flashed "danger" in big, bold neon. And it wasn't just the potentially concealed weapon. It was the hard set of his jaw, the steadiness of his dark eyes as they quickly swept the room, the white scar over his eyebrow that I'd bet my Spigas he hadn't gotten from a paper cut.

He walked slowly over to Richard's desk and glanced down at the file I'd been attempting to read. "Anything good in there?"

"I don't know. I don't speak attorney."

The corner of his mouth quirked up ever so slightly. "Cute."

"Thanks."

He leaned his back casually against the desk, crossing his arms over his chest. His biceps strained against the sleeves of his T-shirt, the tattoo on his right arm peeking out again. It looked like a panther. Dark and sleek. With razor sharp claws. "So, you want to tell me what you're really doing here?"

"Nuh uh." I shook my head again.

He grinned. A slow, wicked grin that reached all the way to his dark eyes. It was the kind of grin that made women either cower in fear or want to rip his cloths off.

I licked my lips, my mouth suddenly filled with sand.

"Okay," he said, cocking his head to one side. "How about this. How about you tell me who you are then, huh?"

"Maddie."

"Maddie what?"

"Maddie Richard's girlfriend." I was reluctant to give him my last name as at the moment I couldn't remember if I'd been talked into a public listing by the phone company.

"His girlfriend? Really?" He raised one eyebrow at me.

"Yes. His girlfriend."

"Huh." He looked me up and down, his eyes doing a slow, thorough appraisal.

"What?"

"Nothing. I just didn't see him with someone so girly."

Hey! I planted my hands on my hips, throwing on my best tough chick voice. "This happens to be my Bond girl outfit. It is *not* girly."

"Easy, Bond girl." That slow, wolfish smile slid across his face again. "I didn't say I didn't like it."

Gulp.

"Oh." Dang it, I was going for tough chick again, but somehow in the wake of that I'll-huff-and-I'll-puff-and-I'll-blow-your-clothes-right-off smile, Minnie Mouse was back.

"So, um, who exactly are *you*?"

"Detective Jack Ramirez. LAPD."

Ugh. Mental forehead slapping. That explained the gun. I silently hoped that snooping hadn't been upgraded to a misdemeanor.

As if he could read my mind, his lips quirked again.

"Jasmine doesn't know you're here, does she?"

I did not dignify this with an answer. Which seemed to amuse him even more, his eye crinkling at the corners. However, he didn't comment, but instead changed his line of questioning. "When was the last time you saw Richard Howe?"

"Friday. We were supposed to have lunch together. What is this about anyway?"

"Did he cancel?"

"No, I was late." I cringed at the sound of the word echoing through my own head. "When I got here he was talking to you, then he..." I trailed off, remembering the way Richard had stared after Ramirez, then abruptly cancelled our lunch. It was clear even then he'd had something on his mind. And I didn't like the way that *something* had prompted Richard to pack his bags for parts unknown.

I swallowed hard, trying to change the subject. "How did you even get in here?" I asked, knowing that if Jasmine hadn't let me in there was no way she'd let a cop in.

He grinned. "I have a warrant."

Double ugh. Suddenly my theories of blackmail and secret cover-ups weren't sounding so far fetched. "Warrant?" I squeaked out. "As in, you have the right to remain silent?"

His smile widened, a dimple punctuating his left cheek. Clearly he was enjoying this. Personally I wasn't finding the predicament all that funny. My boyfriend was missing, there was a cop in his office with a warrant, and I had a pregnancy kit sitting on my kitchen counter waiting for another Big Gulp moment. This was not the stuff sitcoms were made of.

"It's a search warrant," he said. He sat down at Richard's desk, picked up the file I'd just been attempting to read and began scanning its contents. His forehead creased in concentration. Apparently it meant something more to him than it had me. I tried to read over his shoulder, to see if words that made sense had suddenly materialized on the paper. Nope. Same foreign language.

"Searching for what?" I asked finally.

"Evidence." It was clear this guy wasn't going to win any public speaking awards.

If I wanted information, I was going to have to pry it out of him. I mentally greased up my crowbar. "Okay, I give up. What exactly is going on here?"

Ramirez looked up. He narrowed his eyes at me, as if trying to decide how much to share. "All right. Your *boyfriend*," he said emphasizing the word as if he didn't really believe it, "is wanted for questioning in connection with embezzlement charges we've brought against one of his clients. Devon Greenway." He paused. "You've heard of him."

I had, and apparently my expression betrayed it. Devon Greenway was one of Richard's biggest clients. I knew Richard had met with him often. In fact he'd canceled a dinner date

with me just last Thursday to meet with him. However, if Richard was in trouble I wasn't going to be the one to nail his coffin.

"I may have heard the name."

Ramirez pinned me with a look that could pry pearls out of an oyster. Great, I had to pick now to become a terrible liar.

"Devon Greenway is the CEO of Newtowne Technologies," he continued. "They're in the process of filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission for a place on the New York Stock Exchange. However, in the course of an independent audit of the company's finances, a minor discrepancy was noticed."

"How minor?"

"Twenty million dollars."

"Wow." I was *so* in the wrong business.

"No kidding. But before we could file charges, Greenway skipped town."

"And the cash?"

"Just as elusive. Originally the money was funneled from Newtowne into a joint usage account, from which a series of checks were drawn made out to PetriCorp. On the surface everything looked legit until we realized that PetriCorp was only a business on paper. And guess who owns it."

"Devon Greenway?"

"Close. Under the business filing the owner of record is his wife, Celia. Filed under her maiden name, Wesley. Only PetriCorp's accounts are now empty, too. The paper trail ends with the person who set the accounts up in the first place."

A knot formed in my gut. "Richard?"

"Bingo." Ramirez sat back in the chair, crossing his arms over his chest again, watching me digest this information.

I tried not to look as shaken as I felt. "So, is Richard a suspect?"

Ramirez's face was unreadable. "He's a person of interest."

Uh oh. I'd watched enough episodes of *Law & Order* to know what that meant. Just one thing. I *really* had to find Richard now.

Before Ramirez did.

* * *

As soon as I could I hightailed it out of there. I didn't even wait for Jasmine to go on break before barging back through the frosted doors and jogging across the reception area to the tune of her calling "fraud" after me.

My head was spinning the entire two blocks back to the garage. Richard had blown me off and had dinner with Greenway last week. If what Ramirez said was true, it would have been the day before Richard took off for parts unknown. Suddenly I didn't want to know what had gone on at that meeting.

Not that I thought Richard was involved. Richard was a straight arrow, he couldn't even stand his tie being crooked. He would never be involved in something illegal. However, if he'd unwittingly helped Greenway, it was possible he knew more than was good for him, and if Greenway was as unscrupulous as he sounded, Richard might be in danger. And I didn't have the feeling he'd fare much better if Ramirez found him first. Any way you looked at it, my boyfriend was up shit creek.

I climbed the stairs to the second story of the parking structure and revved up my Jeep, pulling out onto Grand. I was contemplating my next move at a red light, when I saw Ramirez emerge from Richard's building and jump into a black SUV. Parked illegally. The perks of being the law. He started the SUV and pulled into traffic three cars ahead of me. As the light turned green I watched him weave through downtown, making a sharp right onto 8th. On instinct, I changed gears and followed him.

Did I know what I was doing? No. But it was abundantly clear that Richard hadn't just gone home to take care of his ailing mother. And I didn't have any better ideas.

Feeling very sly, I stayed two car lengths back as Ramirez got onto the 110 heading south. I followed him right through downtown, passing through Watts and Compton until we hit the 405. He was going a reasonably decent speed and I wished I had a less conspicuous car. While I loved my red Jeep, it didn't really blend into the background. I made a mental note to borrow Dana's tan Saturn if any more surveillance was needed.

The SUV continued south until we turned off at the 22, heading east toward the 5 and Orange County. It was getting late and I knew we'd hit traffic once we got to the 5. And I was starving. I reached across to my glove box, hoping for some protein bar Dana might have left in there. All I came up with was a packet of stale saltines and a stick of Doublemint. I ate the crackers, hoping Ramirez would pull into a Taco Bell soon.

No such luck. We merged onto the 5 and Ramirez moved into the left lane, settling in for a long drive. I groaned, making a mental note to always eat before tailing a cop.

Just when I'd decided I was on a wild goose chase and going to faint from hunger if I didn't have a Big Beefy DeDeluxe, Ramirez exited the freeway at Bear Street, toward the San Joaquin Corridor. My heart did a little jump as I realized he was taking me right into the heart of Orange County's premier shopping district. Maybe Ramirez wasn't such a bad guy after all.

As we neared the South Coast Plaza, Ramirez pulled away from the shopping district and into the residential. He moved through streets lined with two-story California Spanish villas and faux Tudors until he pulled up to a large, modern home, all glass on one side. I could tell it was designed by some famous architect or other by the angular lines of the structure, looming as if it was ready to topple in the next 6.3 earthquake. The

small yard was done in utilitarian bluegrass and decorative stone, which echoed the stark feeling of the glass structure.

Ramirez parked his SUV and got out, approaching the house. I parked across the street, slouching down in my seat in case he glanced behind him. Luckily, he didn't, because I'm sure my red Jeep stuck out like a sore thumb among the subdued Jags and BMWs lining the road.

Ramirez knocked on the front door, then waited. Then knocked again. Apparently no one was home. My shoulders sagged at the possibility that I'd just driven all that way on an empty stomach for a nobody's home.

Ramirez looked over both shoulders, as if someone might be watching him. Good cop instincts... I was impressed. I slouched down further in my seat, just my eyes and nose peaking over the rim of the driver side window. Apparently Ramirez was satisfied, as he proceeded to walk around the back of the house, disappearing through a painted, wooden gate.

I waited. Nothing.

Shit. If he was doing some fancy breaking and entering I couldn't see from this viewpoint. For all I knew he could have Richard in handcuffs back there. I opened the car door and slunk out, crouching as I ran cross the street. Then realized how ridiculous I must look. Gee, Maddie, that's not suspicious. I straightened up, throwing my shoulders back and walked around the side of the building as if I owned the place.

The backyard was much more lush than the front, the landscaping done in a mix of tropical birds of paradise, palms, and fat succulent bushes. Small levels had been carved out of the natural hillside, creating a barbecue area, a patioed terrace, and finally an Olympic sized swimming pool. Ramirez stood on the bottom level staring at the swimming pool. I couldn't see what he was looking at, so I quickly picked my way through foliage to the next level above him. I straightened up to get a better look.

Unfortunately, the uneven ground and my two-inch Choos made for a less than stellar combination. My foot slipped, my arms waving for balance that never came. I pitched forward and, before I could catch myself, let out a little scream.

Ramirez turned just in time to see me flailing like a lunatic, falling right toward him.

"Jesus..." he muttered, before collapsing with an "oof" as I landed on top of him.

I had to admit, landing on him sure beat the ground, though I'm not sure which was harder. His muscled chest didn't give way an inch. I wondered how many hours a day he spent at the gym.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he growled, his nose inches from mine.

I blinked hard, trying to ignore the rush of heat as his muscles wiggled beneath me. "I followed you."

"Hell, I knew that much. But I figured you'd stay in the car."

So much for my career as Maddie the fashionable stealth.

I pried myself off of him, awkwardly regaining my footing. Note to self: real Bond Girls don't wear Choos. "Sorry," I mumbled, sure I sounded as sheepish as I felt.

Ramirez grunted by way of response, standing up and dusting off the seat of his jeans. I tried not to stare. Much.

"I'll wear flats next time," I said instead.

"Smartass," he muttered. But he didn't go for his gun, now clipped conspicuously to his belt, which I interpreted as a good sign.

"So, whose house is this?" I asked.

Ramirez's eyes darkened, the line of his jaw tightening until I could see a little blue vein starting to bulge in his neck. "Hers." He gestured down to the pool.

I peeked over the edge of the hill at the sparkling blue water, shimmering in the late afternoon sun.

"Eek!"

My stomach clenched, the saltines threatening to make a repeat appearance as black spots danced before my eyes. The manicured landscape swayed in front of me and Ramirez's arm, suddenly at my waist, was the only thing keeping me from crumpling back down on the rocky ground.

In the pool was a tall, slim woman with clouds of flaming red hair.

Floating face down.

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