

EXPOSED

CIRCLE OF THE RED LILY



BOOK ONE

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CAEZIK
ROMANCE
ARC MANOR
ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND

SHAHID MAHMUD
PUBLISHER

www.CaezikRomance.com

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Cover Designer: Authors on a Dime

ISBN: 978-1-64710-067-4

First Edition, First Printing, November 2022

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



An imprint of Arc Manor LLC

www.CaezikRomance.com

For JoAnn Munso.

The greatest gift my mother gave me was naming you as my Godmother.

I endeavor to follow your example by leading with love.

PROLOGUE

ONLY the walls had heard her scream.

Old, crumbling, stone walls dripping with her terror.

The now-familiar drug-induced fog in her brain refused to lift, trapping her in the unending cycle of confusion and fear. How long had it been this time? Days? Weeks? Months? He always waited until she was asleep and every time she closed her eyes, she expected it to be the end. Sleep was his weapon of choice. Sleep and the drugs.

It never stopped.

When, *when* was it going to stop?

She never expected to die at twenty-three. But she would. Death teased her with sweet relief, but not even death seemed to want her. Yet. The thought of escape, of release, however she might attain it, brought a chilling anticipation of peace.

Acceptance had taken ... time. Time that had turned her mind to mush and her will to dust. She couldn't remember the last time she'd screamed. But she had screamed. So long and so loud her throat was scraped raw and she coughed up blood. Eventually, the screams had quieted and turned to tears which flowed into a rage that filled the windowless room with a fire stoked by every breath she took.

But it hadn't mattered. Nothing did.

It didn't matter how hard she pounded her hands, her palms, her fists against the intricately carved wooden door without a knob. It didn't matter how many stone grout lines she'd dug into. She got nothing for her pain except raw fingers and ragged, shorn nails. Routine had set in.

Routine had worn her down even in the oddly luxurious room she was locked in. A room filled with images of the others who had come before; framed photographs of the other women whose screams were trapped in these walls.

Portrait-perfect faces touched by the same, careful hands that had touched hers.

It was a room out of time that spoke of glamour and beauty, even as it served as her prison and torture chamber. Amidst the glitz and delicate fragrance of the red lilies he replaced every morning, for a while, however dim, hope burned.

Until he'd come.

Until *they'd* come.

When they'd used, abused, and violated her in ways she could never have imagined, they had killed what little belief she'd still had left that there would be an end other than death.

She wouldn't see her parents again, or her beautiful little niece. She couldn't bring herself to think about her sister—her twin—who would feel her loss so acutely it would be as if a part of herself had died. And what about her dog? What breath she had, hitched in her chest as tears trickled out of the corners of her swollen eyes. She'd only had him a few weeks; he was still a baby. A sob pushed against her lungs. What was going to happen to Barksy?

She wanted to find comfort in the only thing she still had—the solitary half-heart charm that hung around her neck, and the only thing of hers he hadn't taken from her—but she couldn't. Desperation arced through her, pinpricks of energy that sputtered and died after impulse. She willed her arms, her hands, her feet to move. He'd be back soon. The last time he'd brought her food, wearing that blank, plastic mask that left only his piercing black eyes bare, he'd told her his plans.

He'd been so proud of how he hoped to play with her again. Pose her again.

Rape her. Again.

She'd struck out, panicked, flailing, catching him hard against the side of the face. She'd heard the mask crack; the sound splitting through the silence of the room. He'd gone stone still, as if in shock, holding a hand to his exposed cheek as he processed her attack.

She'd dropped to her knees, ducked her head even as she reached up with both hands to grab at his tailored, elegant jacket.

Apologies got her nowhere. She hadn't expected them to. She'd needed to play her part to the hilt even if it meant paying an exacting price later. The price she always paid for disobeying and shattering his imaginary world like the mirror it was.

He wouldn't hit her. He wouldn't dare mar the skin he took such prodigious care of or muss the hair he'd painstakingly dyed, scalp burning, platinum blonde. Instead, he'd bent down and slowly, deliberately, locked his hands around her throat.

When he squeezed, when his gaze bore into hers, she'd clawed at this jacket, struggling to keep air in her lungs until she felt one of the buttons catch between her fingers. When he cast her away, she'd held on and tugged, falling to the ground in a heap, the button clasped securely in her fist.

She'd lain there, barely breathing, forehead pressed against the cold stone floor as he quietly withdrew from the room and closed the door.

She'd had a choice to make while emotions cycloned inside of her. She thought she'd been so smart, not eating the food this time, but now he only brought her water; water that was most certainly drugged. He'd honed his weapon of choice to a deadly edge. She looked down at the button in her hand. Triumph of a sort surged through her. With one swallow, she could use his pretentious clothing against him.

It would cost her her life, but if her gamble paid off, it might also, someday, cost him his. Someday, someone would have to stop him. Maybe ... maybe she would be the one. Even if from the grave.

Curled into the smallest corner of the room, she placed the button in her mouth. Hands trembling, she lifted the bottle to her lips and drank, swallowing the button with deliberate thought. Arms wrapped around herself, she rocked herself in comfort, waging a war with exhaustion, gaze pinned on the door. Waiting.

Waiting ...

She woke up on the bed.

Lying flat on her back, hands clasped under her breasts, she could feel the soft fabric of whatever he'd dressed her in this time. The surreal antique chandelier glowed over her, hypnotizing her with the glittering lights.

She could smell the chemicals in the makeup he'd slathered on her face, her neck. Her breasts above the exposed skin of her chest. She tasted the toxicity of the thick lipstick he'd painted on her dry lips.

She was tired. So tired of hurting. Of fighting. Of feeling.

Her eyes drifted closed. What she wouldn't give not to be able to feel.

"It's time."

She started awake, eyes going wide as he loomed over her. *Time for what?*

His mask had been replaced, but the white plastic was now black, making him appear faceless in the shadows.

Certainty descended.

She'd go to her grave never having seen her killer's face.

His hands slid under her, lifted her into the air then cradled her against his chest. As he walked to the door, chills erupted all over her body as a cool breeze bathed her skin. She could hear breathing. Steady, quiet, purposeful breathing. Not his. And not hers.

They weren't alone. She sobbed, but the sound caught in her throat.

Had she the strength, she would have panicked at the line of masked faces, the suited figures watching as she was carried past.

Even if she had the energy—the will—she couldn't fight. There was no way to escape his prison. He'd taught her that.

Darkness loomed. Shuffling footsteps echoed all around her as the shadows closed in around. Watching.

Something was different this time. Whatever hope she still possessed was quickly doused by the bright lights of the cavernous room she was carried into.

The air was frigid. The stone walls arched into a dome over her head. She could see a sliver of the moon through a center, round window at the top. Her hands turned to ice and she nearly cried out in shock as she was placed on a solid, unforgiving concrete platform. But no sound emerged from a throat clogged with horror.

The room was silent save for the ever-so-light breathing of its occupants.

She'd lost count of the masks she'd seen, of the faces she imagined behind them. Five? Ten? A dozen? More?

All she could do now was stare up at the night sky shining through that one, small circular bit of glass and pray.

A sudden rush of water erupted. Impulse had her wanting to look, to see exactly what was happening, but the drugs had done their job and paralyzed her into ignorance. Light sprinkles of moisture landed on her face, on the back of her hands. Soaked through her dress from beneath.

She could hear the area around her filling up and then, as suddenly as it started, the water stopped.

It took all her effort to breathe, in terror managing to open wide eyes that had stopped cooperating long ago.

He waded into the water to stand beside her, looking down at her with such ... compassion, such reverence, she wondered if this was all some nightmare in her mind.

"It's time." His tone was solemn, respectful and ... grateful.

He lay the flower—a solitary, blood-tinted lily—onto her chest.

Dread and panic skittered through her body like ants escaping a fire. She couldn't move. Couldn't blink. Could barely breathe. The heartbeat she'd clung to all this time began to slow. Slower ... slower ...

His face shifted behind the camera. The same camera he'd used on her time and time again. The platform rumbled under her and began to lower.

She whimpered. A pathetic, hollow sound that didn't come close to conveying her terror. She didn't want to die! She didn't want to ...

The water lapped around her face as he leaned in, focused the lens on her eyes and the flower as it drifted into the water, brushed against her cheek.

"There," he murmured. "Almost there. Almost ... there. Yes. Ah, yes. There it is. Perfect."

The flash exploded with an odd, dull snap. The click of the shutter echoed in her ears.

She drew in one last, desperate breath as the water closed over her head.

CHAPTER ONE

December, Eight Years Later ...

“HEY, hey—if it ain’t Miz Riley Temple, photographer to the stars!” The clear-eyed yet ragged-looking homeless man sidled up to the open driver’s window of Riley’s silver Honda Element as she turned into the parking lot of one of Los Angeles, oldest pawnshops.

Wearing a pair of neon-green parachute pants and a blinding 80s-inspired tank Riley would bet her latest commission he’d unearthed at a local charity shop, she gave silent thanks once again for being born well clear of that fashion-challenged decade. The added reindeer antler hat was a nice festive touch though.

“Come on, pretty lady,” the man teased. “Got me some new clothes. You wanna take my picture?”

“I don’t think you mean that, Dudley.” Riley put the car into park and offered a smile that had the man grinning back. “Last time I took your picture you accused me of trying to steal your soul.”

“That was then, pretty lady. This is a new day!” Dudley raised both his arms and his voice. “I am a new man! Come on. Take my picture and I’ll prove it. I guarantee you never snapped a man as good looking as me.”

“I’ll think on it.” She’d played this game with him often enough to have learned her lesson. Dudley’s moods and stability shifted with each sunrise, but today had clearly been a good one for him. Her gaze shifted to the home he’d made for himself out of a collection of boxes and pallets. He’d added an array of worn blankets and sleeping bags for insulation and—for want of a better term—ambiance. “Follow me to the back.” She drove on and pulled into the space that, at this point, should have had her name on it.

The late-afternoon sun beat down before Friday night locked its weekend hold around the City of Angels. A non-obligation Saturday awaited her, one she planned to fill with, God help her, sunrise yoga with her fellow apartment-house tenants and friends, followed by a mimosa brunch, heavy on the mimosas. If she was lucky, she’d cap off the day with a crap ton of ridiculous reality TV that never served as a much-needed reminder of how normal she her life was by comparison.

“I was worried about you,” she told Dudley as he sauntered around the corner, glancing over his dark brown shoulder as he hunched his hands into his pockets. She bent into her back seat for her bag. “You weren’t here the other day when I came by.”

“Church down the street—they added a bunch of new meetings.” Dudley inched his chin up, pride shining in his ebony eyes. Tight ringed curls covered his head, which barely reached Riley’s shoulder. She put his age somewhere between forty and Medicaid with wise, jaded eyes that still carried a hopeful hint of innocence despite life’s challenges. Reaching into the oversized pocket in his pants, he pulled out a yellow plastic coin. “Got me my thirty-day chip.”

“That’s great, Dudley. Congratulations.” Riley pushed as much encouragement into the praise as she could. She’d done it before. No doubt she’d do it again in the future. “I’ve got something for you.”

“For my thirty days?”

More like for my own peace of mind. “Sure.” She pulled two plastic bags out from her back seat as Dudley moved closer and gave her a good whiff of Los Angeles street funk. “This one’s to help you get ready for the rain and cold.” She glanced up as the sun took its usual late afternoon sabbatical behind a bank of fast-moving clouds. “Got you a couple of rain ponchos, some thick socks, and a battery-light-

up Christmas tree. Oh, and a new sweatshirt. Like the one from last year, only blue this time. I remember you don't like red."

"No, ma'am, pretty lady. No red. That there's the color of the dead. No red for me." She watched as he dug through the bag with the enthusiasm of a five-year-old discovering a gift-laden Christmas tree.

"And this one." She dangled the other bag above his nose. "Is nutrition. There's some fruit and protein bars and one of those salami sandwiches you like from CrayCray. You'd better eat it soon before it spoils."

"Yes, ma'am, pretty lady. You are God's hand, you know that?" Dudley shook his head and looked into his bags. "God's hand, you are. You want me to watch your car while you visit with Merle?"

"If you'd like to." She hitched her worn silver-gray backpack over one shoulder and locked up. "I don't think I'll be very long."

"Got all day, I have. What about my picture?" Dudley called after her. "You gonna take it?"

"Tell you what." She turned, called to him as she walked backward. "You get your sixty-day chip and I'll take you on a photo shoot at the beach."

His face split into a grin so wide her heart swelled. "You got it, pretty lady. Sixty days!"

"A day at a time," she reminded him as she headed toward the street.

Stepping inside Unburied Treasures was, Riley supposed, what the devout must feel when they walked into church. Rather than incense and devotion, she smelled silver polish, dust, and more than a little a touch of expectation. The door frame was decked out in cheap silver-tinsel garland accented with red, gold, and green ball ornaments that had definitely seen better days.

She'd been six the first time she'd stood in front of this building that offered what her childhood mind saw as a magical portal into the past. Her grandfather had promised a unique adventure on the other side of the scarred glass door. Reality had not disappointed. Enchanted by all the bits and baubles her child mind couldn't yet identify, she soon learned each and every item offered promising tidbits of history: a story. People's lives. All encapsulated in trinkets that had, at one time, meant something to someone.

Of course, now Riley saw the pawnshop for what it was: a run-down, barely hanging on business that thrived on return customers and people selling off pieces of themselves in order to survive.

The blinking neon sign with the blown-out “p” declared the store open. Hard to believe this rundown area of downtown was such a short distance from the upscale neighborhood she resided in, but that’s what you got in LA. An entire menu of varying neighborhoods stretching across the financial divide, offering everything anyone could ever possibly want or need. And more than an unhealthy amount of everything no one should.

Riley glanced at her watch. An hour until closing meant Merle would be in a chatty mood. At least she hoped so. She had questions and as of this moment, Merle Paddock was the only one with answers. Besides, nothing got the old man chattier than the promise of a cuppa tea before Vanna performed her nightly vocabulary reveal.

The buzzer sounded as she pushed open the spider-web-cracked door. The second she stepped inside, the air was filled by a screech and scream that had Riley covering her ears. “Merle, what the holy hell is that?”

“Oh, Riley! Hello!” The paunch heavy, bespectacled man behind one of the many glass counters held up both hands as if in surrender before he spun his wheelchair around and disappeared through the doorway behind him. “Sorry. Sorry!” The English accent he clung to after more than thirty years in the States carried through the store above the din. “Bagpipes. About three audio files piled up on each other. It’s a new security feature I’m playing with.” The fact he had to yell to be heard seemed to escape his notice. “I’m experimenting with audio deterrents that complement the security cameras.”

“Shame on you,” she yelled back as the store went blessedly silent. “Bagpipes are the instruments of the gods. How dare you defile them this way!”

“Spoken like the true Scots descendant you are.” Merle’s familiar disapproving scowl was in place when he re-emerged, partially decked out himself with a Santa hat and that typical twinkle in his eye. As diabetes had wreaked havoc with his circulation, he’d been relegated to peering at his customers over the edge of his display

counters for the past few years. That said, he zipped around this place better in his wheelchair than Riley did on two good feet.

“Your grandfather, God rest him,” Merle went on, “would agree with you about those bloody pipes, sadly enough. Ask me, they could drive a saint over the brink. Guess the noise won’t do me any good if it drives away my regulars. I just want to scare off the would-be thieves that don’t wanna be noticed.”

“Try the Chipmunks.” Riley shook her head to clear the remnants of noise. “They chase me away every time.”

“Chipmunks, check!” Merle raised a triumphant fist.

“What happened with the security-cage entry system you told me about? I thought you were going to look into investing in one?”

“Exceeds my current budget.” Merle waved her back. “I’ve got the pot on for tea and I have some of those shortbread cookies you like. Flip the open sign off, will you? Don’t usually see you twice in one week. What brings you by?”

“Oh, a couple of things.” Riley pursed her lips, debating, once again, how much to share. The initial photo negatives she’d evaluated earlier this afternoon could be nothing. Probably were nothing.

Or, if the gnawing in her stomach could be believed, they might very well be a very big something.

Riley chewed on the inside of her cheek. Living life in Hollywood, the eternal land of make-believe, often meant Riley questioned, or at the very least battled, reality. She was probably just being silly. Honestly, she was close to dismissing that niggling little voice in her head that was telling her she’d stumbled on something no one was ever supposed to see. That little voice had rarely, if ever, steered her wrong in all of her thirty-two years.

She clicked off the sign, ending the gentle hum of neon as she wandered through the store.

She performed her usual visual scan of the shelves holding everything from musical instruments to old collectibles, typewriters to exercise equipment that doubled as designer-clothes racks. Framed movie posters from Casablanca to the latest Bond installment hung high on the walls adding that necessary Hollywood touch that was a prerequisite for any shop in downtown LA.

Some of the glass counter display cases were filled with jewelry; cheap knockoffs mingling incestuously with the real deal. Other displays showed off pricier designer items or a limited array of weapons that included engraved brass knuckles, a pair of nunchucks that at one time had reportedly been used by Bruce Lee in a movie, and a selection of knives.

She stopped briefly at the tall tower cabinet filled with cameras and equipment. As if they had a mind of their own, her fingers reverently brushed the glass as she tamped down the longing coursing through her. From a stereoscope viewer to a 1929 Rolleiflex twin lens, to a Polaroid camera from 1948, every cell inside of her itched to get her hands on any one of them. Viewing today's world through a decades-old lens was a special and sometimes her preferred point of view.

There was little she loved more than adding to the collection of cameras her great-grandfather had started back in the 1920s. But frivolities like new old cameras would have to wait until monthly expenses were seen to. Her top priority had to be hiring a new building manager to replace the one who had quit Temple House three weeks ago without any notice.

As always, Temple House—the twenty-plus tenant apartment building she'd partially inherited from her grandfather when he'd passed—came before everything else. It had come first for him, and it always would for her. “Ho ho ho. Responsibilities first,” she murmured and bid a silent but hopefully temporary farewell to the camera display. “Sometimes being an adult really sucks.”

She joined Merle in the kitchen that serviced both the store and Merle's back apartment. Dropping her bag on the floor by the stove, she took a seat at the small square table against the wall. His living space was tidy and practically outfitted for a man of limited mobility. Accented with throwback appliances and an odd floral wallpaper she suspected reminded him of England, cozy was a word that came to mind. “I was worried about Dudley,” she told him.

“Dudley.” Merle shook his head. “Now there's a man who always lands on his feet. He's had a good couple of weeks. Got a new thirty-day chip.”

“He showed me.” She knew Merle and Dudley had an unofficial arrangement to watch out for each other. Of course, reliability is-

sues had cropped up now and again, but the two men had coexisted peacefully for more than a year. As for the other reason that had brought her here ... “I wanted to ask you about that old film you sold me the other day.”

“As much as I adore you, Riley.” Merle shot her a warning glare. “You know my stand on refunds.”

Riley laughed while Merle poured the tea and infused the air with cinnamon and spice. “I’m not looking to return the film.” Far from it. Her gut was telling her she’d come across something special even before she’d actually developed the negatives. Her photography work kept her head above water, but the paparazzi jobs—her main source of income—made her stomach turn even more than normal these days. What she wouldn’t give for one of her accidental, non-invasive pictures to pay as well as scandal and controversy.

She took a deep breath, ran a finger along the edge of a solitary plastic daisy drooping out of an old jar. “I was hoping you might tell me where you got it?”

“You’ve never asked me that before.” Merle frowned and pushed a plate of cookies closer to her. “Why do you want to know? You develop it already?” Interest piqued, his eyes narrowed. “What’s on it?”

“I’m still working with it.” It wasn’t exactly a lie. She’d only gotten a quick glimpse at a few of the negatives. But they had been disturbing enough to bring her back to Merle’s doorstep. “Old film takes a lot of time to bloom and develop its secrets.”

Developing old, lost film wasn’t just a hobby for Riley; it was an obsession. One that had begun at age five when, after the death of her parents, she’d come to live with her grandfather, a onetime Hollywood portrait artist who’d worked in the studio system back in the late 40s and early 50s. The second that Douglas Temple placed a camera in Riley’s hand, she’d found her calling. Over the years, she’d established her own path in the industry; eked out her own opportunities and ways of doing things as a part-time loathsome paparazzo. But nothing beat the rush of the undiscovered treasures lurking in a rusted 35mm canister.

While she had arrangements with multiple pawnshop owners and antique-store dealers around town when it came to photography

equipment, Merle, an old friend of her grandfather's, was always her preferred go-to.

She wasn't a cheapskate about it, either. She was willing to pay top dollar for potential. Her form of gambling, she supposed. She never knew what would be revealed in the darkroom. She might make a living using the most up-to-date technology, but her heart belonged to the images of the past.

As far as she was concerned, rolls that lay forgotten for decades were like rare diamonds waiting to be freed from the earth. It also helped that the hobby kept her sane as she trudged through the sometimes-muddy trenches of Hollywood.

Riley shifted in her chair as the knot in her stomach tightened. "I know you don't like to share where you obtain a lot of your ... merchandise. I'm not looking to hone in on your system or anything, but—"

"But what?" He turned on his appraiser look. "You're going to have to be straight with me if you want an honest answer about where that film came from."

"I don't want to get ahead of myself." She shook her head. "I honestly don't know what I'm dealing with yet. But some background might help me flesh out those answers."

"You're thinking it's something big? Something you can cash in on?"

Always with the bottom line: money. "Possibly."

"Enough to front me some cash to pay for that security cage I've got my eye on?" Merle pressed.

"Maybe." Riley shook her head, grinned, and sipped her tea.

"Well, in that case." Merle's expression brightened. "That might just change an old man's mind. There's only one problem."

"What's that?"

"The box I found that film in didn't come from one of my usual sources. Young kid, said his name was Nestor. Didn't give me a last name. Looked skittish. Brought in a big box of stuff early last week. Mostly junk, near as I could tell at first. Books, trinket boxes. Trophies. Couldn't seem to unload it all fast enough. I gave him fifty for everything and he seemed grateful."

Riley would bet Merle had already made a profit on the junk box, given how much she'd paid for that film. "So there's not really anything you can tell me."

“Didn’t say that.” Merle’s mouth twisted. “Got the feeling he might be back, so I started a customer card for him.”

God bless Merle’s old-fashioned heart. “What else was in the box?”

“Had an estate sale come in that looked more promising, so I didn’t go digging any deeper yet. Just blind luck the film was in that shoebox on the top.” Merle swung his chair one way, then the other, as if deciding which way he needed to go.

“I don’t suppose you’d be okay with me taking the box home with me?” She didn’t give him a chance to argue before plowing ahead. “Just a couple of days. I promise I’ll bring it all back next week. I’ll even pay for the privilege.”

“Now that’s a none-too-gentle push.” Merle’s brow furrowed to the point his bushy gray eyebrows obscured his eyes. “What on earth’s on that film that’s got you wanting to cannibalize my potentially ill-gotten gains? Not that I’m confessing to anything criminal, mind you.”

Riley pressed her lips into a thin line. Speculating at this point was only going to result in more questions and that was one thing she did not need.

“Never mind!” Merle let out a huge, chest-deflating sigh. “I know that look. It’s the same one your grandfather got when he was bluffing a poker hand. Take the box if you want. But only if you promise to tell me everything as soon as you can.”

“I’ll even do so over Christmas Eve dinner at Temple House, how’s that?” She hoped her smile didn’t look as relieved as she felt.

“Will Moxie be there?” Merle’s eyebrows recovered and rose halfway up his forehead.

“I will make certain Aunt Moxie is in attendance,” Riley teased. The two of them in the same room always provided a substantial amount of entertainment. “What about that card on Nestor?”

“Maybe I should start charging you by the request.” He spun his chair and rolled up to the register. “Give me just a second ...”

She gave him more than a few seconds while she drank her tea and nibbled on a star-shaped cookie. That had gone better than anticipated. Merle could be as moody and unpredictable as his alley-dwelling tenant, but she also knew how fond Merle was of mysteries. Heck, his bookshelves were filled with them.

With her nerves abated, Riley took a bigger bite of cookie and reached for another. Something about shortbread and tea always left her felling a bit sentimental. Both were firmly tied around memories of her grandfather. He and his sister, Riley's Aunt Moxie had made it their mission to keep her entertained, occupied, and distracted long enough to pull her through whatever grief her five-year-old self had been feeling after her parents' death. Tea and cookies had gone a long way in that department. Her parents were ghosts in her memory, but her grandfather? He'd loom large over Riley for the rest of her life.

"Here it is." Merle snapped the card out of its holder and handed it to her. "Guy was cagey at first, but I got some info out of him. Probably didn't realize he slipped and mentioned Constant Care Storage off Western Avenue. Place has been there longer than I've had my doors open. They might have some information for you about him."

"Fabulous." She took a quick picture of the card before handing it back. "And don't worry. When and if I cash in, a security cage will be on the top of my list."

As anxious as she was to talk to the storage center's manager, she finished her tea and ate another couple of cookies. Or three.

Before she headed out, she checked the storage facility's website for office hours. She'd have to head over there this weekend to talk to the manager. "So much for my Real Housewives bingeathon tomorrow." She sighed as she hoisted the box off the floor and into her arms.

"What's that?" Merle asked as he wheeled behind her to the door.

"Nothing important. I'll be by next week." She kissed Merle's whisker-rough cheek. Her dilemma as to how to juggle the box and open the door was solved for her by the elderly couple who walked in. "I'm sorry, he's closed."

"Oh, heavens. That's too bad." The frail-looking man, stooped, a bit wobbly, and more than a little wrinkled, heaved a sigh as he clutched his wife's hand. "A lovely young man at the record store told us we'd find an excellent selection of autographed albums. I was hoping you might have an Ornette Coleman or Charles Mingus? Our son's a jazz collector and we want to get him something special for Christmas."

“Let them in, Riley, for heaven’s sake.” Merle’s voice boomed as he waved them inside. “I’ve got bills to pay. Come in, come in. Charles Mingus, you say?”

Chuckling to herself, Riley maneuvered around the couple and headed outside. Stashing the box in her car took no effort because she’d purchased the small SUV precisely for its storage capability. A dim light shined from the openings between the blankets and sleeping bags on Dudley’s house. She could hear him, inside, singing *Here Comes Santa Clause* to himself as he munched away on the food she’d given him.

No sooner had she closed the liftgate on her car than her phone rang. One look at the number and she accepted that her dinner plans with Aunt Moxie were about to change. “Carlos. Long time, no hear. How’s my favorite hotel manager doing this fine Friday night?” She climbed behind the wheel and started the car.

“I bet you say that to all the hotel managers in town,” the middle-aged man teased and Riley smirked. He wasn’t wrong. “You asked me to let you know when Tiffany Small checked in again. I put her in bungalow twelve, your favorite. She’s ordered room service for two. Also booked a couples massage for nine tonight.”

Yes! Riley gave in to an enthusiastic fist pump. As much as she had a love/hate relationship with being part of the rank-and-file paparazzo, some celebrities just begged for attention. Tiffany Small had attempted to build her reputation on family-friendly characters made of cotton candy, angel wings, and pixie dust. Unfortunately, she’d spent an equal amount of time bouncing around nightclubs, harassing her production assistants, and having knock-down screaming matches with her timid, Midwestest, Bible-quoting saint of a mother. The dichotomy of personalities had definitely left the producers of her show scrambling for cover and Riley thirsting for a “gotcha” pic.

“Carlos, you’re a gem.” She tapped her dash GPS, opened favorite destinations then chose Fairfront Suites. “She checking out in the morning?”

“Yep. One night. Same commission?”

“Ten percent if the pictures sell.” And these days any photos of Hollywood’s new “It” girl would. Of course, the price would depend on who her bungalow bunny happened to be. Riley had her money

on her TV co-star. "I'll up it to fifteen percent if there's a bidding war. Thanks for the head's up."

"Anytime."

She glanced at the dashboard clock. Just after six. Plenty of time to still salvage at least some of her Friday night. Rather than turning left and heading home, she made a right and drove toward East 11th Street where the boutique hotel was located.

It wasn't every town where its traffic had its own reputation. Heck, at this point it should have its own Facebook page. All anyone had to do was mention Los Angeles freeways and the chaotic image was planted.

Driving in the area had been the butt of late-night jokes for decades, but within the humor lay truth. Many a blood pressure had been raised and more than a few instances of road rage induced, thanks to these streets. Riley had always looked at driving in Los Angeles as a special kind of game; one she frequently won because she refused to be baited by the congestion that was literally the heartbeat of the city.

The trick, she'd discovered when she'd learned to drive, was to embrace the insanity. Plan ahead. And, above all, avoid freeways whenever possible.

On evenings like this, when her mind was racing with questions around images she couldn't quite forget, a drive was the perfect solution. She never ceased to be amazed by the city she called home. There wasn't a block that didn't contain some small crumb of history or opportunity for entertainment. Not that it was perfect. No place was, especially a town built on desperate dreams. But that didn't make LA any less of a home or, more importantly, any less ideal for her.

She fit as easily into LA as a studio head in a leather chair. They were made for one another.

Riley parked across the street from the back side of the hotel, gave quick thanks to the parking gods for opening up a spot just as she arrived, and within seconds popped open the back of her car. She pried up the carpet and opened the custom locked storage system she'd had built into the floor. If she ever needed a spare tire she was out of luck, but with thousands of dollars' worth of

camera equipment stashed inside her vehicle, she needed things as safe as possible. She'd also invested in a state-of-the-art security system that could border on illegal if her colorful ex-felon of a mechanic could be believed. What better person to install anti-theft devices than a reformed car-thief who called herself Nightmare Halle?

Inside her purse, Riley's phone buzzed. Stopped. Buzzed again. Irritated, she dug for her phone, saw Merle's name on the screen. She clicked decline and tossed it back into her bag. She'd call him back once she was done.

Riley had been sneaking into hotels long enough to have the routine and costume down pat. She tugged on a simple black skirt over her jeans which she quickly shimmied out of. Off came the sweater which was quickly replaced with a white button-down over the white tank she wore. She toed out of her sneakers and slipped on simple black flats, tied her hair up into a semi-neat ponytail and, after flicking through the dozens of name tags she kept in a pop-out compartment in the side of the car, found one for "Vicky," a customer relations representative at the Fairfront Hotel.

She was not one for camping out or staking out hotel entrances, the latest fad restaurant, or even the red carpet. Nope. She had better ways to spend her time and, instead, had spent years cultivating relationships and investments into reliable sources who got her in and out of places quickly, efficiently, so she could exit with significant money shots.

She grabbed her smallest camera bag, loaded it with an extra 55 mm wide-angle lens, and strapped one of her oldest Canon digitals around her neck.

With her car locked up and secured, she hurried across the street, then slowed her pace as she keyed in the default code into the keypad on the back gate.

The boutique hotel was one of the smaller ones in the downtown area, but it was its hidden oasis behind the three-story building that served as the main attraction for a good portion of local Hollywood talent. Privacy abounded amidst the lush forestlike greenery accented with beautiful landscaping that spoke more of the tropics than West Coast cement. The winding paths snaked in and around various

bungalows that for the most part lay dark and dormant. If one paid the right people, their stays went unnoticed. For the most part. Riley had found great success riding karma's coattails.

Bungalow number twelve was closest to the back gate, tucked away behind a thick grove of shrubs that Riley was more than familiar with. She stood back in the shadows for a few minutes, getting a few initial shots to lay the groundwork for where she was. One thing she liked to include in all her sets of photographs was a trail that proved she'd taken them where she said they were.

As she reached into her bag for the additional lens, the front door popped open and a room-service waiter emerged. The irritated expression on his face matched the sharp under-the-breath mutterings that drifted toward Riley on the evening breeze.

"Poor guy," Riley muttered, even as she silently lambasted the actress occupying the bungalow. People got what they doled out and Tiffany Small had earned a karmic backslap in spades since first coming to LA from Montana eighteen months ago.

She wasn't the kind of young woman who could be neatly pigeonholed into a category, which didn't always lead to success. But her natural comedic talent, along with her ability to easily shift from sweet, dark-haired, misunderstood teen to pumped-up red-headed bombshell was keeping her on the top of the current "it girl" heap. That said, Ms. Small was of the generation who believed publicity, good and bad, all led to one thing: stardom.

Riley smirked. A universal truth that kept her solidly employed.

Riley adjusted the lens, took one more picture of the front of the bungalow, then made her way to the shrub-obscured window. Lucky number twelve. She'd been here often enough before to have worn a path, most recently capturing do-no-wrong romantic lead Evan Bennington snorting enough cocaine to send him not only to the moon but on a round trip around the universe. One he'd come down from that trip, he'd shifted his social calendar to include an extended stay in rehab. She didn't take any credit for that. She hoped his awakening had to do with his sudden desire to stay alive rather than the embarrassment at having been caught. Riley's focus wasn't on exposing people; it was exposing hypocrisy and that she would never apologize for.

Noticing the addition of holiday poinsettias and pots of holly, she daintily ducked down in the shrubbery, the skirt snug around her knees as she lifted the camera.

She'd exposed her share of affairs from this position; helped end some marriages while others had been strengthened. Contrary to a lot of her fellow paparazzi, she had lines she didn't cross. Granted those lines were getting thinner and further between considering the new reality was to over share everything on social media.

Lurking in the bushes for over an hour, however, came with its own set of frustrating complications. Riley squirmed and cringed. Dammit, she had to pee! She shifted again, winced, and cursed herself for not thinking of it sooner. Maybe luck would be on her side and she'd get the shot she needed before ...

High-heeled footsteps echoed down the path. Riley shrank into herself, curling into a ball even in the thickness of the bushes. When she heard the harsh rap of knuckles on the door, she popped up, just enough to watch as the door opened and Tiffany Small, dressed in her trademark yellow, stepped back to allow her mother inside.

"Well, crap." Riley sank back down, frowned, and lifted the camera. No illicit tryst. No marriage to bust up or relationship to expose. Didn't stop her from snapping photos as the two women's voices began to rise.

"I'm tired, Mama. I don't want to do this anymore. I want to come home. Please." Tiffany's plea had Riley's spine stiffening as the young woman dropped onto the sofa near the window. "Please let me come home."

Tiffany's mother stepped into the frame, her angular face flushed with the anger that sparked in her eyes. The blue Valentino suit fit her oddly, as if she had picked it off the designer rack of a thrift store. "We had a plan, young lady. You're not living up to your end of things."

"*You* had a plan." The exhaustion in Tiffany's voice had Riley lowering her camera, but only for a moment before she shifted her focus on the older woman.

She could see it now. The camera never lied. Resentment. Disappointment. Anger, all etched into deep makeup covered lines. She could see Tiffany's mother's desperation, her determination to live

vicariously through a daughter Riley would bet had been far more beautiful than she'd ever dreamed of being.

"It was your plan, Mama. You made it. Not me. People hate me. *I* hate me!"

"This isn't about being liked. Your face should be plastered on every tabloid all over the country," her mother railed as Riley snapped frame after frame, capturing the anger as it erupted toward Tiffany.

And just like that, any irritation Riley might have felt for the young woman vanished. The pain in Tiffany's voice, on her face? That was real anguish. Riley shook her head, disappointed in herself. How many times did she have to learn that no one in this town was what they appeared to be?

"A scandal is the only way important people are going to look at you," Tiffany's mother spat.

"I've been seen by important people," Tiffany said. "Trust me, they don't just look."

"Sometimes there's a price to be paid for what we want."

"There is no we! This isn't what *I* want. This isn't who I want to be!"

"It's who you *are*. It's who I've *made* you," her mother snapped. "You're going to be a success. You're going to be a star."

"Why? Because you weren't?" Tiffany demanded. "Because you didn't have the talent—"

Riley rose up as the slap cracked like a whip in the air. Riley released the shutter, checked the digital display. "Got it, you bitch."

Satisfied, Riley pushed to her feet, shoved the camera into her bag and stepped clear of the bushes. Straightening her shirt and skirt, brushing a leaf off her shoulder, she headed back down the path. She was at the gate when she heard the voices rise again.

Riley hesitated, hand on the gate handle, toes scrunching in her shoes. She dropped her chin to her chest and sighed. "Damn it!"

She set her bag under one of the small cement benches and returned to the bungalow. After she knocked, she stepped back and waited for the door to open. "Good evening, ma'am," she ground out a sickly sweet greeting Tiffany's mother.

"What is it?" The woman demanded, anger still shimmering in her glassy eyes.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, but I wanted to let Ms. Small know our masseuse had a cancellation and that she'll be arriving at least an hour earlier than expected. Ms. Small?" She said as Tiffany stepped into view. The upcoming starlet wasn't on display tonight. The yellow T-shirt and jeans, the bare feet, the simple, low ponytail all put the real Tiffany front and center.

The young woman wasn't a good enough actress to hide the sorrow in her eyes, nor was she fast enough to cover the welt on the side of her face. The welt that looked as angry as the woman standing beside her shell-shocked daughter. Riley stepped forward, but her mother grabbed Tiffany's upper arm and squeezed it as if in silent warning. "I hope that'll be all right?" Riley said without missing a beat.

"Yes, it'll be fine, thank you." Tiffany managed a weak smile. And there she was, Riley thought. The real Tiffany Small. The authentic Tiffany who deserved to live whatever life she wanted to live wherever she wanted to lead it. "Thank you for telling me."

"Yes, ma'am," Riley said. "Is there anything else I can do for you?" *Like drive you to the airport? Or punch your mother in her fat mouth?*

"No, you can't. Thank you." Tiffany's mother slammed the door in Riley's face.

"All right then." Riley pivoted and headed over to retrieve her bag. If there was one thing Riley loathed it was a bully. But there were ways to deal with bullies.

She returned to her car and uploaded the images to her laptop. She refrained from tweaking too much. There wasn't any need as the images spoke for themselves. After typing a couple of emails, she sent the attached photographs to her favorite local news anchor as well as the police. She started to close the computer, reconsidered. "What the hell. Mommie dearest wants to be a star? Let's say we make her a star." She shot off a third email to a tabloid editor friend who could circulate gossip faster than a goose could crap grease. She'd get scale for it, enough to make her bank account happy, but it would be worth taking the hit for. "Just so it's not a total waste of an evening."

She locked her equipment back up, grabbed her cell and climbed into the car, waiting for Merle to answer her call back.

“I’m sorry,” she said when an unfamiliar voice answered the phone. Younger than Merle. No accent like Merle, but definitely male. “I must have dialed wrong?” But that didn’t make sense. She’d tapped Merle’s name. “I’m trying to reach Merle Hargrove.”

“Riley Temple?”

“Who is this?” she countered, an odd, slick, greasy feeling slithered into her stomach. She knew that tone. That officious, serious, down-to-business tone. “Why do you have Merle’s phone?”

“My name is Detective Quinn Burton, ma’am.”

“Detective?” Riley repeated, as if from a distance. “A detective with what department? Burglary? Fraud?”

“No, ma’am.” There was a pause before he spoke. “I’m with homicide.”

CHAPTER TWO

“WE can likely mark Riley Temple off our list of suspects.” Detective Quinn Burton slipped Merle’s phone back into the plastic evidence baggie and, after casting his new partner a brief glance, handed it off and stepped out of the way of one of the crime techs. “She was shocked. And angry.”

“This is Hollywood,” Detective First Grade Wally Osterman said with a derisive snort from behind the disposable mask clutched against his nose and mouth. The younger man had the nose of a bloodhound and didn’t do well at murder scenes in particular. Ironically, it was the smell of blood that tended to make him sick. “You sure she wasn’t acting? She was his last call. Maybe he was identifying his—”

“No one’s that good an actress. Not even in this town. And we can confirm her whereabouts, to be sure.” Shoes crunching, Quinn made his way through the EMT debris, destroyed displays, and shattered cabinet glass. After more than fifteen years as an LA cop, Quinn had learned how to tamp down on his anger; to keep an emotional distance.

But something in Riley Temple’s voice had grabbed hold of him. Grabbed hold and refused to let go.

Sometimes He crouched and resisted the urge to rescue the autographed Charles Mingus album, soaked with the victim's blood. Sometimes this job was too damned much even for him.

"Tis the season, huh?" Wally scoffed. "Takes one evil son of a bitch to come after Merle Paddock. Man's a freaking legend around here. You know, my grandfather used to hock his guitar here when he was short on rent. Merle always kept it in the back room for when he could afford to buy it back."

"Merle's known for his big heart." Attacking a beloved character like Merle wasn't just ballsy, it was risky. Nothing united a community faster than going after someone who had attacked one of their own.

Wally hop scotched over the pile of costume jewelry. "This is one of those 'world's officially gone mad' cases, isn't it?"

"The world went mad before either of us was ever born." Quinn scanned the floor, a frown furrowing his brow. The jumble of rings and watches and jewels sparkled amidst the glass. He reached out a gloved hand, lifted a necklace free of the wreckage. He angled it in the overhead lights. "Something look off to you with this robbery, Wally?"

"Wallace," his partner corrected automatically. "And no, not really." The newly promoted detective stepped behind Quinn and peeked around the cashier counter. He wore a snug suit jacket and slacks that made him look like a kid dressing up for his first school dance. "Cash register's empty. Apartment behind the store's been tossed as well. Wheelchair's on its side back here, like he was dumped out of it then dragged out before anything was destroyed. Tells me they didn't like something he said or did. Neighborhood's got its problems. Plenty of addicts and homeless—"

"No addict or homeless person would have come after Merle." Quinn grasped the necklace in his palm. "He helps them. Protects them." He stood, let the jewelry catch in the light. "I'm pretty sure these are real diamonds."

"No shit?" Wally's eyes went first year detective wide. "Why would a thief leave something like that behind?"

"They wouldn't." Quinn gestured to one of the techs to bag the necklace and wondered how many other valuable items had been left behind. "Something's off. Almost as if ..." he trailed off. It was too

early to speculate that this hadn't been a robbery at all, even if that's what it felt like. "I need some air."

Quinn strode out the broken glass doors of Unburied Treasures and into the police-light illuminated night. Even in the crime scene aura of violence and change, he found an odd peace on the other side of the crime scene. Outside, he could close his eyes and draw the city in his head as a source of comfort. The old RCA Records building, Echo Park, the countless mom-and-pop hole-in-the-wall eateries he prided himself on patronizing. But there was no comfort tonight. Not one bit of it.

The pair of patrol cars that had been first on the scene sat parked haphazardly in the street. While one patrolman directed traffic around the blocked-off area, others had taped off the store's entrance and the alley next door. Quinn's department-issued sedan was double-parked nearby where a crowd had begun to form, cell phone cameras clicking away.

Quinn snapped off his gloves and shoved them in a nearby trash can on the other side of the crime scene tape. Homicide was the goal of a lot of cops when they signed up for duty. It had been his goal from the start. But there was one thing they didn't teach at the academy: being called to a homicide always meant you were too late.

Dammit. He was really tired of being too late.

His hand automatically dipped into his jacket pocket, then fisted when it didn't find what he needed. "Picked a bad month to stop smoking." And a bad night to offer to be on call. With a handful of detectives swinging between shifts, the main investigators in their unit—Quinn, Wally, and Detectives Perkins and Powers—managed to cover the crimes committed in their designated area of Los Angeles fairly easily. But Perkins and Powers—or as they were known, P-Squared—each had families. Well, in Power's case her marriage was hanging by a very thin thread, but Quinn's lack of attachments made him easy pickings when his fellow cops asked for him to cover their weekend shifts.

That said, Quinn could have gone the next twenty years without seeing Merle Paddock's life smashed into oblivion.

"Just last through the year," he reminded himself. "Then you can be done with all this if you want."

Even as he said it, that tiny, doubting devil that took up too much space in his head danced its irritating little dance on his soul. For a moment, Quinn gave in and listened, breathing in the somewhat clean Los Angeles air as he started the process of bidding adieu to the job he loved.

Nights like this often led him into dwelling on the what-ifs, but those thoughts always circled back to the one, firm truth of his life. He was a good cop. Correction—he was a damned good cop. Countless commendations and certificates of merit aside, he was proud of the work he did. He had an instinct for it and a dedication to it that was becoming far too rare. He'd learned to listen and trust his feelings while still keeping the realities of the job firmly in place. If he had his way, he'd stay where he was in robbery homicide until his pension came due.

But Burtons didn't settle for a detective shield and a permanent spot in one department. Oh, no. Quinn was expected to follow the family tradition of clawing his way all the way to the top of the LA law enforcement food chain. His grandfather's run as chief had lasted more than ten years which came on the heels of his great-grandfather's tenure. Quinn's father was poised to double that, a feat unheard of in the toxic sludge of Los Angeles politics. As for Quinn?

He stomped an invisible foot on that dancing devil to grind him into silence. He was taking every second of this month to make the decision whether to jump onto that ladder or not.

That nicotine craving of his kicked into high gear. He almost gave into temptation and asked one of the lookie-loos for a cigarette, but he forced himself to detour to the parking lot to check on the second forensics team instead.

An explosion of tires screeching and horns honking had him turning to the street where he saw a woman racing across traffic. She wore a stark button-down white blouse tucked into a knee-tight black skirt and flats that made his arches hurt. Keys and cell phone clutched in her hand, shoulder-length dark hair flying around her tear-stained, flushed face, she leapt onto the sidewalk with no indication she planned to let the crime scene tape slow her down.

"I'm sorry, ma'am." One of the female patrol officers stepped effortlessly in front of her, both hands up to stop her. "No one's allowed beyond the tape."

"I'm family." Her breath hitched on a sob she was clearly trying to stop. "Merle's my fam—"

"Miss Temple?" Recognizing her voice, Quinn moved toward them. "It's all right officer. I've got this."

Relief swept across her face even as caution rose in her eyes. "Detective Burton?"

"Yes. Come on through." He lifted the tape, flicked his gaze to the name tag pinned over her heart as he drew her away, lowering his voice. "I planned to call you once we were done with the scene."

"Where is he? I want to see him." She hugged her arms around her torso and squeezed, tried to catch her breath. "Where's Merle?"

"They're taking him to Cedars-Sinai. It was touch and go for the EMTs, but they got him stabilized."

"He's *alive*?" She reached out and grabbed his arm, letting that trapped sob escape. Once it did, she released a breath and closed her eyes. "I guess I assumed when you said homicide—"

"I'm sorry. I should have been more clear during our conversation." Not that there had been much of an exchange. He'd barely gotten another sentence out before she'd hung up on him—probably to drive on over here. "Patrol units responded to the store's silent alarm. We were actually called to the secondary scene."

Her dark eyes opened. They were clearer now. Sharper. And far more leery. "Secondary scene. Someone else was hurt?"

"Yes. I'm afraid they were killed." He looked down to where she continued to cling to him. "In the parking lot. There's a homeless—"

"Dudley." She shoved past him, running through the parking lot gate. One of the crime scene techs shot to his feet. "Please. Let me see ..." She turned pleading eyes on Quinn. "Let me see him."

Intrigued, Quinn didn't have to ask if she was sure. Certainty was written all over her face. He nodded to the techs and they moved aside, the police on the ready to intervene if she moved too close to the evidence, or pollute the crime scene in any way. She was careful, respectful even, as she moved deliberately before crouching in front of the opening of the makeshift dwelling. A tiny Christmas tree with no more than a dozen teeny light bulbs glowed dimly in the space.

A soft, grief-filled sound escaped the control he saw her fighting for.

“Give us a few minutes?” Quinn asked the techs. The parking lot’s solitary light flickered, as if it, too, was exhausted from the night’s events. There weren’t any cars around, save for the SUV belonging to the crime scene team. For a downtown Hollywood lot, the place was pretty clean. The Jenga construction of the victim’s residence told Quinn he—Dudley—had been living here for some time.

Quinn bent down and rested a gentle hand on Ms. Temple’s shoulder. “We haven’t found an ID for him yet. You said his name was Dudley? Dudley what?”

“He never said.” She shook her head, tucked her hair behind her ears as she pressed her lips into a hard line. “He showed up about a year ago, tried to steal a pair of shoes from Merle’s shop.” A sad smile touched her lips as she reached for a yellow plastic disc lying on the blanket.

“I’m sorry.” He caught her hand, held it gently. “I can’t let you touch anything.”

“Right.” She shook her head as if clearing her thoughts. “I knew that. He was just so proud ... sorry.”

So was he, Quinn thought. It was clear this man had meant something to her. “You were saying? About Merle and Dudley? Dudley tried to steal some shoes?”

“He made a right mess of it. Knocked over a bunch of displays trying to get away. Instead of calling the police, Merle fed him dinner and offered him a deal. He could camp out here in the lot if Dudley kept his eyes on the place at night.” She reached out again, this time to touch the man’s lifeless hand, but refrained from making contact. “Guess, maybe, it wasn’t such a good deal after all. He looks like he’s sleeping.”

“It would have been quick.” Two bullets. One to the head. One to the heart. Gunshots around this part of town, at this time, caused as much concern these days as errant firecrackers. “I know it doesn’t mean much.”

“It doesn’t mean anything. He was harmless,” she whispered. “He was harmless to everyone except to himself. Why kill him? Why ...” She stood, looked back to the gate. “This doesn’t make any sense. Why is Merle alive but Dudley’s dead?”

There was no guarantee Merle was going to live, but Quinn kept that to himself for now. It was, however, a very good question. “Did you see either Merle or Dudley recently?”

“I was here earlier this evening.” She nodded, confusion crossing her face. “I wanted to ask Merle about some film he sold me.”

“Film?”

“I’m a photographer.” Her gaze seemed cloudy, as if she was still trying to process the situation. “Developing old film is a hobby. Merle comes across a lot of it from estate sales.” She looked back at Dudley’s sleeping bag covered home. “I only left a couple of hours ago. He and Dudley were both fine.”

He caught sight of Wally heading their way and waved him over. “Where did you go after you left here?”

“The Fairfont Hotel.”

“Did anyone see you?”

“Yes.” She blinked. “Right. Sure. I guess you need to know that.”

“If you don’t mind?”

“The two women in bungalow number twelve.” She shrugged. “I spoke to them. I’m sure they’ll remember me.”

“Am I right in assuming they’d remember you as Vicky?” Quinn gestured to her name tag.

She touched her fingers against the plastic, but rather than removing it, she simply shrugged it off. “Like I said, I’m a photographer. I got a tip about a celebrity checking in to the hotel.”

“So when you said photographer.” Wally voice held clear disdain. “You meant—”

“I meant photographer.” Her voice was so cool her words could have triggered an ice storm. “I’ve got time-stamped photographs on the camera in my car if I need an alibi.”

“Can’t hurt to cover all our bases,” Quinn cut his partner off and earned his own glare from Wallace. “You were a frequent customer of Merle’s then?”

“I’ve been coming here since I was a little girl. He should have sprung for that stupid security cage,” she muttered. “Always too damned cheap to invest in protecting himself. He considered everyone who walked in those doors a friend.”

“We didn’t see any security cameras either,” Wallace said.

“Then you weren’t looking closely enough.” She shifted her attention to Quinn. “Bookshelf over the cash register. Collector’s copy of Ian Flemming’s *The Spy Who Loved Me*. You’ll find a camera in the spine. And another in the front display cabinet by the door. In the eye of the Lucky Cat statue.”

Appropriate or not, having her come back to the scene was proving a gold mine of information.

Wallace didn’t seem to agree. “Not going to do us much good without the computer it fed into. Thieves must have taken it.”

“Wally—” Quinn warned.

“He was frugal, detective. Not stupid. If you check his apartment,” Ms. Temple said with obvious strained patience, “the bookcase in the living room slides out. His computer system’s in there. Not that he needed one for the Wi-Fi cameras.” Ms. Temple turned her cool stare on Wallace. “I didn’t catch your name.”

Quinn didn’t know much about this woman beyond her obvious devotion to her friends, but he knew enough not to want to be on the receiving end of that tone.

Wally shifted to attention. “Detective Wally—” He cleared his throat, straightening up. “Wallace Osterman, ma’am.”

“The store security feed uploads to a Cloud account,” she told them. “You’ll find the IP address and password in the Rolodex—”

“Rolodex,” Wally snort laughed and scribbled in his notebook as he shook his head. “Man, these old guys are a hoot.”

“So glad my friend’s assault could entertain you, Detective Osterman.” Her glare eased a fraction when she refocused on Quinn. “The information’s under John Robie.”

Quinn’s lips twitched. “Clever.”

“Merle thought—thinks so,” she agreed, clearly impressed Quinn got the joke even as Wally stared blankly between them.

“John Robie was Cary Grant’s name in *It Takes a Thief*,” Quinn filled in his partner. “You work in Hollywood, Wally. Watch some movies.”

“Wallace,” he corrected.

“Can we get back to it, detective?” The techs called from their vehicle.

“Yes, sorry.” Quinn waved them back over as the three of them shifted to stand beside the parking lot entrance. “Ms. Temple—”

“Riley’s fine. You’re going to find my prints in there.” She gestured toward where Dudley’s body lay. “Whenever I came by, I brought him some necessities. Food, clothes.” She flinched. “The Christmas tree.”

Quinn nodded. “Then we should probably take yours then for elimination—”

“No need,” Riley interrupted him. “I’m in the system.”

Quinn bit the inside of his cheek to stop his amusement showing. “Should I guess?”

“Harassment?” Wallace jumped in like a twit. “Stalking?”

“Trespassing, actually.” And just like that, whatever light there was in her eyes vanished. “Unless you have more questions for me, I’d like to head over to the hospital and see Merle.”

“Give me a second to call the ER.” Quinn pulled out his phone. “If he’s awake and stable I’d like to talk—”

Across the street a car alarm blared. Considering most alarms these days barely registered, Quinn dismissed it. Until Riley’s cell phone vibrated and blared the exact same sound. “Shit.” She craned her neck to peer over the crowd. “I don’t believe this.”

She was off in a shot, ducking under the crime scene tape before getting swallowed by the crowd of onlookers. With images of having to scrape what was left of her off the street, Quinn ran after her, grabbed her arm and yanked her back before she dived into traffic.

“Hey!” Riley shouted into the night toward the small gray SUV parked beneath the solitary traffic light across the way. “Get the hell out of there! Get away from my car!” She turned and glared at Quinn. “Let go of me!” She did her best to wrench free of his hold, but he only tightened his grip. A Cadillac Seville blasted past, horn blaring as it nearly skimmed her toes.

“Nothing’s worth getting run over for,” he muttered angrily in her ear.

“Easy for you to say,” she snapped. “Do you know how much camera equipment costs?” The hoodie-clad figure struggled to drag something out of the back seat. A bandana covered the bottom portion of his face that, for an instant, was illuminated in the glow of the streetlamp.

“Officers!” Quinn shouted over his shoulder and then shouted some quick orders—too quick for Riley to comprehend. Two of the

uniformed patrol men ducked under the tape and stepped into the street to bring the cars in both directions to a halt.

“About time,” Riley grunted and yanked herself free. “Drop the box!”

Quinn stuck close, focusing his attention on the would-be thief who glanced toward them, eyes shifting with anger. After one hard tug on the box, the thief’s feet slipped in the shattered window glass. The oversized, filled-to-capacity box tipped out of his hold and spilled its contents onto the street.

For a split second, the thief stood over the strewn pile of junk before throwing a solid, frustrated gloved-fist punch into the side of Riley’s car. He looked back at them one more time before he sprinted away like a jackrabbit. Halfway down the street he jumped into an idling sedan waiting in front of a vacant dry cleaners.

The car pulled away so fast, smoke plumed off the asphalt.

“Let them go,” Quinn ordered the patrol officer running up behind him as the car made a sharp right at the corner. “I got most of the plate number. Riley?”

“Stupid shoes.” She stood beside her car, panting, hands on her hips as she glared down at her feet, then over her shoulder at him. “I’d have caught him if I’d been in my sneakers.”

“Or you’d be joining Merle in the hospital.”

Her mouth twisted beneath narrowed eyes. “I didn’t need your help, detective.” It was the way she said it, as if his title was somehow toxic to her lips.

“Next time I’ll just let you turn yourself into roadkill then.”

She opened her mouth, then snapped it shut as Wally jogged over, an additional patrol woman at his heels. “You get a plate?”

Quinn rattled off the few numbers he’d caught in the dim light. “Toyota. White. Probably 1990s model. Don’t know how many street cameras are around. Could be worth a check and see where they go. Riley ...”

She had moved away to pop open the back of her vehicle and was rummaging around inside as Quinn and Wally joined her.

She pulled open a shoulder bag, searched it, set it aside then touched a hand to the souped-up, sticker-covered laptop. Lifting up the spare-tire panel revealed a custom storage system that put Martha Stewart to shame. Her sigh of relief accompanied her bracing

her hands on the SUV as she dropped her chin to her chest. "It's okay. It's all here."

"Must not have had time to get to it," Wally said. "Or know where it was. That is one impressive installation, ma'am." He said it as if he was surprised.

Quinn frowned, stepped back to take in the damage done to the side window and the very deliberate punch that had left a slight dent in the door. "You had a high-end laptop in plain view in the back of your car and they went after this box of junk?"

"What?" Riley poked her head around the side of the car. "Yeah. I guess." She blinked, something akin to recognition registering in her eyes before she looked away, as if guarding her thoughts. "Who knows what they were thinking. Crazy, huh?"

"Yes," Quinn said slowly. "Crazy."

"What's in it?" Wally stooped over and picked up a rusted metal box and a couple of worn paperbacks, pulled the box over and dumped them in.

"What's in what?" Riley asked as she added in a package of golf balls, an overstuffed accordion file, and an ancient calculator.

"The box." Quinn retrieved a now-broken track trophy from behind the front tire.

"Just ... junk. Is that everything?" She ducked down, checked under the car as the officers brought over the last of the items. "Just toss it all in there, thanks." When she bent down to pick the box up, Wally shooed her away and hefted the box into the back seat once more. "Any more questions, Detective Burton?" She rubbed her hands down the side of her skirt hard enough to rip the skin off her palms.

"You should come into the station, make a report on the attempted theft," Quinn told her, but she waved him off.

"No point." The snap in her voice told him she didn't appreciate his suggestion. "I'm well aware that small-fry crime doesn't register high enough to waste your time. Do you mind?" She stopped in front of where he stood, blocking the driver's door.

"Your insurance won't cover any of the repairs without a police report." Quinn tried again as he stepped aside.

"I've got it handled."

Right. She didn't need his help. "If you're sure." He opened the door and stepped back, closing it once she was inside. "You going to head to the hospital and check on Merle?" he asked after she started the engine and powered down the window.

"Yes."

"With a busted window? You lucked out just now. No way someone doesn't steal your equipment a second time."

She pressed her lips into a straight line, as if angry with herself for needing the reminder. "Right." She tucked her hair behind her ear, something she'd done earlier over Dudley's body. A sign of stress? Or maybe uncertainty? "I guess I'll head home first. My friend Mabel ..." She waved off her own thought. "More information than you need. Appreciate you letting me see Dudley, detective. Thank you ... for taking care of him." There it was again. That tone. She was dismissing him. "If you have any other questions, let me know."

Oh, he had questions all right, but now wasn't the time to push. "I'll be in touch." Quinn motioned a gaping Wally to keep quiet. "Good night, Ms. Good night, Riley."

She was spooked, he thought as she drove away. Spooked, scared, and definitely angry. Anger that was clearly directed at him and his fellow officers and not, as one would expect, at the person responsible for harming—and killing—her friends.

"It's not just me, right?" Wally moved in behind him. "That whole car thing was super weird, wasn't it?"

"Definitely weird. Too coincidental. Who would dare to rob a car with so many police cars in attendance? That's bold as brass, even for hardened criminals." There was definitely something more to Riley Temple—and her box of junk—than met the eye. But his curiosity on that topic would have to wait. "Do me a favor?" Quinn asked his partner as they walked back to the crime scene. "Grab your laptop and meet me inside."

He made his way back into Unburied Treasures and, ignoring the click of the techs' cameras, headed to the front counter. A solitary card sat nearby with the name Nestor and the name of a local storage facility. He flipped through the ancient Rolodex, finding John Robie's information amidst the hundreds of names and contact information. He pulled the card free, snapped a photo with his

phone then motioned one of the techs, a young woman with yet-to-be-jaded eyes, over. "Make sure this Rolodex gets brought in with the rest of the evidence, will you? And these cards." He indicated the one he'd pulled out and the one on the counter.

"Sure thing, detective."

"What's got your spidey senses tingling?" Wally asked as he joined him.

"Spiderman you get, but not classic Hitchcock." Quinn shook his head in exaggerated disapproval. "Don't know if this relationship of ours is going to work, Wally."

"Wallace." The correction came without the usual irritated tone. "That the IP address and password?"

"Unless Riley Temple lied to us." But she hadn't. Not about this at least. It took a few minutes for the site to load and for Wally to figure out exactly where the most recent footage was stored. "Okay, here we go. This is the live feed here. See?" He turned, waved up at the camera that displayed the same action on screen, with just a fraction of a delay. He returned to the computer, tapping on another icon. "Here—this is the archive." He clicked on the time box. "Going back to opening hour."

"Good. Riley said she came in this afternoon. Let's fast forward through—"

"On it." They slowed down for customers coming and going, then reduced the tracking speed again as Quinn's eyes scanned the screen. "So here's Riley Temple arriving," Wally murmured. "Time stamp is three-forty five this afternoon. Lines up with what she told us."

"I'm not worried about her arrival time. She's got her eye on something in the cabinet, there." He pointed then glanced to where the tall cabinet once stood. The cabinet that now lay smashed on the ground, along with a handful of vintage cameras. As she was a photographer, he'd bet that sight would break her heart. "Okay, yeah. Slow it down here. See that?" He tapped the screen image of Riley, her arms filled with the box from the back of her car. "Clever woman." He shook his head. "No wonder she got squirrely. She likely figured out the guy was probably specifically after the box." Riley didn't know what was in the box because it had been in Merle's shop until shortly before the assault. He stood up, pressed

his hands into his lower back. “No audio on the surveillance footage?” Quinn asked.

“No. And I don’t think the box is the only issue.” Wallace paused the playback to display Riley stepping back to let an elderly couple shuffle in the door. After a quick exchange, Riley left and the couple entered.

Merle wheeled into the frame and the three of them chatted for a few minutes before the owner waved for them to follow him into the back of the store. Not long after, the old male customer, no longer stooped and delicate, returned to the front door and locked it. When he turned to face the camera that he didn’t realize was there, the age and frailty disappeared.

“Can you zoom in on his face?”

“Yeah, sure, but I don’t think there’s any doubt he’s the one responsible—”

“For the attack on Merle—yeah, I know. That’s not ... what I’m ... looking for.” He peered closer. A disguise. A good one, but the man was definitely wearing one. Seemed like overkill for a simple pawnshop robbery. The resolution was crap, but some things shined through. “Yeah,” he murmured as he nodded. “I’ll bet two months’ salary that’s the guy who broke into Riley’s car.”

“Really?” Wallace didn’t sound convinced. “Near as I could tell, he was wearing a mask—how could you be sure?”

“It’s the eyes.” Caught in the spotlight of the one working lamp-post. Cool, dead eyes. “Keep the video going.” It wasn’t pretty. But viewing the footage definitely shifted the direction of the investigation. He’d been right. This definitely wasn’t a straight-forward robbery. Despite having a rather joyous romp destroying the store after looking for something they were clearly disappointed not to find, the assailants hadn’t taken a thing other than the cash from the register to make it *look* like a robbery. “We need that other camera footage. Can we play them side by side?”

“Yeah, give me just a sec ...” Wally’s deft skill with technology was one of the reasons Quinn had agreed to take him on as a partner after his last one took early retirement. “Let me just sync it up timewise and ... here.”

The laptop screen divided into two windows. From the second angle, it was clear Merle had been attacked well before the store had been trashed. But he hadn't gone down easily. "They thought he was down for good." That was when they began trashing the store, hopping and jumping around like cartoon senior citizens on meth. "But he wasn't. He hit the silent alarm button—just then. Did you see it? You can see his fingers over the edge of the counter." Quinn stepped back, found the button by the register. "They didn't expect that. They got careless."

"And angry," Wally added as the male suspect slammed the camera display case into the floor. "I can see where that's our car puncher."

"They dragged him out from behind the counter. He's still moving at this point." Despite knowing Merle was still alive and hadn't been shot, he still cringed at the image of one of the intruders aiming a pistol at the back of Merle's head. At the last second, his accomplice said something before she hauled him out of the store. "Literally dodged a bullet," Quinn murmured, watched as Merle dragged his cell out of his pocket. "Must have been when he called Riley." Quinn slapped a hand against Wallace's shoulder, squeezing it in excitement. "Wait, what was that? There. Go back about a minute and freeze it." He looked up at the cracked mirror hanging on the wall behind a rack of coats and classic T-shirts. "There was a flash in the mirror."

Quinn walked over to stand in front of the cracked mirror. He looked at his reflection, and the large square window behind him. He turned, strode across the store back toward the register. "The camera display case blocked the window before the attack, but not after." He peered outside where his lab techs were continuing to work the scene. "Dudley's tent is right below this window. That could have been a muzzle flash we saw in the mirror." Something shifted inside of him, the same something that uncoiled whenever he saw a case opening up in a new direction. "They shot Dudley *after* attacking Merle. Not before."

"Wouldn't they have killed him on the way in if they were worried about witnesses?"

“Maybe they didn’t care about witnesses,” Quinn reasoned out. “They’d planned to kill Merle, but got scared away. Maybe they needed someone—or make that anyone—dead.”

“Again? Why?”

There was only one reason Quinn could come up with.

To lure back the one person they knew had walked out with a box before they realized what it likely contained. To lure Riley Temple back to Unburied Treasures.

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