

The Gangster's Mistake

Jodie Leigh Murray



Jodie Leigh Murray Books

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Content Warning: This book contains strong language, sexual situations, stalking and harassment, drug/alcohol abuse and addiction, and mental health issues. Readers who may be sensitive to these, please take note.

The Gangster series is best enjoyed in order:

The Gangster's Daughter

The Gangster's Mistake

The Gangster's Game

Chapter One

As I looked at the two-story De Luca family home, I thought of all the people here today who could easily find their wallets missing. I couldn't help it. Being a thief for so long, thoughts like these defined me, etched in my memory like a part of my DNA. Thievery was bound to me for life. These guests would go a long time before they noticed anything was missing, all of them sidetracked by the festivities happening on this joyous day.

I've been a thief since I was eight years old. Stealing at such a young age was a way of survival. My mother cared more about her next fix than she cared about me. If she couldn't get her hands on drugs, alcohol was the next best thing. There was never enough money for food, clothing, necessities, and definitely not toys or books. Stealing was a way to make sure I got fed and the lights usually stayed on, not that I decided where the money was spent. Not once.

The past was something I preferred to keep well hidden, but when my limousine pulled up through the eight-foot tall black iron gates of Regan De Luca's family's estate just north of Los Angeles, I couldn't help but to think of how out of place I felt. My life was very different now, at twenty-four, than it was when I was eight. I wasn't poor, but I wasn't wealthy. A highly skilled thief, such as myself, could easily target this house, if it weren't for the security guards.

Shit, I thought, looking around the perimeter of the front lawn. *No one's going to get past this security. Not today.* The

driveway was long, under thick shady trees where cars lined the perfectly manicured lawn, attesting to the importance of the day. There were at least ten guards at the gates, and several trying not to be noticed. But I noticed. I learned at a young age to watch for the men who stood in the shadows, the way they held their hands loose and ready, and the way their heads tracked your movement even if you couldn't see their eyes under dark glasses.

Growing up in one of the poorest parts of Las Vegas, I couldn't remember ever being invited to a house of this size. I'd never owned a house, and given my history and my current job, I wouldn't. And I was fine with that.

But even an invitation to this house, on this day, was something to be coveted. Besides, robbing houses wasn't my thing. Stealing from people was. When I was younger, I could have targeted houses, but I was good at slipping through crowds. Because of my petite stature, it was easy. Why change what I was good at? That, and I could never go stealing on my own.

My life changed the second I met Cameron Moretti.

Cameron was the sole reason for me being here. He was my oldest friend—oldest being five years older than me. I had known him for just over ten years, which also made his friendship the longest lasting.

Now, he was getting married. I couldn't wrap my head around it. Eight months ago, he wasn't considering settling down. When he told me his father arranged a marriage with the daughter of an old friend, I almost peed myself laughing. Cameron hadn't been ecstatic about it, either. Until he met Regan.

Tearing my eyes away from the intimidating house, I looked down at my dress and pressed my lips together. Cassie, my roommate, therapist and best friend, all wrapped in one, insisted that I look my best for this occasion. It was something I wouldn't ordinarily do. She knew me well and knew I wouldn't put forth the effort. She prohibited dark clothing of any kind. Instead, I wore a white V-neck mini-dress with pale blue and purple

flowers. Finished off with strappy wedge sandals, I felt more girly than I ever had, and it wasn't bothering me as much as I thought it would. Having Cassie in my life, I had to admit, was a blessing. She was my second oldest friend, having met her while I was in high school.

"Miss?"

I whirled at the manly voice behind me, surprised that the limousine driver was still there. It must have been several minutes since I had been staring up at the house. *Shit*, I muttered under my breath and opened my purse.

"No, no," he said quickly, watching me pull out a twenty. "Mr. Moretti instructed me to bring your luggage to Miss De Luca's house in Malibu."

"You *don't* want a tip?"

"They paid the drivers extra for our services to the guests today."

Oh. I was wondering what to do with my bags since I had just come from the airport. Hating to admit that it took me longer to decide whether to come, I had gotten on a flight just in time. I hope Cameron wouldn't notice just how late I was.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, Miss Parker."

Paid extra indeed, I thought. *The driver knows my name. I doubt there's another person here other than Cameron who knows who I am.* And I was getting dangerously close to missing the wedding entirely if I didn't move. As I approached the doors, I half expected them to open automatically for me but they didn't. The open foyer was empty, and I stepped in with wide eyes at the gentle curve of the staircase leading to the second floor, splitting into two directions at the top.

I didn't have time to look around and hurried past an enormous living room and into a spacious ballroom where open doors led to the backyard. Walking across the shining floor, I almost wished I had on stilettos just to hear the click of them.

Gavriel De Luca had made this ballroom specifically for Regan when she was younger. Envy ran rampant through my veins. To have grown up with this much money, I couldn't even imagine. Or any money.

The day was beautiful, the sun glowing in the vast sky, void of clouds except for a few stray wisps. I could hear the hum of the crowd followed by a fading quiet, and I knew I was on the verge of missing the wedding. Despite my petite figure, my legs were long, and they carried me quickly out the doors to the poolside. The wedding was set up beyond the pool.

Hundreds of people already sat watching the couple at the altar, separated by the aisle with a blinding white runner, just as I expected. I walked down to the hedges separating the pool from the back lawn, stopping when I saw Cameron suddenly grab Regan and kiss her. *Shit, I'm too late.*

But then the gasps from the crowd started, murmurs sweeping from one side of the guests to the other. People were looking at each other, some chuckling, others in confusion. *What the hell is happening?* Swallowing a deep breath, I hurried toward the white chairs set up in perfect rows. And the people. If I walked down, every eye would be on me—the latecomer—instead of the couple. I stopped, hanging back by the hedges as Cameron pulled away from Regan and the ceremony continued.

I shook my head. Whatever had happened, Cameron never played by the rules. I stayed by the hedges and settled for watching the ceremony from here instead of drawing attention to myself by searching for an empty seat, convinced there wasn't one to begin with.

From this distance, I could hardly hear anything, but I could see clearly enough. I envied the two people at the altar, Cameron with his dark hair and black tuxedo and Regan, although I hadn't met her yet, with her pale golden hair styled perfectly and hanging down her back. From what I could see, her gown was exquisite. Jealousy hit me with ferociousness. Marriage was something I

was positive would never happen for me. I had too many issues with men. And trusting them. But that didn't mean I couldn't dream that someday it would happen.

Only in my dreams would I live in a house like this, in a neighborhood like this, and associate with people like this. These were wealthy people. I would never be part of this crowd. How I fit into Cameron's life was something I had never quite understood, but after I tried to rob him, he caught me and wouldn't let go. He never told me why.

It was my belief that it was because I was only thirteen. He was eighteen, on the cusp of adulthood and living his life to the fullest, in downtown Vegas on a business errand for Reno. When he suddenly snatched my wrist and saw the fear in my eyes, something that had only happened once before, I think he knew I needed his help.

Instead of calling the cops, he gave me his phone number and told me to call him whenever I needed help, or whenever I needed something. I was so scared that my mother's adopted son would find the number; I memorized it and swallowed the paper like a piece of gum. I hadn't needed to contact Cameron until my grandmother took me and my little sister, Ivy, out of my mother's care five months later, and that was only to tell him I had moved away from Las Vegas.

Clapping roused me from my memories. Cameron and Regan were walking up the aisle toward me. I scrambled to the shadows next to the pool while they walked to the reception area. Tents covered the other half of the lawn, providing shade for tables set with sparkling glasses and impeccable China. A DJ booth and a large, makeshift dance floor sat beyond tables. I wasn't sure I had ever seen a party this big before. Patiently, I waited while swarms of people moved from the ceremony to the reception before I swallowed deep breaths and finally moved.

I was comfortable sliding through crowds, but these people were daunting. They *looked* rich and there were way too many of

them. I waited for the crowds to reach the reception area before slipping in behind the last of them.

My eyes scanned the crowd for Cameron. *Stupid. He's busy with his guests. He doesn't have time to soothe my nerves right now.* I would need to make do on my own and hopefully strike up a conversation with someone at my dinner table.

"Excuse me."

Without moving my head, my eyes snapped over to a curly, blonde-haired woman on the arm of a guy almost a head taller than her. There was a bounce in her step, causing my lips to twitch at the urge to smile.

"You're Riley," she announced. "Riley Parker."

The declaration stunned me for a moment. How could she possibly know who I was without ever speaking to me before now? I couldn't imagine. I didn't recognize either of them. Did I look obvious? Did I look like I didn't belong here? Suddenly self-conscious, I glanced at the guy on her arm. He gave me an apologetic smile.

"How do you know that?" I asked slowly.

As they stopped in front of me, she extracted herself from him and thrust out her hand. "I'm Tatum. This is Alex."

I looked at him again, wondering if he could be one of those boyfriends who allowed his girlfriend to speak on his behalf. From what Cameron had told me of the pair, they met around the same time he had met Regan. It seemed they were about as evenly matched.

Alex smiled, holding out his hand and meeting my gaze as though he were looking deep into my soul. "Please tell me she's right, and you're Riley."

A nervous laugh escaped from me. "She's right. I'm not sure I want to know how she knew it, but she's right."

So it begins. It took me a moment to stare at his outstretched hand before I slipped my hand into his. I couldn't escape people today. Normally, I wasn't shy around people. I wasn't a shy person.

I was a *guarded* person. Especially around men. This many rich people, all at once, intimidated me.

"Tate is always right."

A grunt escaped from him as she gave him a slight elbow to the side on her way to linking her arm with mine, wasting no time in pulling me toward the tents.

I can do this, I reminded myself.

"You're staying with us. Get to know us," she casually said, leading me down across the cushy lawn. She glanced down at my wrist, slightly turned toward me but visible.

"Interesting tattoo."

"A gift to myself when I was eighteen."

"What's it mean?"

My eyes lifted to meet hers. At that moment, I couldn't recall ever having met someone like Tatum. Her energy was stunning. "It's a reminder that my story is not over yet. Life will continue despite my struggles."

She said nothing else about my tattoo, no comments or questions following. For that, I was relieved. The tattoo hadn't been a mark to draw questions about my past. It was truly as I explained. It served as a reminder. *My* reminder.

Guests stood in groups talking with others, not paying attention to Tatum and me walking in with Alex trailing behind us. This was much better than walking into the wedding ceremony late and having all eyes on me.

"It will be nice to meet Cameron's family. Finally. And Regan."

Alex's voice drifted from behind us. "Stay away from Stefan. Peter and his wife are around somewhere. And Zoey is probably steering clear of family."

As we came closer to the party, I counted to maintain my breathing. The crowd looked more intimidating the closer I was. Tatum must have sensed my distress. She pulled me slightly closer as we strolled. *One, two, three ...*

"Okay?"

"Fine," I whispered when Cameron came into view. "Just one of my struggles."

Closer this time, he made a dashing figure in his black tuxedo. As soon as he spotted me, his mouth curled into a devilish grin. Even from this far, I could see the happiness etched on his face.

With his hand cupping Regan's elbow, he cut off whomever they were speaking to and met us at the edge of the tent.

"Riley."

I hadn't seen him since before last summer when he traipsed off to his house on Cape Haven, an island off the coast of South Carolina. In the years I had known him, I'd never seen a light like this in his eyes. Abruptly, Cameron pulled me away from Tatum and hugged me tightly. I felt the tension ease away as soon as he had his thick arms around me. I felt safe. In so many ways, Cameron was almost like a brother to me.

When he stepped back, his arms slipped back around his new wife. Regan was even more stunning up close with her bluish-green eyes. Brides were supposed to be beautiful. She was more than beautiful. And the light in her eyes matched Cameron's perfectly.

"Riley, this is Regan. Regan—"

She pulled me into her arms so fast the breath whooshed out of my lungs. I had never met two people more suited for each other than Cameron and Regan. She was as strong as he was, but I knew that already by the way she had taken matters into her own hands over the phone yesterday when Cameron found out I hadn't confirmed my invitation or booked a flight yet. When she pulled away, I could see the sparkle of a tear in her eye.

"It means so much to us you're here. We are so happy you'll be staying with us for a few days."

"I'm surprised you aren't taking a honeymoon."

"We were married in January," Cameron said. "In secret because I couldn't wait. And because she was in danger. This is just to satisfy Gavriel's girlfriend, and everyone who was planning

on attending.”

I laughed. “Shit, Cameron.”

He shrugged. “Anyway, we’re happy to spend some time with you.”

“Only a few days. I have to get back to work.”

“You have to tell me all about it,” Regan said. “When Cameron told me you steal back stolen dogs, I couldn’t believe it. I almost didn’t. I have so many questions to ask you.”

“Yes!” Tatum shouted, even though she stood right next to us. “Tell us what it’s like. It sounds fascinating.”

A nervous laugh escaped. “I’ve rescued dogs when the need is there. That’s not all I do.” But Regan was right. I was stealing back stolen dogs, all the same. On the side.

“If you need anything, you tell us. We’ve got your back,” Regan said.

During our interchange, Cameron was whispering to Alex. I couldn’t help but wonder what the secrecy was until I noticed another guy join our group. He looked like a younger version of Cameron. He was slightly shorter, just slightly, and had a lighter shade of brown hair.

The way he looked at me, studied me, was unnerving. He extended his hand.

“Stefan Moretti.”

Behind him, I saw Alex roll his eyes dramatically when Stefan took my hand in a hearty handshake. Stefan’s eyes remained on me, and I couldn’t help but get an odd feeling that the warning Alex had provided would be easily something I could do. The feeling I got from the way he looked at me gave me the creeps.

“Riley,” I said.

He tilted his head. “Has anyone told you that you have a striking resemblance to our-”

“Stefan, leave it alone,” Cameron snapped.

While Cameron faced off with his brother, I couldn’t help but notice the animosity between them. He pointed his finger into

Stefan's chest with a snarl. "Stay away from Riley. She's not for you."

Stefan only laughed, strolling away with the sound wafting behind him.

What the hell. Shivers danced on my skin. *His laugh is almost like . . . No, I won't think about that today.* Cameron offered me an apologetic smile, curling his arm around Regan's waist.

Tatum leaned toward me. "We're going to get drinks. We'll see you later, Riley."

"I'm truly envious of you," I said, shaking off the interchange. Cameron had nothing to worry about. I'd steer clear of Stefan. "You both look so happy."

"We are, and I'm sure you'll find someone who can make you just as happy."

As much as I wanted to believe Cameron, I wasn't looking for someone here. This wasn't somewhere I fit in. I didn't want to fit in here. Still, I offered him a small smile. It wouldn't kill me to mingle for a while and get a ride back to Regan's condo.

He leaned toward me. "Not him, though."

I nodded. After hearing Stefan's laugh, I was safe from falling prey to his charms.

"Cameron, are you going to introduce me?"

The deep voice strolling up behind Cameron and Regan belonged to a man slightly taller than Cameron with the same shade of dark hair, graying at his temples. Instead of Cameron's translucent blue eyes, his eyes were brown. Both of them were extremely handsome in their tuxedos. Next to him was a mousy woman, who smiled at those wandering about around us until she finally centered her attention on me.

I watched her eyes widened and her smile falter. Her arm withdrew from the man and she took a step back. *What an odd way to greet someone,* I thought. It almost seemed like someone had slapped her in the face.

"I must excuse myself," she said with an air of superiority in

her whimsical voice. "I see an old friend I must greet."

While she removed herself from our circle, I looked at Cameron while he exchanged a look with the man. I wondered what that was all about. Then I thought maybe this was normal with them. I didn't need my private investigative skills to tell me about Cameron's family and their black market dealings.

"My father Reno," Cameron finally said. "And that was my mother, Orianna."

Reno stared at me as though he were studying every detail of my face, much like Stefan had done. His mouth was slightly open, as though he was at a loss for words. It was my fervent hope he wasn't recognizing me from my sleazy past. He snapped his mouth closed and extended his hand.

I slid my hand into his, gripping his hand just as hard. "Riley Parker."

"Good to meet you, Miss Parker. Are you from here?"

"No, no . . . I live in Seattle. And you can call me Riley."

I looked curiously at Reno. As Cameron's father, I knew it would be easy to be around him. He seemed like a good-natured man. Like Cameron, one probably didn't want to be on his bad side. Being around people of wealth and power, Cameron aside, caused me higher anxiety than I wanted to admit.

"It was good of you to come," Reno said. "Cameron tells me you rescue dogs. Could I interest you in a drink?"

"Steer clear of Stefan," Cameron added, leaning into me and causing me to laugh.

Cameron and Regan strolled away to greet other guests, leaving me alone with Reno.

When Reno picked up my hand and tucked it in the crook of his elbow, I was stunned for a moment. The men in Cameron's family were very formal and highly protective, I noted. He led me toward one of the ten bars situated around the area. Whoever planned this wedding was not about to allow guests to wait long for a drink.

"I am inclined to agree with Cameron," he said, stopping us at the end of the bar and catching the attention of the bartender with a mere wave of his fingers. "I love all of my children, but Stefan is what you would call a . . ."

"Womanizer?"

He smiled. "If she walks and talks, she's for him."

I smiled.

Reno laughed. "What can I get you to drink?"

"Tea, please."

"Long island?"

"Iced tea, or sweet tea. I don't drink."

With an incline of his head, Reno gave his order to the bartender. The lull gave me the chance to look around the classy reception. Although the number of guests was overwhelming, most of them were still speaking in groups and I could relax. Servers dressed formally laid out salads to begin the dinner service.

A jolt shot through me, causing my body to jerk, when I swore I saw a server across the tent that looked exactly like David. My mother's adopted son, even though the adoption had never been legalized. The breath caught in my throat, my hand flying to my throat. He was supposed to be in prison. The last time I checked, he was.

"What is it? Are you okay?"

I waved my hand in front of my face. "I . . ."

It must be a hallucination. The possibility of David being out of prison and working as a server at a highly guarded event such as this was virtually impossible. It's unlikely that they would hire a felon to be a server at this wedding. Not by the Moretti and De Luca families. With the heightened security at the event, they would have heavily scrutinized anyone working here today. David was serving a prison sentence for possession of drugs with intent to distribute. It was impossible for them to have released him yet.

Abandoning our drink order, Reno guided me over to the

closest empty chair and eased me down while he looked around. He looked panicked. I centered all my thoughts on breathing steadily while I stared at the edge of the tent where I could have sworn I had seen David, convinced my eyes had played a trick on me. I could see no sign of the server now.

"What brought that on, if you don't mind my asking?" Reno asked.

"I think it's how many people are here."

Reno wasn't buying my lie. I couldn't blame him. He didn't know me, but I'd never been very good at lying. No one had to know about David. Not even Cameron.

"You can tell me, you know."

My eyes snapped to his, then softened. "It's all good."

"You'll sit at my table for dinner." He waved over a woman server, giving him orders to move around some place settings. "Cameron told me about two boxers you rescued in Fresno. Is it true one of them refused to move?"

His kindness at changing the subject, averting my sudden panic, was admirable. Even the way he effortlessly changed seating arrangements to make room for me was kind.

"Boxers," I said with a shaky laugh. "They look so mean and scary, but they're huge babies. I appreciate you offering a seat at your table, Reno, but your table is for family. I can find another place to sit."

He smiled. "You'll sit at my table, and I'll not hear another word otherwise. It seems you're good at what you do. Besides, Cameron thinks very highly of you."

Like Cameron, you couldn't argue with Reno. *Must run in the family*, I noted. After he retrieved our drinks, he handed me my tea and guided me by my arm again to one of the two family tables. Since there was no wedding party, there was no head table.

"Miss Riley Parker, this is one of my closest and oldest friends, Gavriel De Luca."

I offered my hand to the distinguished-looking man. With a

liberal sprinkling of gray, his dark hair was complemented by a dapper little mustache. Now, I wasn't innocent enough to know that I wasn't in the company of notorious gangsters. Gavriel had quite the reputation in California, while Reno had his in Nevada. They kept their family names out of the mouths of the legal system, but they were not innocent of a lot of criminal activities. I wasn't one to talk, though. Thievery was only one of my criminal activities, much to my shame.

"Very nice to meet you, Mr. De Luca."

"Gavriel," he said. "It's a pleasure to meet you. And this is my wife, Isabel."

This ordinarily would have been the reason for panicking, meeting these people all at once, but they charmed me almost instantly. Regan was almost the spitting image of her mother, except Isabel had a deep tan and blonde hair swept up beautifully.

"It is so nice to meet a friend of Cameron and Regan's. I've heard you'll be staying with them for a few days," she said.

"Yes, just a few days before I have to get back to work."

"And what is it you do, Miss Parker?" Gavriel asked, pulling out a chair for Isabel to sit.

Being truthful to a known gangster had me biting my tongue between my teeth. No way would I admit I was a junior private investigator with a degree in criminal justice. If Cameron hadn't told them, I wouldn't offer it. "I rescue dogs. Dogs stolen either for resale or for dog fighting rings."

"Ooooh!" Isabel shrieked. "That's amazing! It must be so exciting."

Reno pulled out a chair for me and as soon as I sat down, it appeared the rest of the table had already filled. It wasn't a large table, and I had a feeling the sudden change in seating arrangement had misplaced someone. The table next to it contained the rest of Cameron's siblings.

At the same time I slid a glance toward Zoey, her eyes met and locked with mine. My lips parted. Her perfect straight, shoulder-

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length jet black hair added to her exquisite beauty.

There was no further sign of David, as I originally thought, but I was watching. Carefully. After a few days, I would be home. But in the meantime, I needed to do some digging to make sure David was still in prison. If he had gotten out, I would need to be extra vigilant. Prison was the only thing keeping him away from me.

Chapter Two

I pulled my stuffed dog closer to me, burrowing further into the threadbare blankets. I was grateful we didn't live in one of the colder states. Southern Nevada was usually warm enough, although in the winter months the nights could get chilly. Absently, I rubbed the worn fabric of Bobo against my nose. It was my most prized possession, even at thirteen years old. My grandmother bought it for me when I was a toddler. Naomi was choosy about what she bought for me, knowing that everything usually disappeared. Rubbing it against my nose was something I did to comfort myself, but as I slowly opened my eyes, I wondered why I was doing it now.

My small corner of the room was dark, but there was light coming from the hallway. I rubbed my eyes, shifting until I faced the door to see why there was a light. And then I saw him, and ice ran frigid through my veins. He didn't look at me like he had when I was a kid.

David. Most of my life, I believed he was my brother until Naomi told me he was not my mother's son. He was a boy that one of Simone's boyfriends had abandoned before she had gotten pregnant with me. It was a relief to know, but now I wasn't sure it was a good thing, the way he was looking at me.

Pulling the blanket up to my chin, I shrank back into the lumpy mattress while he leaned against the doorjamb. My little sister, Ivy, slumbered without disruption beside me while David continued to gaze at me with his steely blue-gray eyes. Dread

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washed over me, knowing I'd need to get up even though it hadn't been but a few days since we'd gone out. For once, I wanted to sleep and not need to worry.

Fear had its way of knifing through me whenever he came to the room, waking me up to go out and steal. Anxiety about when I would get caught again, or when a misstep would make him angry. And what was worse was the fact that I was growing up.

The way he was looking at me was far more frightening than when he was angry with me. Abruptly, he pushed away from the door and walked into the room, glancing around before his eyes came back to rest on me.

He stopped when he was hovering over my makeshift bed on the floor, looking down at me. I knew I was changing. I was getting older. My body was developing even though I didn't want it to. There was nothing I could do to stop David when he wanted something. He would make me do things by threatening something I cared about, or just threatening me.

"Get up," he said. "We're going out."

He turned and left before I could say anything. He knew I wouldn't say a word in dispute. When I sat up, I looked down at my stuffed dog. This one was my favorite because I couldn't have a real dog. It was missing its eyes because David had pulled them out when he was angry at me the first time I refused to go. I picked it up; the head lolling to the side because David had ripped the head off the first time I got caught stealing. I never got caught after that. I had to steal the sewing kit to sew Bobo's head back on. It was the one and only time I had stolen something other than someone's wallet.

I tucked Bobo in with Ivy. At only six, I often shared Bobo with her. Naomi had long since been forbidden from seeing me and Ivy after she had a vicious argument with my mom, which meant we didn't get any new clothes or things like toys. We had barely anything. I had no watch or clock to see what time it was.

We lived in squalor because my mother would get fired from any job she could get. She didn't have to steal like David and I did, but I knew she did bad things to get money. Things that made Ivy and I have to sleep in the living room sometimes, on a couch with many cigarette burns in it. I didn't need to get dressed, learning to sleep in my clothes most of the time. I couldn't trust anyone in this house. Only Ivy.

I darted a glance at Simone's bed, where she laid haphazardly on her stomach with one leg hanging off the side of the bed. She slept where she fell, oblivious to anything that was going on around her. Her latest loser boyfriend must be out for the night. I left the room, closing the door and tiptoeing down the hallway. I scoffed at my stupidity. Simone never heard us sneaking out.

David was waiting for me in the tiny living room that joined the equally tiny dining room. The lower-level townhouse we lived in was not in the best neighborhood, but it kept us sheltered. He jerked his chin toward the door and we stepped outside into the warmth of the Vegas night without a word.

I felt his hand at the small of my back, guiding me down the street. "You know what happens if you get caught."

"I know, David."

There was bitterness in my voice. I couldn't help it. I was tired. All I wanted was to be asleep in my bed, since it was a rare night when Simone didn't have a man in our room. I didn't want to be out in the streets looking for people to lift money from. Getting caught and the threat of being arrested had scared me more than anything in my life. It wasn't something I cared to repeat, but David wouldn't let me stop. I was his minion. Without me, he would go nowhere in life. I was small enough to sneak my way in, blending in nicely with crowds because of my petite size, and no one would notice.

I would have no way of knowing that night would be such a pivotal night for me. It was the night I tried to pick-pocket

Cameron Moretti. And got caught.



The sunrise from Regan's deck in Malibu rivaled the sunrise in Seattle from Cassie's deck. Regan and Cameron's in California was on the beach while Cassie's front deck faced the bay and the back deck faced Mount Rainier. Gorgeous views all around.

It was mornings like these I took the time to appreciate my life and how far I've come. I glanced down at my wrist tattoo. There was nothing I would change, except the possibility of sharing these mornings with someone. Out of the few guys I'd dated, none of them worked out to be anything close to a relationship. My invisible wall was high and thick. That, and I never knew when I would need to pick up and leave if David found me.

The door to the deck opened, but I kept my eyes on the horizon and my hands around my mug of coffee. It was chilly outside, but not so much that I needed a jacket like I would this time of year at home. Steam rose from my coffee, and I would have smelled the deep aroma if I wasn't already enjoying the smell of the salty tang of ocean in the air mixed with the earthy scent of the beach.

"Did you have a good time last night?"

Cameron slid into the chair across from me, setting his mug down on the table. I was sure that we hadn't slept for more than a few hours. Much to my surprise, I had stayed at the wedding reception until after midnight and hitched a ride back to Regan's with Cameron, Regan, and my two new friends, Alex and Tatum.

A yawn escaped. "I did. I'm surprised you're up already."

"I'm an early riser no matter what time I get to bed." He

picked up his mug and took a tentative sip before setting it down again. "I don't like to bother Regan. She needs the sleep. Why are you up so early?"

"I'd still be in bed, but I love sunrises."

He stared at me. Was it strange that I loved sunrises? I loved sunsets just as much, but there was something about sunrises that captivated me. The way he was looking at me was strange, like he wanted to say something. I raised my eyebrows.

"Regan's pregnant."

It was a good thing I wasn't still holding my coffee. The revelation momentarily stunned me. A lot had happened in their relationship in the last eight months since they'd met. As a daughter and only child of a gangster, Regan had been in danger the entire time.

Cameron looked like he couldn't possibly be happier. Jealousy struck me again. My little sister was the closest I would get to having a child of my own.

"Are you happy?"

The grin that curled his lips was enough of an answer. "She told me yesterday during the ceremony. Guess she couldn't wait. And I'm glad she didn't."

"That's what was going on!" I wondered how many other people knew why Cameron had kissed Regan in the middle of their wedding ceremony because she had spilled the news of their impending parenthood to him. "And how far along is she?"

"Three months. She's extra tired lately, but I'm not sure if that's from her recent ordeal or the pregnancy. Either way, I don't want to disturb her." He shook his head, looking out at the ocean as though he was deep in thought.

I could tell by the light in his eyes what he was thinking. You didn't know someone for as long as I had known him without knowing what was going on behind his light blue eyes.

"You're done for," I whispered.

He looked at me. "What do you mean?"

"She's wrecked you, my friend. There isn't anything in this world you wouldn't do for her. Anything you wouldn't give her. You love her that much."

"Fuck yes, I do," he muttered. "I almost lost her. This last time . . ." His voice broke. "That bastard had a gun right at her, and it didn't faze her."

"And you?"

"I couldn't have done anything. There were too many of them and too many of us. It would have been a bloodbath had anyone pulled the trigger."

"What are you going to do now?"

He shrugged, picking up his coffee again and cradling it in his hands. "We're going to head to Cape Haven for a while. Regan loves it there, and after all this stress, she needs the relaxation. We'll be gone for a while. A month, maybe more."

"You deserve it, Cam. She deserves it." I leaned over, cupping my hands over his. "I'm happy for you. And I adore her. You're a lucky man."

"You know, I have this friend."

"No! Nope. Don't want to know any friends, brothers, or anything. I'm good."

"You can't be alone forever."

"Just because you're happily married doesn't mean I need to be."

Cameron sat back with a laugh. "Someday, Riles, you're going to get caught. I didn't think for a minute I would fall in love. I couldn't have stopped it if I wanted to. It'll happen to you."

I wouldn't have believed it if I didn't know him so well. A year ago, Cameron wouldn't have considered settling down with one woman. I didn't think any of the women he had dated deserved him. He must have known it, too, because he was never with any of them longer than six months. Prior to Regan, he'd

been single for several months after his last model girlfriend—who was shallower than a parking lot puddle.

“Do you have to go back to work so soon? Can’t you stay longer?”

A sigh slipped from my lips. “Unavoidable. I wish I could tell you I’d stay longer, but you have an island to escape to.”

“You know damn well we’d wait. Both of us would much rather spend more time with you before you head home.”

“If we weren’t short on people, you know I would. Two more days is my limit, Cam.”

His lower lip stuck out like a petulant child. “You never take time for yourself.”

True. I’d never taken more than a few days for myself. Never in my life had I taken a full week’s vacation other than traveling for side jobs. My career wasn’t high paying, and I was barely skating by on what I had. An actual vacation wasn’t in my plans for a long time.

I was only here because I could afford the plane ticket. I didn’t have to pay for a hotel, food, or rides. The money I earned from my job was enough, and I would never resort to being a pickpocket again.

“You’ll come out to the island to visit sometime, right?”

Guilt for not fessing up to him since I didn’t have that kind of money gnawed at me. A plane ticket to South Carolina was probably more than I could afford, not to mention a ferry ride to the island. It might take a while of saving, but I would figure it out. Picking up an extra job wasn’t an option. Being a junior private investigator had me doing the dull tasks like reviewing cases and writing reports. Not to mention shadowing senior private investigators like my boss, Maria, and performing my own smaller undercover investigations. And sometimes it took weeks. Not accommodating for a part-time job.

It was bad enough I needed to take time off when someone called me to track down a stolen or missing dog,

which had happened. What Maria didn't know and could get me fired was I'd used company equipment and programs to help track down those dogs. There were only a few occasions, the first time having been for an old friend missing her two boxers, but word got around and damn if I hadn't been called to do it again after that.

"Visiting an island where I can lie on the beach for hours? I can't wait. It won't be soon, I hope you know. You and Regan need your time with no one hanging around."

"Regan and I are making Cape Haven our permanent home."

That brightened my mood. From what Cameron had told me about the island, it was a slice of heaven on earth.

"That's wonderful! Maybe I will come for a visit."

He looked me in the eye. "I'm counting on it, Riles."

There wasn't a day that didn't go by since that night I found my tiny wrist seized in the large hand of Cameron Moretti that I wasn't grateful he had caught me. Sometimes I think back to that night and surmise it must have been fate that brought us together. There were few people in my life I could count on to save me from trouble. Cameron was one of them. He'd never hesitated to put someone in their place for me if he had to.

If only the younger me had known that. I would have called him the night I stabbed my mother's boyfriend instead of relying on David. David not only had me in his pocket, he had stalked me for years after Naomi took us away from Simone. At least he's behind bars now, and we've securely hidden ourselves where he won't be able to locate us.

Chapter Three

My mistake, while walking through the parking garage at Sea-Tac airport, was paying more attention to my phone than my surroundings. It wasn't a good thing to do when walking alone, even in broad daylight. I knew better, even when I heard the car pass me and stop. I was too interested in the debriefing email from the agency about the biggest case we had undoubtedly received to date. Someone tipped off that a popstar's missing dog, worth over ten thousand dollars, was spotted here in town.

Approaching my old Jeep, I slipped my phone back into my pocket and stopped dead in my tracks at the steak knife sticking out of the front tire. The black handle stared back at me while terror struck me down like a bolt of lightning. My legs lost feeling, and I stumbled, crashing against the cold metal. My bag slipped from my shoulder, landing with a thump behind my Jeep while I pressed my body close to the car. A white piece of paper fluttered in the breeze under the driver's side windshield wiper.

Reading what was on that piece of paper had my heart thundering like mad in my chest as I reached for it, but I needed to see . . . needed to know. My hand shook as I slipped it out, ripping the corner while I did so. I couldn't breathe, unfolding it to see the black ink scrawled across it. "Nice try, *Alexis*. Looks like you aren't the only one who can put a steak knife to good use."

Crumpling the piece of paper in my fist, I fought for air. *David*. He found me. He found us. My body slid to the cold, hard cement

on my hands and knees. While my heart thundered in my chest, I wondered with fear if he was watching me while I read the note. If he knows I'm here, does he know where we live?

Through the buzzing in my ears, I heard a car rolling slowly by, followed by the screech of brakes. Even after I heard the slam of a car door and footsteps coming closer, I was paralyzed and unable to get up, still struggling to catch a full breath.

"Miss?" I heard behind me. "Miss, are you okay?"

I held up my hand, still on my knees, trying to gain control of my panic attack. If airport security was here, I was safe. For now. He kneeled beside me, a man dressed like security with a thick midsection. My focus remained on the tag on his shirt, stating he was security while I counted, regaining control of my breathing and my heartbeat.

"Miss?"

I crawled back until I sat on my haunches, taking a few deep breaths. "Someone put a knife in my tire," I said. "Can you help me change it?"

Worry marred his bushy brown eyebrows while he squatted next to me, but he nodded and stood. I waited for him to go to his cruiser before I stood up, keeping my back pressed to the driver's side door.

"Who would put a knife in your tire?" he asked, coming back with a car jack. He set it down next to the tire and looked at the tire. "A steak knife? What the-"

"Can you help me or not?"

"Sure, sure." He started jacking up the car while I went around the back, kicking aside my bag to get the spare tire. "Looks like someone wanted to make a statement. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine," I said, yanking off the tire and rolling it to him. "I work for a small PI firm. This is probably someone who we helped bust. Not a big deal."

Playing it off like nothing happened helped keep my breathing normal while helping him change the tire maintained

my focus on something other than being watched, even if in the back of my mind it was there. The need to get home hastened my movements.

Once the tire was changed and the man graciously took the steak knife to dispose of, I slid into the driver's seat and locked the door. I drew my hands up onto the steering wheel and pressed my forehead to my wrists while I gathered my thoughts. After a minute I lifted my head and looked out at the drizzling rain.

Alexis . . . No one called me that except Simone and David. When Naomi took me and Ivy out of Simone's house, she called us Riley and Hannah Parker. Parker was her name before she married my grandpa Gus, who passed away before we could meet him. From that day forward, she never referred to us as Alexis and Ivy. I didn't understand why until David found me the first time. She helped me officially change it after I turned eighteen, from Alexis Monroe to Riley Parker. No one else knew me by that name, and no one else would.

Ivy would need to wait another year to become Hannah officially.

I glanced down at my wrist, my fingers tracing the curves of the black ink. Setting my jaw, I threw the shifter of my Jeep into gear and left the parking garage behind me, uncertain when David would find me again. And uncertain what I would do now.



"Tell us everything" were the words that greeted me before I got through the back door.

Gus and Gatsby greeted me with wagging tails and bumps against my legs, their way of getting my attention without jumping on me. Hannah wasn't home from school yet, but it

wouldn't be long before she was.

We moved to Seattle seven years ago when I was a junior in high school, after David found me the last time. The house we lived in belonged to Cassie's dad, Lex Edwards, who was a drummer in a rock band. We didn't always live here, though.

When Cassie's mother, an actress, had overdosed when she was fifteen, no one was there to care for her. Lex was in the middle of a tour, unable to make it back for his daughter. My uncle Ricky had been friends with Lex for most of their lives, so when Cassie's mom died, Lex called Naomi to ask for her to take in Cassie. We moved from Fresno to Los Angeles at the insistence of Lex to live in his empty house.

Rarely did Lex Edwards come here to his Seattle residence, gladly providing a permanent residence for his only daughter and the woman who had saved his ass by taking her in when he needed her the most. I grew up with no father, never knowing who my father was, while Cassie grew up with an absentee father. We were only a couple of years apart in age. It didn't take us long to become friends.

Gus and Gatsby followed on my heels into the open concept kitchen and living room. The focal point of the living room, aside from the giant windows facing the bay, was the enormous fireplace with rocks embedded from floor to ceiling.

Cassie eyed me over the back of the ivory sectional. Her dark blonde hair was thrown up in a messy bun, yet always looked like every wisp was exactly where it should be. We couldn't be more opposite.

It didn't matter how many times she tried to get me to care about how I looked. I preferred a pair of leggings and a t-shirt that was three times too big, cut off at the neckline so it was always half-way falling off one shoulder. My dark hair was always tossed in a ponytail, but it never looked as good as Cassie's messy bun. I wore Doc Marten boots almost every day, sometimes I was in such a hurry I forgot to put on socks. My dress for the wedding

was about as far from my daily ensemble as it could be.

My oversized bag slid off my shoulder, landing on the floor, tugging my bulky shirt half-way down my arm when I crouched down to talk to the boys again. They still eagerly danced around my legs. They were all our dogs as much as they were mine, but they were mine mostly because they helped with my anxiety. All four of us took care of them, Cassie and Naomi taking the brunt of it when I was working for an extended amount of time, and while Hannah was at school.

Despite my inability to lie, I wished I could tell her I had a horrible time at the wedding and days following. But I had a wonderful time with Cameron and Regan, along with Tatum and Alex. It was as though I had a newfound family in California.

Regan, Tatum and Alex had made me feel like they had known me for years, like Cameron had when we first met. I escaped my problems for a few days. Something that I could rarely do. Not with David lurking.

"Come on, Riles," Naomi said, her whimsical voice matching her hippie-like persona. "Don't leave us hanging here."

I laughed. "The boys haven't seen me for days. Let me give them some love first."

Once my face was satisfactorily wet with dog kisses, I finished my journey to the living room with the boys right behind me. Naomi, with her bright multi-colored peasant shirt and a pair of bright red baggy pants, sat on one end of the sectional with her legs tucked up against her to the side.

I bent down to kiss her cheek before plopping down on the couch beside her. Cassie sat curled up across from us, in her classic skinny jeans and a baggy white sweater. A mug of steaming tea held firmly between her hands. I rolled my eyes. Cassie always took the healthy way. She gave up on trying to convince me to do the same.

"I don't have long," I said. "Maria called and wants me to come into the office as soon as I can. I'd like to see Hannah when she

gets home first, though.”

Naomi’s eyebrows cinched together, adding more wrinkles to her already wrinkled face. Smoking for years had aged her. That, and she loved to garden and didn’t care for sunscreen. Both had taken its toll on her skin.

“They can’t be serious! You just got back!” she said.

“I’m pretty sure she wouldn’t have asked if it wasn’t important. It’s not a big deal. Maybe she has an assignment for me.”

Cassie tentatively sipped her tea. “You heard about Ellie Varro’s dog, Queenie.”

“That was a few days ago. I’m sure they have someone already working on it.” *Which is good for me, so it buys me some time to figure out this issue with David, and how to get out of it,* I added silently.

“But you’re the best at finding dogs,” Cassie said, earning her my fiery look.

“Maria doesn’t know I’ve been doing that,” I reminded her. “And she won’t know if I can help it.”

I hadn’t been with the private investigation agency long, having only graduated last year with my degree in criminal justice, which is why I was only a junior investigator and never assigned big cases. This was a big case. I doubted Maria would let me in on it.

“They’d be idiots if they didn’t assign you to it,” Naomi murmured.

“How did she lose her dog?” I wondered.

“Someone broke into her dressing room while she was doing a show,” came Hannah’s musical voice from the hallway a second before the backdoor clicked shut.

Gus and Gatsby made a mad dash for Hannah, nails clicking on the hardwood floors as they ran toward her. A minute later, her angelic face appeared around the corner. Her hair was much lighter and shorter than mine was. We had the same mother but

practically none of the same physical features.

"You're back!" she said, coming into the living room and plopping down on the couch next to me. "How was it?"

"It was fun," I said, not wanting to delve into details. "Now tell me about Ellie Varro's dog."

If a thief wanted a dog, a thief was going to get it. Usually, the owner never stood a chance, but there were things an owner could do to make it much harder to steal. Microchips made it easier to track dogs down, but it was more effective in the cases of lost dogs more than stolen. The police were never much help, either. Even in states where there were laws against stolen dogs, they still helped very little. That's why I worked on the side sometimes.

This was what all the years of stealing I did were for. I would do anything to recover a stolen dog. Even if it meant risking my life. Dogs meant everything to me. All animals, really. But dogs meant the most. It was what I clung to in the darkest days of my childhood. Pretending Bobo was a real dog. It was why I had Gus and Gatsby. I tugged Gatsby close to me and kissed the top of his smooth black head. He kissed me back with a lap to my chin.

"My good boy," I murmured, scratching behind his ear before turning my attention to Gus and giving him equal attention.

Cassie set her tea down on the glass coffee table. "Apparently, this Löwchen is worth over ten thousand. Queenie is her emotional support dog. I don't think she wanted that to get out. She relies on this dog to calm her. Ellie Varro, popstar extraordinaire, is autistic even if higher on the spectrum."

"There are many people on the spectrum," Naomi reminded her. "Too many."

Cassie smiled. "Naturally, I know that since I treat a good number of them."

I shook my head, reserving judgment. I could relate to needing a dog for emotional support. I glanced down at Gus and Gatsby. In my case, I needed two of them. It would take nothing to

scoop up a small dog like a Löwchen and hurry away. Not like stealing a Mastiff or a German Shepherd, both highly sought after, along with several other purebreds. But to break into her dressing room? She had to have a lot of security. She was a pretty big star. That would take a highly skilled thief.

"I'm sure whoever they assigned will get the dog back, working with the cops, of course. You know there's only so much the agency can do except help them locate." I wasn't sure who they assigned, but I hoped for the sake of the agency that it was true. "As long as states don't have strict laws protecting dogs from being stolen, this is going to continue to happen."

Naomi sighed. "I admire your resourcefulness, but please be careful."

"You always say that."

"Always mean it."

"We're going to worry about you," Cassie said, picking her tea back up. "Nothing you say will convince us otherwise."

"I know."

"So tell us about the wedding." I was glad Hannah changed the subject. "Was it as beautiful as you expected?"

"It was stunning. And hard not to be jealous of Regan. Her family estate is where dreams come from. I can't imagine what it was like growing up in such a house." I absently patted Gatsby's head. Hannah knew what I was talking about. Although she was only six, almost seven, when Naomi took custody of us, she still had vague memories of how we had lived. "I had a good time, though. Everyone was nice. Nothing at all like I expected."

Cassie's grin wasn't hard to miss. "I knew it! And Cameron?"

"Hard to describe how happy he is. They complement each other like no one I've ever known. I envy their relationship. He'll do anything for her, and she'll do anything for him."

"Glad you had a good time," Cassie said. "You didn't meet any charming men? Anyone to convince you there's a better way of life?"

"No," I said, rising from the couch along with the dogs. "I've gotta get to the office. I'll be back before dinner."

"Naomi is cooking tonight," Hannah said.

Thank God, I almost said out loud. Naomi, Cassie and I took turns cooking when I wasn't on assignment. Cassie, although she tried, wasn't the best cook, but then again, neither was I. We both breathed a sigh of release when Naomi cooked, but we never took her for granted, which was why we took turns. We decided Hannah should focus on finishing school rather than on what to make for dinner.

After a quick shower and a change of clothes, I was back in my crappy Jeep, headed toward the city. The agency office was on the outskirts of the city, but on the south end, so it took some time to wind down the freeway. I parked across from the five-story brick building and sprinted across the street.

The first floor had medical and dental offices, the second floor had several businesses in technology and staffing, and the third office was my place of salary, even though it wasn't much. I was comfortable enough, thanks to Lex's generous living arrangement. There wasn't much else that I needed, although Naomi and I made sure Hannah had everything she needed. We wanted her to focus on school and not a part-time job, mainly because David could find her just as easily as he could find me.

And apparently he did find me, I thought as a chill swept through me. Hannah didn't need to know that, though.

I strode through the front door, greeting the front desk receptionist whose name I could never remember. Going to the office was something I avoided at all costs. Only when getting a new co-assignment, or coming in for check-ins, I stayed away. A hallway forked behind the front desk, both paths leading to offices and conference rooms on each side and cubicles in the center.

A line of windows at the back of the office overlooked the bay. The view was unhindered by taller buildings. I could almost see the boardwalk from Maria's office, which was one of the two

offices at the back that had windows.

When I heard voices from her open door, I slowed my pace. Dread crept up my spine, recognizing the smooth and sultry voice of Maria. A whimsical, highly emotional voice followed it. I turned the corner, seeing none other than Ellie Varro facing the wall of windows while Maria, all business in her pants-suit and swept up dark red hair, sat calmly behind her desk.

Ellie whirled, as though sensing my appearance. Mascara and tears streaked her cheeks, and her full, pouty lips quivered. I slipped into the room, stopping just inside the door and leaning against the wall. A huge map of the city and surrounding suburbs covered most of the wall across from the door. A perk to being a senior investigator.

"Close the door, Riley. Please," Maria said as she rose.

The look in Ellie's eyes was a mixture of surprise and doubt. Being a scrawny kid, I grew up to be a petite woman. I certainly didn't look that impressive. I was hoping to come to the office to use some resources to look into David's sudden presence and hoping to find him still behind bars. It was possible he sent someone to scare me.

"You?" she scoffed. "They're sending you after my Queenie?"

I felt the invisible slap. "Excuse me?"

"Riley, I need you to take over this case."

"What? Why?"

Maria gave me a look that begged me, calmly, to not give her a hard time about this. "Mandy backed out."

Mandy was good. I was good. Mandy was better. I couldn't imagine her reasoning for backing out of a case. In the years I'd been here, I couldn't recall *anyone* backing out of a case. Sure, we lost some, but we always gave it a go.

"Why would she do that?" I asked, aware that Miss Varro was looking between us like a tennis match.

"We received a tip that one of the city's most notorious and dangerous gangs *might* have taken Queenie. This gang has a

reputation for dealing in arms and even dabbling in drugs. We don't know why they would want a dog. Mandy could get some information, but not a location; however, I have some leads."

I looked at Ellie. The sadness behind her deep brown eyes was clear. I could relate, not wanting either Gus or Gatsby to go missing. Not only would it break my heart, I needed them for my support. When I looked into her eyes, I could feel her emotions. I couldn't promise her I would recover Queenie, but I would do my damndest.

"I'll do whatever I can, Miss Varro."

The side of her mouth quirked up. "You?"

My anger flared. "Do you want your dog back?"

"Riley is the best," Maria interrupted.

"I need Queenie back before my tour starts," Ellie said, her voice sounding small, as though burdened with fright. "I *need* her."

"How did your dog get here? Don't you live in LA?"

"I was doing a concert in Vegas when she was stolen out of my dressing room. Worthless security guards weren't paying attention, apparently."

Vegas, I said silently. *I can never get far enough away from that place.*

Offering a manila folder, Maria left me with no option but to enter the office completely. Ellie Varro, although famous, would not be a treat to work with. I hoped it was because she was emotional. I understood too well how stressful it could be to lose a beloved pet.

Bypassing the empty chair next to Ellie, I went to the small table in the office's corner to review the contents of the folder. There was a picture of a man. Rough-looking and covered with tattoos. This would be interesting.

"Miss Varro, you may wait outside while Riley and I go through the details."

I kept my eyes on the file, waiting for the door to open and close before saying a single word about the contents of the file. It

was safer for her to not know anything we knew. Especially in such a high-profile case.

"Now, Riley. I've traced one of the gang members to the coffee shop down the street. We also received an anonymous tip that whoever took the dog could wait until the publicity dies down. You need to stake out the coffee shop immediately."

"Grady Allen," I said, looking at the picture of a man with a partially shaved head with dark blond hair flopping over to the side and jaw, chin and upper lip covered with raspy hair. He had the most piercing, mean green eyes I had ever seen in my life. Cleary, he was a person someone would think twice to mess with. Formidable came to mind.

"Try not to tangle with him," Maria said, sitting down next to me. "We think he's part of the gang. Hopefully, you can find something out at the coffee shop."

I scoffed. "No known residence or current job."

"But there's a list of possible previous jobs."

"Did Mandy discover anything else?"

"Afraid not." Maria laid her hand on the folder before I could close it, her eyes serious when they met mine. "They are dangerous, Riley."

"Usually are."

"I don't think you should underestimate them. Drug dealers, arms dealers . . . there are a lot of rumors about these guys if you stop to listen. People who had tangled with them, people who had gone *missing*."

"Aw." I grinned. "You caring about me, Maria?"

"Get the hell out of here."

I almost laughed, but the fact was Mandy didn't give me much to go on at all. Almost like starting at the beginning, and already a few days had passed. That would mean I would need to get started immediately. There was still time to head over to the coffee shop to hang out for a while and be back before dinner.

"Are you sure you want me to do this?" I stood up. As much as

I cared about my job, she was putting me on a big assignment. I wouldn't be shadowing anyone this time. This was all mine.

"Yes," came her answer, without looking at me. "Try not to get hurt. You'd be hard to replace."

I left the office without another word, not bothering to look at Ellie again on my way out. The look on her face when I handed Queenie back to her was what I wanted to see, not the look in her eyes right now.

"I want weekly updates on your progress," Maria called after me. "At least by phone!"

I was already on my way down the hallway, but I heard her. Phone call check-ins were much preferred to coming to the office, especially if I found the location. I would be too busy watching and waiting for the precise moment to run in and grab the dog. We were supposed to get the police involved, but I wouldn't. If I had a chance to grab Queenie myself, I would do it.

Chapter Four

Based on Maria's information about the coffee shop, I strolled into the shop down the block by late afternoon. I didn't have enough time in the office to stop at my disorganized desk to boot up my computer and look into anything related to David. Maria was watching, and I didn't dare make her doubt my ability to take on this case.

I didn't need to drive since it wasn't far from the office, but I did anyway so I could watch for a while to see who was coming and going. Any strange activity and I would notice immediately with my trained eye for detail. This was huge for my career, and I needed to come up with something for Maria. Only then I could become a full private investigator with the salary to prove it.

As luck would have it, as soon as I parked I had the urge to pee, so I hurried in. On my way out, I ran smack into a guy that looked like he worked in construction, his muscular arms bare despite the lack of sun and the chilly temperature. His blue eyes caught me off-guard when his hands came up to my arms, making sure I didn't topple over from the contact.

"Sorry," I mumbled, pulling away quickly.

"No problem," came his smooth, deep-voiced reply.

Not wanting to be suspicious, I moved away from him toward my car. I couldn't help but to cast a glance over my shoulder to see him watching me walk away. The look in his eyes was unmistakable. I had caught him watching my ass. I yanked open

my car door and slid in, dropping my head against the headrest.

I took in a few deep breaths, then continued to watch the entrance as though it was normal to do. It was a couple minutes later; I got momentarily distracted when the construction worker emerged with a cup of coffee. Damn, but he was sexy.

When my phone rang, I noticed I had been sitting here for a while and I had seen no one looking remotely close to Grady Allen.

"Riley!" Hannah said. "Are you coming home? Where the heck are you?"

"Shit, yes. I'll be home soon. I got side-tracked."

"Everything okay?"

"Yes, everything's fine. I'll be home as soon as I can."

That was that. Evening would be approaching, darkness along with it, and my stomach was rumbling. I needed to get home and resume my efforts the next morning. Early. If this was a place of interest, Grady Allen would be here. There would be no way to miss him. He was an ugly son of a bitch, if the picture held true.

I'd try again tomorrow. I reached down to start the car just as a car pulled up to the curb in front of the coffee shop. Call it intuition, but I waited with my breath held until the driver's side door opened and Grady Allen stepped out. The picture had been accurate as far as what he looked like.

"Gotcha," I breathed.

I watched him stride into the coffee shop, but not before he took a quick glance around at his surroundings. With a gasp, I slid down in the seat. Shit! After a minute, I crept back up to see Grady had gone in and his car still there.

"That wasn't suspicious at all," I said. "Think you're being followed? You'd be one helluva smart guy. So let's see what your next move is."

When the door to the coffee shop opened fifteen minutes later, I surveyed Grady and another guy with shaggy dark blond hair with him. Both got into the car, and I immediately followed

with elation thrumming through my veins. This is what I lived for. This is what I was trained for. Bring me to Queenie, I thought, in silence this time. I knew that would be too much to hope for. It could be too good to be true but following could bring me one step closer.

As quickly as I could, I called Hannah back to let her know I wouldn't be home for dinner after all. I'd have to settle for eating leftovers when I made it home. It wasn't a far drive from the coffee shop, into a normal neighborhood south of where I lived but not by much.

The neighborhood was characteristically middle-class with average homes, lush yards and decent size driveways. Trying to reserve judgement wasn't always fun, as I couldn't imagine a man like Grady Allen living in a suburb such as this, but maybe he lived with his mom and the guy he'd picked up at the coffee shop was his brother. I wasn't being paid for guessing things. I was paid to uncover things.

When they pulled into a vacant driveway in front of a separated two-car garage, I rolled my Jeep to a stop far enough away to be hidden from sight but close enough to still see them. When they disappeared into the house, I brought up the map on my phone to snap a picture so I could find it again. I waited to see if a Löwchen was let outside to potty, but the longer I waited the more my disappointment grew. No sign of the little lion dog.

After waiting an hour, I went home in disappointment. Queenie was here. I could feel it. Having rescued dogs before, I had a feeling. I wasn't an amateur. And if there was one thing I knew, it was that I'd be back. I was going to find her.