

CARREFOUR

A novel by D. M. Buckley

CHAPTER 1

Ryan's eyes shot open, the remnants of an ominous dream still alive in his mind. He glanced at the clock on the nightstand and noting it was half past one in the morning, a sense of anxiety swept through him.

Struggling to calm his erratic heartbeat, he tried to pinpoint what had startled him awake. He lay still, listening, unconsciously holding his breath, but the whirring of the overhead fan was all that met his ears.

Had it been a peculiar sound or simply that same incessant nightmare? The nightmare that found him tossing and turning in fitful rest most nights and feeling bone-wearily drained most mornings.

He held his body tense, straining to hear, and after another ten minutes, satisfied there were no evil fiends lurking about ready to pounce, he expelled a long breath and kicked the covers off, knowing it was senseless to think he could possibly go back to sleep. He swung his legs off the side of the bed, grabbed his jeans off the floor and hop-danced into them as he headed to the kitchen to put on a pot of coffee.

His head was pounding, probably from his overindulgence the night before, which had pretty much become his routine as of late, having come to the conclusion, after nearly two years of restless nights, that passing out was as close to oblivion as he was going to get.

Eat something, you idiot. Make a sandwich, something to soak up some alcohol, he chastised himself as he attempted to shove

the replay of that night from his mind, and as he paced the kitchen floor, waiting for the caffeine machine to finish its gurgling, he absently opened the fridge, grabbed some lunch meat and condiments and set them on the counter.

Why couldn't he just get past it; move on? It had been more than two years. But the bone-chilling images of that night, the body as it cascaded to a horrifying death, was as fresh in his mind as the night it had happened. The last night he'd had any contact with his lifelong friend, Mick.

Consumed with his torturous reflection, he began to aimlessly slather mayonnaise on his soon-to-be mega sandwich when his cell phone started its buzzing dance across the kitchen counter. Recognizing the ringtone, he faltered, a feeling of dread seeping into his bones as he wondered why, after all this time, he would suddenly call, out of nowhere, in the middle of the night.

"Hey, Mick. What's up?" Ryan answered warily, hiking his shoulder up to cradle the cell phone while he piled cold cuts onto the oozing bread.

"Road trip."

"Where to?"

"Meet me out front," was all Mick offered before quickly disconnecting.

Ryan stood staring at the cell in his hand for a full minute, vacillating, the thought that Mick was likely jammed up again niggling at the back of his mind, but eventually, feeling bound by their history, he stuffed the sandwich in his mouth, snatched his shirt off the back of the sofa, shuffled into his shoes and headed out the front door.

Just as he reached the end of the driveway, Mick's rusted old Chevy pitched to a stop and the passenger door flung open. As soon as Ryan's feet were inside, Mick gunned the engine and the

car lurched forward, slamming the passenger door shut.

"Long time," Ryan stated simply as he instinctively reached for the grab bar.

Mick moved his head and fixed Ryan with an icy stare before returning his eyes frontward.

"What's got your pants in a wad?" Ryan asked, having noticed the barely veiled look of tension on Mick's face.

"Business," Mick responded, chewing his lower lip in consternation as he entered the on-ramp to the interstate.

"What *kind* of business?" Ryan pressed.

"The 'less you know' kind," Mick declared, his focus glued to the road, and after what seemed an interminable silence they finally exited the interstate and proceeded through the dark streets ahead.

"Hey man, where are we headed?" Ryan asked nervously when Mick suddenly whipped into a pitch-black, deserted alleyway.

"You know I've always had your back," Mick said, skidding to a stop beside a dumpster and kicking open the driver's side door. When no interior light came on, Ryan's anxiety intensified at the significance.

"Yeah," Ryan returned, his voice guarded.

Mick reached into the console, pulled something out and placed it in Ryan's hand. "Now it's your turn to watch mine."

"What's this? Is this a gun?" Ryan asked with alarm.

"Be careful. The safety's off. Wouldn't want you to accidentally shoot something important," Mick smirked as he twisted his body toward the open car door.

"Safety?"

"As soon as I'm out of here, work your way over to the driver's seat," Mick said, turning to face Ryan again with one foot on the pavement. "And keep your eyes open. If I need help, I'll signal. In the meantime, leave the driver's door open and

the headlights on and if things go really sideways, get lost. Forget you were here. Forget my name. Got it?" he said, quickly exiting the vehicle.

"Where are you going?" Ryan asked, his voice raising an octave.

Mick hesitated for a moment, glanced back with a resigned half-smile and threw out, "You know I love you, man," before continuing on.

Ryan stared after Mick, unable to shake the uneasy feeling gripping his spine, compelling him to question why he had blindly agreed to tag along. He more than knew what Mick was about. What the hell had he been thinking?

Aware he could ponder his shortcomings into infinity and knowing, at this point, he had few options, he shoved his misgivings aside and shook himself to clear his head before gingerly opening the passenger door. He cautiously dropped out of the vehicle into a semi-squat and duck-walked around the back on wobbly legs. As he fell into the driver's seat, a white panel van pulled in and stopped, its headlights shining brightly into Mick's windshield, and Ryan's pulse kicked into high gear.

He nervously sat on the edge of the seat as flashes of him and Mick and their nefarious exploits during their formative years wafted through his brain. There was no denying that Mick had always been the bad boy of the neighborhood; a rabble-rouser as far back as he could remember. By age nine he had a string of B&E's to his credit, was busted for car theft at age twelve and had been in and out of prison three times for possession, but he had always been there for Ryan, covering his back, taking the fall for whatever mischief happened to find them, until the tragic incident two years ago. So he figured, at the very least, he owed him.

Squinting through the blazing glare of headlamps, Ryan scanned

the area, trying to detect Mick's whereabouts, but he wasn't able to see so much as a shadow through the blinding lights. He crawled across the console and stuck his head through the open passenger side window, looking in the direction Mick had headed. He spotted him rounding the dumpster, aiming a pistol at two other men as they slowly moved toward him.

Ryan stilled, not daring to draw a breath, but after a few moments the weapon lowered and they seemed to be engaged in simple conversation, all three stances relaxed. As his raging pulse began to slow, Ryan eased back across the console, settled into the driver's seat and looked to his lap, fingering the gun Mick had given him. As he curiously wrapped his hand around the grip and slipped his finger through the trigger guard, being careful to steer clear of the actual trigger, the sudden slam of the van door caught him off guard and as he bolted upright in a panic his finger tensed, sending a bullet into the gas pedal. The engine revved for half a second and before he could react, a third person approached Mick from behind, shoving him forward into the other two and in no more than a heartbeat, Mick was propelled into the van. The door slammed shut and then, in one horrifying split-second, they raised automatic weapons and began firing in Ryan's direction.

"Holy hell!" Ryan exhaled, rolling out of the car in complete terror, and hearing the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps, not to mention the barrage of flying bullets, he scurried toward the back of the car, staying low to the ground to avoid the slugs whizzing past.

What a moron, he silently berated himself, his throat constricting in fear as he glanced behind at the continuation of the passageway. It was flanked on both sides by tall buildings and from his vantage point, appeared to be a mile long. No hope there he thought dismally and as an unexpected calm washed over

him, he slunk down on his belly and slithered under the car. He pulled his cell out, muted the sound, hit number three on his speed dial and set it on the dirt beside him, figuring, at the very least, when she heard it, she might not think he was such a dorky pantywaist after all, and then, resting on his elbows, he gripped the pistol in both hands, ready to face his destiny.

The shooting stopped as the sound of the doors and the trunk lid being wrenched open resonated above him.

"No way anyone could run that fast," he caught one of them say as three sets of feet shuffled just beyond the vehicle's perimeter.

"Go check that dumpster up ahead," another voice barked.

"Have to be superman," the first voice grumbled as his feet moved down the alley.

"That's a thought. Maybe you should check out the tops of these buildings," a third one chimed in with a chuckle.

"You think this is funny?" the one who appeared to be in charge bellowed as the creak of the dumpster lid opening drifted back.

"Nothing here," garbage guy shouted out.

"Is it full?"

"Pretty full."

"What're you waitin' for? Dive in," the gruff voice demanded.

"You shittin' me?!"

"You think he just disappeared into thin air?" the boss growled, and with that, another volley of ear-splitting rounds, clanging as they came in contact with the metal dumpster, assaulted Ryan's ears, followed by the stomping noise of the returning set of feet.

"Dead now," dumpster guy said as his feet lumbered past and headed toward the van and then, much to Ryan's stunned relief, the other two followed suit.

Unnerved, Ryan remained motionless for a good fifteen minutes after the sound of the van making its way to the street faded away before scooting out from under the car. He stood precariously on shaky legs, fell into the driver's seat, put Mick's car in gear and stepped on the gas.

He was approaching the entrance to the interstate when he suddenly recalled placing his cell phone on the ground. His cell phone containing contact information, not only for himself, but everyone he held near and dear. In a semi-panic, he made a quick U-turn and headed back toward the alleyway, but as soon as his headlights swerved between the buildings, he spotted the white panel van idling near the spot where Mick's car had been only moments before.

With chills of fear shooting down his spine, he jammed the shifter into reverse and stomped on the gas pedal, flying through the intersection behind at breakneck speed, and once he was through, he slammed on the brakes, threw the transmission into drive, squealed around the corner and tore down the highway, heading, once again, for the on-ramp to the interstate.

CHAPTER 2

At nine-thirty in the morning the sky suddenly opened up and the deluge that followed brought the traffic to a dead stop on the Veterans Expressway. Huge raindrops pelted my face as I frantically reached up and mashed the overhead console switch to raise the convertible top on the Jaguar and the twelve seconds it took for it to lock into place left me drenched and feeling like a soggy biscuit.

The wind gusts were so strong, I could feel the car sway with each one and I couldn't help wonder, even though I hadn't heard any alerts, if a hurricane was in the works.

While I sat in gridlock, unable to discern a single thing through the downpour, I blew out an annoyed breath, blasted the radio and hunkered down in my seat, trying not to hyperventilate, but the horn blaring, fishtailing vehicles surrounding me had my patience--which is not necessarily one of my virtues--at the breaking point.

I reached for my phone as a means of distraction and flipped it open as I waited for the torrential rain to ease up. Nothing.

Figuring it was out of juice, I rooted around in the console for the car charger and snatching it up, I plugged it in and flipped it open again, only to find a blank screen.

Frustrated to the max, I tried pressing all the buttons and then, in desperation, shaking the life out of it. Still nothing.

"Piece of crap," I shouted out, and as I raised my hand, ready to fling it across the seat, the memory of turning it off yesterday flashed through my brain, just after Valentini showed up on my doorstep.

Tony Valentini is a Tampa police detective I'd met when my

Aunt Scarlet's house had been broken into a couple of years ago. He'd melted me with his dreamy, bedroom eyes, and wormed his Italian self into my life...and my pants. And if I were to be completely honest, his ruggedly handsome looks and chiseled body may have played a small part in the worming as well.

The not so pleasant side of him, however, is that every now and then his fiery temper rears its ugly head. Being of Italian and Irish descent myself, we occasionally butt heads, usually over something I've done that he's perceived as my going off the deep end and putting myself and possibly others on an unhealthy collision course. I'm not saying I've never leaped before I looked, but honestly, who's never done that? Anyway, I digress. Needless to say, mostly we like each other. Last night was one of the 'mostly like' times.

Recalling our amorous evening together, I felt a tug at the corners of my mouth as I held the button in on the side of the phone to bring it back to life. As soon as it booted up the little whistle sounded, signaling I had a missed call and glancing at the screen, I saw it had been from my cousin Ryan.

I dialed into my voice mail to see if he'd left a message. There was one in the box. As it began to play, at first all I could hear was static, but the static soon subsided and was replaced by what sounded like gunfire. Gunfire?! What the...?

I pulled the phone in front of me and looked at the screen, puzzled. Was he pulling another prank? Geeky Ryan, trying to scare the bejesus out of me?

I put it back to my ear. The shooting had stopped and I could hear a car idling and then what appeared to be doors and maybe a trunk lid opening and slamming shut. Then I could barely detect the sound of voices. Something about a dumpster? Then another voice, angry and much louder this time, "You think this is funny?" More rounds fired, then, "Dead now." Then nothing but

the car idling before my phone declared, "End of messages."

Perplexed, I racked my brain for what to do, if anything. On the one hand, Ryan was famous for playing practical jokes, especially on me. But then, on the other, I couldn't imagine my weenie cousin being anywhere near gunfire. Could it have been the television? A video game?

I punched in his cell number, ready to rip him a new one. It was answered on the third ring, and not by Ryan.

"Can I speak to Ryan?"

"Who's this?" a grating voice demanded.

"Who's this?" I shot back, and the line was instantly disconnected.

Okay, don't panic, I told myself. It's probably nothing, but my radar was zinging off the charts and a very bad feeling had begun to settle in the pit of my stomach.

Where could he be? Who was attached to that obnoxious voice on Ryan's cell? Was he in some kind of trouble, or was this just another one of his crazy stunts? But if he really was in trouble, what was my next move? Ryan didn't have a land line, and I certainly had no desire to phone his parents. My Aunt Kathy was a basket case under the best of circumstances.

While I sat there, contemplating what to do, the sudden ringing of my cell sent a shock wave through my nervous system, causing my pulse to accelerate. My unsteady hands juggled the phone while I struggled to hold on to it, but eventually I managed to compose myself and answer with an even voice.

"I hope I didn't wake you, Lexi," my mother said, her voice syrupy-sweet, and I did an eye roll.

"No, Ma. Just stuck in traffic on the Veterans."

"What are you doing out in this weather?"

"Have to pay the bills."

"I didn't think you girls had set up shop yet."

"And you would be correct."

We girls consist of my recently widowed sister, Lizzie, a displaced attorney from New York, my two best friends, Darcy, hairdresser extraordinaire with a self-appointed side of *Sherlock Holmes* thrown in, and Isabel, currently a part-time cigar factory employee attending school for a degree in criminal justice while serving in the volunteer police reserve force, and me, Lexi O'Malley, an unemployed software programmer and begrudging part-time process server for my irritating childhood antagonist, Nick Romano.

After stumbling our way through some pretty hairy situations and helping the police catch some bad guys, the three of them had set out on a mission to convince me to combine our efforts and start our own business.

I had argued that my sister, Lizzie, was only licensed in New York, so until she acquired her Florida credentials we would have no attorney on board to represent any not so lawful clients we might acquire, not to mention keep us on the straight and narrow and out of prison. And since Isabel had yet to graduate, we would also not have a licensed P.I. on staff. I also pointed out that I had no real investigative talents, except maybe dumb luck, and Darcy's claim to fame was behind the scenes internet trolling.

Darcy had countered that we could, initially, hire out as snoops, which was a talent Isabel and I had discovered we clearly possessed, she could help by locating information via the internet and my sister Lizzie could use her knowledge of the law to try and keep us out of trouble. Then, once Isabel graduated and Lizzie secured her credentials, we could start our own P.I. firm.

Needless to say, I'd been intrigued, but the mental happy dance playing through my brain at the thought of no longer

working for Nick Romano had been the clincher.

"Then where are you going in this monsoon?"

"Nowhere right now. Traffic's at a dead stop."

"I...asked...where...you're...headed," she said, her voice dripping with exasperation.

"To work."

"Oh. So you got a job? Doing what? For Who? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Nothing to tell. I'm on my way to Nick's place."

"I thought you were done with him?"

"Apparently not."

"For heaven sake, Lexi. Why do you always have to be so difficult?"

"Have you heard from Ryan?" I quickly threw in, skirting her question.

"Ryan? No. Why?"

"Just curious."

"Did you try calling him?"

"Yes," I said, crossing my eyes. "No answer. Guess I'll try him at work."

"Why are you trying to reach Ryan?"

"Because we're cousins?" I quipped.

"There's just no talking to you!" she responded, slamming the handset down, and I felt that old familiar wave of guilt surge through me, which, no doubt, was her goal. After letting out a huge sigh, I dialed her back. She answered on the fourth ring.

"Sorry, Ma. Guess this weather has me on edge. What did you need?"

"I don't *need* anything, Lexi," she snipped. "I just wanted to ask you and your sister to join us for a nice family dinner tonight."

"Have you talked to Lizzie?"

"Not yet. I thought you could give her a call. And while you're at it, why don't you ask your Aunt Scarlet to join us, too."

My Aunt Scarlet and my mother had, for as long as I can remember, a rather contentious relationship. According to Aunt Scarlet, my mother had been born with a stick up her butt, which I can't necessarily disagree with, and according to my mother, Aunt Scarlet had arrived on this earth with an astronomical chip on her shoulder.

When my sister, Lizzie, after moving back home from New York, decided to reside with Aunt Scarlet rather than my parents, my mother had been attacked by the green-eyed monster and now I cringed at the thought of being within ten miles of the two of them together.

"I'll get back to you," I breathed out through clenched teeth, promptly snapping my phone shut before she had a chance to torment me further. I thunked my forehead on the steering wheel, took a deep breath, thunked again, and punched in Lizzie's cell number.

"Don't make any plans tonight. Mom wants us to come for dinner. And I need you to talk Aunt Scarlet into joining us," I stated matter-of-factly as soon as she answered.

"Not a chance."

"This isn't a request."

"If *you* want to ask Aunt Scarlet, be my guest. I'm not about to open that can of worms."

"Can't. I'm working."

"Then I'd say you've got a problem."

"Just put her on the phone, you wimp," I exhaled. "And you'd better be there!" I shouted as her snickering laugh wafted back to me.

"What is it, Lexi?" Aunt Scarlet's brusque voice sounded

through the receiver.

"Dinner at my parents' tonight."

"For crying out loud! It's the middle of the week."

"See you there," I hastily spit out before hanging up and placing a call to Ryan's office.

I was informed he wasn't in today and they had no idea why. He hadn't called, texted or emailed. Crap! Now what?

The rain had eased a bit and the vehicles in front of me began to advance at a slow crawl, so I put the Jaguar in gear and poked along behind, deciding my best bet would be to run by Ryan's house.

It took an amazing thirty minutes to make it to the next exit and easing into the turnoff lane, I felt like I was stuck in the middle of a senior's stock car race as I crept down the off-ramp.

By the time I reached the light at the end, I was itching with impatience. I tore around the corner and my heart leapt into my throat when I skidded into the left hand lane and the car began to waggle. While I struggled to regain control my cell chirped again and I answered distractedly.

"Where are you?" Valentini asked.

"On my way to Ryan's house."

"What are you two up to this morning?"

"I'm not sure about Ryan, but so far I've been soaked by this torrential rain that just decided to drop in out of the blue, then I was stuck in gridlock on the Veterans while having a delightful conversation with my mother, Lizzie and Aunt Scarlet. I finally managed to inch my way off the expressway and am now trying to keep the Jaguar from veering into the next lane while I talk to you."

"What are you doing out in this mess?"

"I was on my way to Nick's, but then Ryan left a strange

message on my voice mail and I haven't been able to reach him. He didn't answer his cell, didn't go to work or call in, so I'm heading to his house to make sure he's still among the living."

"What strange message, and why were you going to Nick's? I thought you were through with him."

"Answer number one, it wasn't really a message, but it *was* from his cell."

"What did he say?"

"He didn't *say* anything, it was just what sounded like gunfire, a car idling and some guys talking. The whole thing kind of freaked me out. I think he might be in trouble."

"What makes you think that?"

"You'll have to listen to it."

"How about meeting me at Ragano's for lunch? Or, better yet, we could hook up at my place and pick up where we left off yesterday," he said with a smile in his voice.

"I smell like a wet chicken butt, or maybe it's the car, or maybe both," I groaned.

"Ooh, I've never smelled a wet chicken butt," he replied playfully, and my eyes automatically rolled to the back of my head.

"Let me check on Ryan and get back to you," I said.

"So, what's answer number two?"

"Nick called this morning. He's in a pickle and needs my help. I told him no, but he begged, and I have to admit, the begging part did brighten my day."

"And, being in such a good mood, you caved."

"That I did."

"What's the assignment?"

"Don't know yet. I figured I'd at least hear him out."

"Call me."

CHAPTER 3

The rain had finally petered out, but the traffic on the Veterans was still deadlocked, so I decided to try to navigate to Ryan's house through the back streets and based on the snail-paced line of motorists in front of me, I guessed everyone else on the face of the earth had the same idea.

After another infuriating forty minutes, I finally rounded the corner to his street and as I neared his home I noticed a white panel van in his driveway. I pulled in next to it and parked.

The van's motor was running, judging by the trail of smoke coming from the exhaust, but no one appeared to be inside and as a sudden chill of uneasiness steeled up my spine, I pulled out my cell and rang Ryan's number again, silently urging him to pick up. No such luck.

I snapped the phone shut, eased the door open and cautiously exited the Jaguar. Standing in the driveway, I glanced at the homes on either side. Not a soul in sight. I did a slow three-sixty and scanned the rest of the neighborhood. Nothing. No people, no pets, not even a stray squirrel.

Feeling spooked, I hesitated, but uncertainty over Ryan's whereabouts quickly overrode my jitters. Thinking fast, I yanked my cell up, pretended to make a connection and casually strolled to the front door with the phone to my ear.

I rang the bell and waited. When no one answered, I stood on the buzzer and then pounded on the door. Still no response.

"Hold on," I said to my fake contact before pulling the cell away and pressing my ear to the door, hoping beyond hope to detect any sound from inside.

A faint scuffling noise and a jangle, like from a ring of keys carried through, then nothing. Did I actually hear something or

was it just my mind playing tricks? Where were the occupants of that blasted van? Could they be inside the house? With Ryan?

"Ryan, stop acting like a jerk and open this door," I bellowed, knocking louder.

No answer.

"Ryan, I can hear you in there and I'm not leaving until you show your face!" I screamed, furiously hammering on the wood.

Still nothing.

Never one to give up easily, I disconnected my fake call, punched in Ryan's number again and, holding the phone out to my side, I pounded once more. As I shoved my ear to the door, I could hear the familiar ring tone of Ryan's cell.

With panicked thoughts rolling through my brain, I instantly disconnected, pressed number one on my speed dial to connect with Valentini and yelled, "If you don't answer this door, I'm going to break a window!"

A second later the door flung open and caught unprepared, I stumbled back, almost wetting myself when a very large, tattoo covered dude with humongous biceps appeared in the threshold.

"Who are you?" I demanded belligerently. "And where is Ryan?"

"Who are you?" he returned with a snarl.

"His co-worker," I lied. "Ryan didn't show up today."

"He's not here, either," he barked, slamming the door in my face.

I stood there, dazed, and I have to admit, a little weak in the knees. Who was that guy? What did he have to do with Ryan? And if Ryan wasn't home, could he have possibly given that brute a key *and* left his cell phone? Knowing Ryan, it didn't seem likely. So what to do now?

"Lexi? Lexi?" I heard Valentini's voice roar through the receiver as I brought the cell back up.

"What?" I snapped.

"You called *me*."

"Just as a precaution. Let me get back to you," I replied as my phone suddenly beeped, alerting me to another incoming call.

"Lexi?" I heard Ryan say as soon as I switched over.

"Ryan! Where the heck are you?"

"I'm not sure. Somewhere off the interstate. At a *Walmart*."

"What? Why?"

"I had to buy a cheap, disposable phone."

"Why?"

"Because those trigger happy friends of Mick's have my cell phone."

"Mick? When did you hear from him?"

"Last night."

"What did he want? No, let me guess. He's in a jam. Again."

"He just needed my help with something."

"You seem to have a short memory."

"He's just had a few rotten breaks."

"A few?"

"Let's not split hairs here. He asked and I went, but when I shot the gas pedal..."

"You what? Where did you get a gun?" I cut in incredulously.

"Mick gave it to me."

"Why did Mick give you a gun?"

"Because it was way after midnight when we went to meet some friends of his in a dark, creepy alley off twenty-second street. When we parked, Mick gave me the gun and told me to stay in the car, but I guess I drew their attention when I fired a bullet into the accelerator. They startled for a second and looked toward Mick's car and I swear, Lex, I thought my heart was going to explode. Before I could even blink, they threw Mick into a van and then turned and started shooting automatic weapons in my direction.

"I assumed they couldn't see me because the car lights were so blinding all I could see was the flash from their weapons, so I rolled out of Mick's car and slithered under it. When they couldn't find me, I guess the nitwits thought I was hiding in a dumpster because the next thing I heard was a blast of bullets hitting metal. I think the only reason I was able to escape was because they thought I was dead."

"Are you kidding me? Guys were actually shooting at you?"

"That would be affirmative."

"I'm surprised you held it together long enough to get out of the car and crawl under it."

"You're preaching to the choir, Lex."

"What in the world were you thinking, Ryan? Why would you go *anywhere* with Mick, especially after midnight? And did you know he was taking you to an alley off of twenty-second street?"

"No."

"You just mindlessly went along?"

"Yes, I did. Not my brightest moment, I'll admit."

"So why, or how, did you shoot the gas pedal?"

"That's not important. I'm pretty sure Mick's life is in danger and if we don't find him soon *he's* likely to end up in a pile of trash."

"We?"

"Come on, Lex, you know I'm no good at this stuff. I don't have any *idea* where to start looking for him."

"What makes you think *I* do?"

"Please?"

Jeez!

"Pretty please?"

"Why does this jerk at your house have your cell phone?"

"What jerk at my house?"

"Big dude, covered in tattoos."

"At my house?" Ryan squeaked.

"Inside. Why does he have your cell phone?"

"I accidentally left it on the ground. I went back to get it, but as soon as Mick's headlights hit the alley, I saw that stupid van and took off."

"You're driving Mick's car?"

"I am. Since they obviously assumed there was no threat, thinking I was dead and all, they left it," he said in a smart-alecky tone. "And not long after they took off, I jumped inside and tore out of there."

"Don't you think they'll be on the lookout for that particular vehicle?"

"I didn't stop to weigh the pros and cons," he responded sarcastically.

"But why are you still driving it? I mean, since they clearly came back after you split, they'd have to be blind not to notice it was gone."

"See, that's why I need your help," he whined. "That thought never crossed my mind."

"Was the van a white panel van?" I sighed, changing the subject.

"Why?"

"There's one parked in your driveway."

"Is Mick in the back?"

"How would I know? There aren't any windows in the back."

"Is it locked?"

"Don't know."

"Can you check?" he said with a note of desperation.

"I'm not about to get myself shot trying to help your douchebag friend!"

"He'd do it for you."

Crap! Crap, crap, crap! The guilt thing again! Twice in one

day!

"Hold on," I breathed out, firing up the Jaguar's engine. "And don't you dare hang up on me!" I added as I put the shifter in reverse and slowly backed out of the drive.

"Is that your motor running?! Are you leaving?" he shrieked in my ear.

"No, you ninny, just hang on!" I yelled into the phone as I pulled away from the house. When I made it halfway down the street, I put the Jaguar in reverse, stepped on the gas and parked at the curb behind the van.

I took a deep breath to settle my nerves and pulled the phone back up to my ear.

"Do you have Valentini's number?" I asked Ryan.

"No. If you remember correctly, that jerk at my house has my cell phone and I'm using a throwaway," he scoffed.

"Then you'd better find something to write it down with, unless you want me to hightail it out of here right now," I said in a controlled voice.

"Hold on," he responded, and I heard him start to fumble around. A moment later he came back on the line. "Okay, shoot."

After reciting Valentini's cell number, I instructed him to make it number one on his speed dial.

"It will have to be number two. I already assigned number one to you," he declared in a self-righteous tone, stomping on my last nerve.

"Well, alrighty then," I said, crossing my eyes and making a face.

"Okay. Done. Now what?"

"I need you to stay on the line while I check out the van and if anything out of the ordinary happens, hang up and call Valentini," I directed.

"Like what?"

"Jeez, Ryan! Like what do you think?"

"I don't know. I don't want to panic and cry wolf!"

"Better than finding me dead!" I spit out.

"Okay, okay. What are you doing now?"

"Opening the car door," I whispered, stepping out on rubbery legs and crouching down as I made my way over to the back of the van. I stood up, grabbed the door handle and twisted downward. It turned with an audible groan.

"Unlocked," I exhaled.

"Is he in there?" Ryan asked breathlessly.

"Haven't opened it yet."

"What are you waiting for?!"

"Well, considering the grinding noise the latch made when I pulled it down, I suspect the door will probably scream when I try to open it and I'm none too anxious to alert those bozos inside your house to the fact that I'm trying to break into their vehicle," I breathed out.

"Hey, what the hell do you think you're doin'?" I heard someone yell a split-second before the jarring sound of the front door slamming met my ears.

In a cold sweat, I glanced to my right just as a guy moved quickly toward me. He was, thankfully, not as big as the one who'd stood in the entryway to Ryan's house, but nonetheless, looked just as threatening.

"I was driving away when I heard something banging around in the back of this van. If it's yours, you should be ashamed for leaving an animal locked up in there in this heat," I scolded, taking on the offensive as I tried to keep my voice from shaking.

"Why do you think the motor's runnin'?" he bellowed, and when I didn't answer right away, he added, "So I could leave the *air* on."

So that explains it, I thought, and then I wondered if Mick could be the reason he'd been so considerate.

"You still shouldn't leave an animal in an unattended vehicle without proper ventilation," I defended.

"You don't look like no PETA cop to me, so I say it's none of your damn business!"

"And I say you should be a little more concerned about the health and welfare of your pets!" I declared, but when he began to advance toward me, his face red with anger and fists clenched, I decided a rapid retreat would be in my best interest.

"Well, gotta run," I threw out hastily, pivoting on my heel and turning toward the Jaguar, praying my unsteady legs wouldn't betray my panic as I made a beeline for my car.

CHAPTER 4

"Why did you have to argue with the guy? I told you they had guns *and* they tried to kill me! Do you have a death wish?!" I heard Ryan exclaim through the cell as I jumped in the Jaguar and sped away from the curb.

"I needed to make my story believable," I said. "Didn't want him to get suspicious."

"I don't know how Tony lets you run free on the streets."

"Lets me?! For your information, you little twit, no one *lets* me do anything!"

"You know what I mean."

"No, I don't. Why don't you explain it to me," I flung out indignantly.

"Now's not the time. We need to find Mick."

"What do you suggest?" I spat, still seething.

"You're the detective. Figure it out!" he declared, his temper matching mine.

"I am *not* a detective. And if I remember correctly, you asked for my *help*. *Help*, as in *assistance*, which means I follow *your* lead."

"I'm just a computer geek. What do I know about snooping and lying and getting shot at?"

"Admit it. You're just a sissy," I goaded.

"Okay. I'm a sissy," he said, his tone sullen. "So what's our next move? Do you have any ideas?"

When my lifelong verbal sparring partner simply backed off, offering up no rebuttal, to say I was a little stunned would be the understatement of the millennium. We were known to all as the famous battling cousins and it suddenly hit me like a ton of bricks how frightened he was for his friend, Mick.

"I guess I could ask Isabel to join me. Her truck would be a lot less conspicuous than the Jaguar. Maybe we could follow that van when it leaves your house; see where it goes."

"Sounds like you're finally using your head," he returned, his contemptuous tone leaving me, momentarily, speechless.

The conversation stalled as I fumed, but detecting his rapid breathing through the receiver, I eventually managed to bite my tongue and calm down.

"I'll see what I can find out. In the meantime, is there somewhere you can hole up?"

"I guess I could stay with Aunt Scarlet. I think she might be the only person I know whose personal information isn't stored in my phone."

"Personal information?"

"Yeah. Phone numbers and addresses."

My eyes grew wide as the impact of his statement sunk in. "Before you head there, you'd better ditch Mick's car and take a cab."

* * * * *

I glanced at my watch, noting it was almost eleven in the morning and wondered not only where the morning had gone, but if Isabel would be free to help me tail the van.

"What's up, girlfriend?" I asked cheerfully as soon as Isabel answered my call.

"Uh, no. No way! I know that song, and the answer is no!"

"So, maybe."

"No. No maybe. I'm on my way to meet Nick."

I'd introduced Nick, my childhood nemesis and sometimes employer, to Isabel, one of my best friends, apparently during a brain fart. I'd been disheartened when they had begun dating and

nothing less than horrified when they'd so swimmingly hit it off. Who knew?

"I guess I could ask Darcy to help me bird-dog this van. I just hope no one pulls a gun. She'll faint and I'll be left blowing in the wind with my pants down," I sighed.

"If you're trying to pull the guilt card, you're wasting your time," Isabel countered. "I haven't had any free time for a week and my poody-oody-oody is starting to wilt!"

"Now you're just trying to gross me out."

"Is it working?" Isabel laughed.

"You know it is," I bit back.

"Why are you following a van, anyway?"

"Do you remember Ryan's friend, Mick?"

"You mean the loser he got jammed up with a couple of years ago?"

"One and the same."

"I thought he'd been convicted of murder and sent to prison."

"He got off on some technicality and apparently disappeared. Ryan hadn't heard from him since all that mess went down. That is, until last night."

"Let me guess. He got mixed up with some bottom feeders again and ended up in a bind."

"Ryan didn't give me any particulars about the call. He just said Mick needed his help. I'm really not even sure what happened, except that Ryan said some thugs threw Mick into a white panel van and then started shooting some kind of assault weapons at *him*. He was able to hide under Mick's car until they drove off, but the problem is, they drove off with Mick still in the van."

"And we care because?"

"Because when Ryan wouldn't answer his cell and didn't go into work, I went by his house. Guess who was inside and who wasn't?"

"You're kidding, right?"

"I wish."

"How did they know Ryan's address? Are they friends of his?"

"According to Ryan, those trigger happy punks are acquaintances of Mick's, who, in addition to hijacking Ryan's home, have also commandeered his cell phone. We assume that's how they found his house. Names, phone numbers and addresses for everyone Ryan knows are listed in his contacts, including me and you."

"You don't think they'd come after us?"

"I have no idea. Ryan doesn't know what Mick was doing in that alley, who those hoods were, why they threw Mick in the back of that van or why they're camped out in his house. What I *do* know is that Ryan's about to come unglued and he asked for our help."

"*Our* help?"

"Technically no, but when I mentioned I was going to ask you to drive he seemed happy."

"So, Ryan did not specifically ask for my assistance?"

"No."

"Then it sounds like I'm off the hook."

"But *I* asked."

"You always ask."

"And you always ask me. Have I ever turned *you* down?"

"Where are you?" Isabel forcefully blew out and I felt the ends of my mouth turn up.