

THREE POINT TURN

By D. M. Buckley

CHAPTER 1

It was mid-May in Tampa, and at ten-thirty in the morning it was already hotter than stink. I'd decided to lower the top on the Jaguar before heading to my latest assignment and I would like to say I was enjoying the sunshine, fresh air and wind whipping through my mane as I tooted down Dale Mabry Highway, but truth be told, my scalp was on fire, the humidity had turned my hair into a giant frizz ball and a seagull had just dumped a mammoth load on my head, taking the old adage, 'some days you're the windshield', to a whole new level.

My name is Alexis O'Malley and I guess you could say I'm currently, and begrudgingly, a process server; a profession I'd been pressured into by my old childhood nemesis, Nick Romano, who had needed a favor while recovering from a bullet wound he'd received while trying to save my ass. Since there had been no escaping my inbred guilt, having been born, raised and schooled in the Catholic faith, combined with my current unemployment status *and* his willingness to pay for the associated training and fees to become certified, I'd ultimately caved.

Being low man on the totem pole at Romano Investigations, I'd been saddled with serving an eviction notice to Millie Wiggles and since I'd already pasted the notice to quit on

her door two days ago, I was now on my way to serve the eviction complaint, cringing at the thought of tossing the young mother of three out on her ear.

As I turned the corner and headed toward her address, my conscience began its ugly dance and my foot eased off the accelerator, slowing the car to five miles an hour. I racked my brain for any viable way to avoid the service, but as I approached the house, unable to concoct any brilliant excuses as to why I didn't follow through, I expelled a huge sigh and parked at the curb. I ran my fingers through my mop to chuck the bird poop, grabbed the eviction papers and exited the car.

I could see someone peering around the blinds on the front window as I moved up the sidewalk and the sudden visual image of a homeless, ragtag family pushing a shopping cart flitted through my mind.

Feeling lower than dirt, my steps faltered and, once again, I searched for a way out, but before I could come up with anything the door opened and a small girl stepped onto the porch.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"I'm...I'm...is your mother home?" I sputtered.

"My mother doesn't live here."

"Then can I speak to your...caretaker?"

"Good grief, Toots," she suddenly laughed. "Haven't you ever seen a little person before? Open your eyes. I doubt a child has a pair of these," she continued, sticking her chest out, and taking a closer look, I noticed she was more than well endowed and most definitely not a kid.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't..." I stumbled, feeling the heat radiate off my face as I came to the quick conclusion to just shoot Nick Romano.

"Don't feel bad, sugar. I get that a lot. So, just who is it you're looking for?"

"Millie Wiggles."

"Then I'd say you found her," she smiled, offering her hand.

"Lexi," I responded, and as I bent and tentatively gave it a little shake, the guilt burrowed deeper.

"What's that in your hair? It looks like bird doody."

"Yeah, well," I responded with an eye roll, pointing to the exposed Jaguar parked at the curb.

"Ah, convertible," she remarked with a smirky nod. "Well, don't just stand there like a ninny, Toots. Come on inside. I'm sure I've got *something* we can clean you up with."

"Thanks for the offer, but I'll just wash it out when I get home."

"Now, I know you don't want to walk around all day with bird poop dangling in your face," she declared, hands on her hips and her posture obstinate, "so stop being such a granny and get your butt in here. It'll only take a minute," she threw behind as she turned her back to me and headed inside.

I sheepishly followed her through the door and into the bathroom, feeling more and more like the lowest form of pond scum, and while she rummaged through her linen closet, I reached into my back pocket and retrieved the eviction notice, anxious to get the thing over with and get the heck out of there.

"This ought to do it," she said, grabbing a comb and a bottle of shampoo, and turning to face me, she spied the documents in my hand.

"What's that?" she said slowly, taking a step back.

"Millie Wiggles," I started, and unable to spit out my spiel, I extended them in her direction, lowered my eyes, and kicked at the ground.

She grabbed the papers from my hand and began to scan them while I struggled with my inner demons.

"What a moron," she finally mumbled, shaking her head as she tore them to shreds and tossed them into the trash can.

"I'm no expert here," I commented haltingly, "but I'm not so sure that was a smart move, Millie."

"Not your concern, Toots. Now, let's go into the kitchen. The sink's bigger in there."

"I really should get going," I said, but when she abruptly turned and gave me the death glare, I clamped my mouth shut and trudged along behind.

She placed a stepstool in front of the sink, maneuvered herself on top and turned on the faucet. While she fiddled with the temperature, my comfort level went from zero to minus a thousand, and just as I prepared to bolt, she spoke up.

"If that idiot thinks he can back me down with the threat of eviction, he'd better think again! I might be small, but I know my rights!" she spat. "He's the one who broke the lease! How can he possibly expect anyone to live in these conditions? The roof leaks, the plumbing backs up into the tub every time the toilet flushes and the place is infested with roaches!" she raged, working herself into a frenzy. "This *home* is so disgusting, I was forced to take my kids to my mother's house!"

"You *could* just move," I remarked, biting my lip.

"That would be too painless, Toots. I'm not about to let that scum-sucking slumlord off that easy."

"But, you can't just withhold your rent. That eviction

notice will throw you out in the street."

"No, it won't. And yes, I can. I've done everything legally. I opened a separate account at my bank and stashed all the rent money due to that cheapskate in that account. *And* I've filed a complaint with the court. He thinks just because I'm a little woman he can push me around. Well, I'm here to tell you, he's got another think coming!" she stormed, turning to face me, and that's when I noticed the huge crocodile tears streaming down her face.

Jeez!

"Eviction, my rear-end! That worthless piece of crap is in for the fight of his life! And don't be such a Catholic, Toots," she added, noting my discomfort. "This stupid water running down my face is just out of anger...and frustration. But, don't you worry. I'll set his sorry butt straight. Now get your fanny over to this sink and let's get that dung out of your hair."

I did as I was told and as she yanked on my hair, I couldn't help wonder about her babies.

"But, what about your kids?" I sputtered through the water as she shoved my head under the faucet.

"They'll be fine. They like staying with my mother. She's a wuss."

"How does their father feel about all this?"

"Don't know and don't care. He's gone...for good, I hope. Caught the slimeball making merry with another little knee-high. Guess my first clue should have been his *Barbie* collection."

"Is he...?"

"A pygmy? No; just a pig."

"So you don't even know where he is?"

She paused at that and stepped off her stool. "Why all

the questions, Toots?"

"Just curious," I responded, giving her an inquisitive look as I straightened up, ignoring the water dripping onto my shoulders and soaking my T-shirt.

"Well...the truth is, up until a couple of months ago, he'd been badgering me to come back," she sighed, her expression doleful, and then, swiping her arm with resoluteness, she added, "but I told that perverted mini-chaser to take a hike. Now, get your head back under this sink so we can get that doo-doo out of your hair."

"Has your landlord responded to your concerns at all?" I asked as I bent over the basin and stuck my head under the tap again.

"Yeah. The butthead claims the property was in *pristine* condition when he rented it to me. And, in all honesty, when Mikey--that should have been my second clue, by the way; I mean, what grown man calls himself Mikey? Anyway, when that lousy two-timer lived here, there *were* no issues. They all started about a month after I kicked him out. Hey," she suddenly sputtered, her expression introspective as she stepped off her stool again and stood tapping the comb against her cheek.

"Hey, what?" I remarked, snatching the kitchen towel off the counter and slapping it on my head as I stood up.

"I just had a thought. You don't suppose Mikey could be responsible for all this?"

"Guess that would depend on how determined...and obsessed he is."

"Wouldn't put it past him. He's probably in cahoots with that jerk of a landlord. Always were a little too chummy for my taste. Guess I'll have to start camping out here at night. See if I can catch the sneaky dastard trying to

make my life miserable."

"You're not living here?"

"I work out of my home, so I have to be here during the day, but at night I've been staying at my mother's place. The thought of all those roach eyes on me while I sleep just creeps me out."

"If he knows you're here, do you really think he'll show his face."

"I have no intention of letting him know I'm here, Toots."

"But..."

"Like I said before," she interrupted, "my predicament is none of your concern, so you can wipe that guilty look off your face. I know you're just doing your job."

"Maybe I could..." I began again, but catching her prickly scowl, I clammed up.

"Maybe you should be on your way. I think we got most of that junk out of your hair and I'm sure you have things to do," she said as my cell suddenly screeched, and grateful for the distraction, I held up a finger as I pulled it from my pocket. I flipped it open, and noting the word 'Mom' on the display, I put it to my ear with a sigh.

"Your dad has the night off tonight and we were wondering if you and your Aunt Scarlet could come for dinner. We'd love to see you," my mother said sweetly.

"Love to Ma, but I've got a thing tonight. And besides, we'll see you Sunday."

"Sunday dinner's a ritual and Tony--and heaven knows who else--will be here. And don't take that the wrong way," she interjected sarcastically. "You know we all love Tony...and Darcy...and Isabel, but this is a treat. Your father rarely gets a night off and we were hoping for a

little family time."

"Wish I could, Ma, but..."

"I'm making lasagna, and one of your favorite desserts, Lexi; cherry zabaglione tarts."

My mother's cooking was to die for, and as my mouth began to water, I hesitated, but then the thought of spending an entire evening in the same room with her and Nana flashed through my brain and I quickly came to my senses.

"I have to work," I blurted in desperation.

"Why do you always have to give me a hard time, Lexi? Your father and I have a big surprise for you two. Can't you just do what I ask this once?"

"I'll call Aunt Scarlet and get back to you," I breathed out through clenched teeth.

"See you at six. And don't be late. You know how your Nana hates," she started, and I promptly snapped my phone shut, cutting her off.

"Your mother?" Millie smiled as I shoved the thing back in my pocket with a pained expression.

"Yeah. Anyway, guess I'll shove off, and sorry about the eviction notice, Millie. Here's my card. If you change your mind; maybe want some help..." I said, letting it dangle as I hung my head and headed toward the door.

CHAPTER 2

I was moping my way back to the Jaguar when the creepy sensation of being watched made the hair on the back of my neck stand at attention. I slowed my pace and nonchalantly turned my head to the right, catching something out of the corner of my eye suddenly flit out of view behind Millie's house.

My spidey senses were tingling off the charts, and a little unnerved, I slowly pivoted on my heel and casually scanned the area, but the only thing that jumped out at me was an eerily quiet street.

I tried to convince myself it had been a stray animal, but my gut instinct would have no part of my rationalization, so I paused to consider my options.

One, I could traipse through Millie's back yard in hopes of finding...what? I couldn't imagine anyone brazen enough to try to pull something in broad daylight. Two, I could knock on Millie's door and inform her of my near discovery. Or three, I could go about my business and, even though she had made it clear she did not want my help, I could come back this evening for a little late night spying.

Deciding on option three, I continued on to my car, started the engine, pointed it toward the Veterans Expressway and focused on shaking my blue funk.

As I entered the on-ramp, bummed-out over this latest assignment, and considering the fact that Nick was mostly recovered from that bullet wound, I decided it was time to get serious about a job search.

By trade, I was actually a software programmer, but when

the economy had taken a dump, the company I'd worked for had downsized, leaving me out in the cold. At the time, tired of beating my head against the wall supervising a bunch of whiny, self-absorbed, ill-tempered prima donnas, I'd welcomed the layoff and actually looked forward to exciting new challenges, but after being shot at, accosted by a homicidal maniac, crashing my car, finding my apartment burned to the ground, and almost having my neck sliced open, I sort of missed the comatose lifestyle, as Aunt Scarlet had put it.

While contemplating the pros and cons of immersing myself in another mind-numbing, tweeby position, my cell chirped, and merging into traffic, I flipped it open distractedly.

"Did you serve the eviction?" Nick demanded in greeting.

"You know, it was bad enough that you sent me to evict a mommy with three babies, but you could have at least given me a heads-up that I'd be serving a midget!"

"She's not a midget. She's a pygmy. Big difference," he said. "And besides, I gave you her entire file."

"I read the file. Nothing about a *pygmy* in there!"

"I assume you're heading in. How long before you get here?" he responded, ignoring my remark as my call waiting beeped.

I disconnected in answer, stuck my tongue out at the phone, and switched to my next call.

"I need you to stop at the pet store and pick up some birdseed for Miss Chickenhead," Aunt Scarlet declared as soon as I put it to my ear.

A recent animal shelter rescue, Henrietta Chickenhead is a mixed breed parrot that, at the time, had an injured wing, and due to the stiff-as-a-board feathers on top of her scalp that jutted out in all different directions,

thanks to some parental head pecking, Aunt Scarlet had decided the name fit.

"I'm on my way to Nick's place. Can't you ask Maggie to pick it up?"

"Touc and Maggie are busy packing."

Touc, A.K.A. Twocan Sam, A.K.A. Samuel Peck, and his wife Maggie lived on the premises; Peck acting as her handyman and general contractor and Maggie as her housekeeper, gofer and chauffer.

"I'll get it as soon as I finish up," I said. "And don't make any plans for tonight," I added hastily. "We're expected for dinner at my parents'."

"Can't. We have to have everything out of the house tonight. Touc's planning to start demolition in the morning."

As her general contractor, Peck, A.K.A. Touc, was charged with tearing down Aunt Scarlet's old home, carting away the debris and overseeing the architectural design and construction of her new home.

"Not an option. Mom won't take no for an answer. Supposedly, they have some big surprise for us."

"Well, for heaven sake!"

"I'll be there before you know it and between the four of us, we can have everything moved into the new trailer in plenty of time."

"Just don't forget my birdseed," she barked before slamming the handset down. I rolled my eyes in response, snapping my cell shut just as it buzzed again.

It was Valentini, a recently promoted undercover cop I'd met a few months back who had, as evidenced by the boyfriend status, won me over once he'd fixed his dark, smoldering, bedroom eyes onto mine and turned me into a

pile of mush.

"Sarah, from Dr. Lehman's office called," he said. "Your B.B. bunny is ready to be picked up."

I'd inherited B.B.--short for Buffalo Bunny, thanks to the tuft of hair between her ears--from Aunt Scarlet a few weeks ago when I'd discovered her quaking in Aunt Scarlet's freezer, and afraid she might turn her into a bunnysicle, Aunt Scarlet had guilted me into adopting her.

"How is she?"

"Well, you were right. She *is* sight impaired, but otherwise in good health. And Dr. Lehman also said that being locked in the freezer would not have caused her blindness."

"You told him about Aunt Scarlet accidentally locking her in the freezer?"

"I thought it was an important bit of information."

"I never would have pegged you as a snitch."

"He wanted to know where you found her."

"And you just had to tell him I found her in Aunt Scarlet's freezer?"

"Unlike you, I don't make up stories on the fly."

"What did he say?" I asked, crossing my eyes so hard I gave myself a headache.

"Nothing; just raised his eyebrows and grinned."

"Did he give you any pointers on caring for a blind bunny?"

"A few. I'll fill you in tonight."

"It'll be late. We're having dinner at my parents'."

"I'm not sure I can make it. Depends on how long it takes to process my latest scumbag."

"Lucky you weren't invited."

"Then who's we?"

"Me and Aunt Scarlet. My parents have a big surprise for us. Yay!"

"Maybe we could hook up for lunch."

"Wish I could, but I'm on my way to Nick's to deliver the Affidavit of Service on Millie Wiggles and after I'm done there, I have to stop at the pet store and pick up birdseed for Henrietta before heading to Aunt Scarlet's to help get everything moved out of the house and into the new trailer before morning."

"Why before morning?"

"Because Peck is planning to start demolition in the morning and it was the only way I could get her to agree to dinner."

"Wonder what the big surprise is," he remarked, and I could hear the amusement in his voice.

"Knowing my mother, she probably just got another pet. I have the sneaking suspicion she's trying to keep up with Aunt Scarlet in her old age."

"I'm not so sure anyone could keep up with Scarlet," he chuckled.

"True enough. Anyway, considering my tight schedule, I don't suppose you could find the time to pick up B.B. for me."

"I might be able to fit it in, but you'll owe me."

"I always pay my debts," I smiled.

"See you tonight," he responded before disconnecting, his husky voice sending shivers down my spine.

I struggled to put aside my amorous thoughts and refocus on the task at hand as I pulled into the parking lot of Romano Investigations, and spotting an empty slot close to the entrance, I zipped in and killed the engine. I filled out the affidavit in the car, exited the vehicle and

strolled through the front door just as Nick rounded the corner from the hallway.

"It's about time," he snarled.

"I see you forgot to put that sedative in his coffee again, Mary Lou," I said to his administrative assistant, and scooting around him, I planted myself in front of her desk and handed her the affidavit to notarize.

"Just leave the papers with Mary Lou and come back to my office. I've got something I need you to do."

"You'll have to give it to Mark. I've got stuff to do today."

"Mark's been made."

"Then give it to the new guy, Ralph."

"Ralph's no longer employed here."

"Well, for your information, I've never been employed here! This little arrangement was just supposed to be a favor while you recovered from that stupid bullet wound and seems to me you're pretty much back to your normal, irritating self! Add to that all the crap you've dumped on me during your recuperation, and I'd say you're definitely, and permanently, out of favors!"

"Have you forgotten I almost died trying to rescue you?"

Jeez!

"I just need you to do a little surveillance," he said, knowing from my hesitation and my tortured expression that the guilt trip he'd so ruthlessly laid on was in full swing. "Let's step into my office and I'll give you the scoop," he added, turning his back to me and heading back down the hallway.

"In case you have any delusions about asking for my help again, keep in mind this is the last favor you're ever going to get, and I can't start on whatever it is today," I

bristled to his back as I followed behind in a huff. "I have to help Aunt Scarlet move all her stuff out of the house and into the new trailer."

"Then you can start tonight."

"We're having dinner at my parents' tonight."

"Oh yeah? What's your mom making?" he asked as we entered his office.

"Her soon-to-be-famous, mouth-watering lasagna. It's a shame you weren't invited."

"Don't need an invitation. Your mom loves me."

"Don't even think about it," I chafed. "This dinner is for family only."

"Then you can just bring me a doggie bag."

"Yeah, that's gonna happen."

"I'll tell your mom you refused to share her scrumptious lasagna," he teased.

"What are you in, third grade?"

"You know she won't be happy," he goaded.

"Just get to the point. I've got stuff to do."

He hesitated, throwing me a devilish grin before handing over the file. "Subject's name is Tess Sullivan," he said, his tone back to business. "Her husband, Andrew, says she's not been herself lately and he wants us to, discreetly, follow her around and try to find out what she's up to. Her address and schedule are in the file."

"I take it he thinks she's cheating."

"What do I care? Guy paid cash up front."

"Once again, for the record, I'm not a P.I."

"But you are a snoop. In fact, you're, possibly, the nosiest person I know. I *am* aware you've been rifling through my desk when I'm not here," he responded with a challenging look. "And besides, you don't need a P.I."

license to make friends."

"Make friends? What happened to just following her around?"

"She's already made Mark, so it's pretty obvious she has her guard up. I was thinking it might be easier to find out what she's hiding if you joined her yoga class and tried to worm your way into her confidence. And judging by that little muffin top thing you've got going on there, I don't imagine the exercise will hurt you any."

"You really know how to soften a girl up," I smirked as I self-consciously sucked in my stomach.

"She'll be there tomorrow; ten A.M. Don't screw it up," he said in dismissal.

"I sure hope this little favor is worth it to you because it's the last one you're ever going to get," I flared, throwing him a peeved look as I turned on my heel and headed toward the exit.

CHAPTER 3

I stopped at the pet store, secured the birdseed, hopped back in the Jaguar and wove my way toward the Veterans. As I started up the on-ramp, I glanced at the clock on the dash, and noting it was already past one in the afternoon, I grabbed my cell and dialed my friend Isabel's number, hoping she'd be free to help me stake out Millie's place tonight.

"Hey, girlfriend. What's up?"

"Feel like helping me with a little late night research?"

"Who are you spying on now?"

"I'm not *spying* on anyone. Someone's been giving Millie grief and I just want to see if I can catch the creep."

"Who's Millie?"

"The midget mommy with three little ones your cold-hearted boyfriend sent me to serve an eviction notice to this morning."

"Wish I'd been there. I've never seen any midgetlets. I bet they were adorable."

"Are you free or not?" I asked, mentally thumping my forehead.

"As a bird. Nick has a dinner meeting with some client tonight, and evidently the guy's pretty paranoid; insisted on meeting alone."

"I wonder if it's Andrew Sullivan."

"Who's Andrew Sullivan?"

"New case. Don't you two ever talk?"

"We pant a lot."

"Thanks for the visual," I responded dryly.

"What time?" she laughed.

"I'll be home no later than nine. Meet me at my place?"

"See you then."

As I started down the dirt road leading to Aunt Scarlet's, my mind drifted back to the conversation with my mother and, as much as I hated to admit it, she'd sparked my curiosity.

Don't get me wrong, I love my mother, but she was kind of a stuffy, meddlesome, irritating sort who led a pretty drab life and I couldn't fathom any kind of exciting news she could possibly be planning to spring on us tonight.

"You'd better get a move on if you expect me to accompany you to dinner. We still have a ton of stuff to pack," Aunt Scarlet called out from the front door as I pulled onto the parking pad.

I turned off the ignition, exited the car and stepped into the middle of bedlam, where Peck, Maggie and Aunt Scarlet were furiously at work cleaning nick-knacks and packing boxes like she was moving across country.

"You and your mother have the most perfect timing!" Aunt Scarlet declared as I dove into the fray.

"Me?! She's your sister!"

"Well, you could have tried a little harder to discourage her."

"You can't tell me you're not even a little bit curious."

"Lexi, the last earth-shattering news your mother had to share was...none," she said caustically, hands on her hips as she straightened and turned toward me.

"Yeah, well, whatever it is, she's obviously excited about it, so let's get this done so we can go humor her."

We spent the rest of the afternoon clearing out the house and carting everything to the new trailer at the opposite

end of her property, and by the time we finally left for my parents' house, I was exhausted and hungry and, if nothing else, looking forward to taking a load off and enjoying a good meal.

We pulled into the driveway alongside an unfamiliar vehicle with a crunched up right front quarter panel just as my mother and Nana stepped onto the porch, pulling the door shut behind them.

"Whose car is this?" Aunt Scarlet asked as they moved toward us.

"We have a visitor," my mother said excitedly. "Now close your eyes and take my hand."

Nana threw me a mischievous grin as my mother clasped Aunt Scarlet's arm and began pulling her toward the house.

"Just tell us who it is, Jez!" Aunt Scarlet demanded, planting her feet as she yanked out of my mother's grasp. "I'm too old for this nonsense!"

"Why do you always have to be such a killjoy, Scarlet?!"

"If I close my eyes while you try to drag me into that house, I'm likely to trip and bust my fanny, and probably break a hip in the process! Then your visitor will be all alone while *we* head to the hospital!"

"For crying out loud!" my mother spat. "You take the fun out of everything! And don't think for a second that snippy look of yours is going to wear me down. If you want to know who our surprise guest is, you'll just have to find out for yourself!"

Aunt Scarlet threw my mother a terse look, pushed past them and barged through the front door, and as we followed in her wake I heard her sudden intake of breath directly before she shrieked my sister's name.

Lizzie?! What the hell was she doing here? I thought,

entering the house with a strained expression. We hadn't seen hide or hair of her since she'd left for college; well over ten years ago. Even after she'd finished law school, she'd informed us she'd opted out of the graduation ceremony and planned to move to New York the next day to start her new job, so there had been no need for us to make the trip. Then, about three years ago, when she'd gotten married, she hadn't shared the news until after the fact, stating they'd taken the plunge in a simple ceremony at the court house. My mother had been heartbroken and I'd never forgiven her.

So the question was, after distancing herself from her family, what had happened to make her suddenly come home and try to worm her way back into our good graces?

As I entered the house, I found Aunt Scarlet embracing my big sister, or at least I assumed it was Lizzie since all I could see was her back. Her hair was different; sort of a strawberry blond, cut short and the style chic. When she'd left, it had been jet black and had flowed almost to her waist.

Aunt Scarlet stepped back and when Lizzie turned to face me, my mouth dropped open. My goody two-shoes, little-miss-perfect sister's dopey expression and big-as-saucers pupils left no doubt in my mind that she was higher than a kite.

"Lexi," was all she said, stumbling toward me.

"What happened to your car, Lizzie?" I managed to spit out, holding my hand up as I sidestepped her outstretched arms.

"My car?" she slurred, her expression confused as she wobbled in place. "Oh, that was Mr. Three Point Turn. He backed into it. But I got his information and it'll be

fixed in no time," she added, trying to snap her fingers and missing the mark by a mile, and noting my mother's distressed look, I grabbed her arm and dragged her into the back bedroom.

"What the hell's the matter with you, Lizzie?" I demanded, stopping in my tracks to glare at her as soon as we entered the room. "Wasted? Really?"

She stared off into space, offering no response, then pivoted on her heel and landed face first on the bed.

I stood, scowling at her prone body for a full minute before shaking my head wearily and yanking her up toward the pillows. I covered her with a quilt and left her snoring away in la-la-land while I rejoined my family.

"Where's Lizzie?" my mother asked when I returned.

"Sleeping."

"The poor thing must be bone tired. That traveling can really wear you out," my mother excused, and I mentally crossed my eyes.

"Not to mention having her car smashed up by some careless driver," Aunt Scarlet piped in.

"Yeah, poor Lizzie," I smirked, amazed that after pretty much divorcing herself from us, she'd miraculously shown up, blitzed out of her mind, and had been welcomed back into the fold with open arms; no questions asked.

"Something obviously happened to upset her," Aunt Scarlet stated simply.

"Gee, what a pity," I wisecracked.

"Your Nana's ready to eat," my mother snipped in her holier-than-thou tone, turning her back to us and starting toward the dining room. "We can catch up with your sister after she rests up."

CHAPTER 4

"So, what's the plan?" Isabel asked as we headed to Millie's place.

"Nothing specific. I just figured we could park across the street and keep our eyes out for anything that moves.

"And why are we doing this again?"

"Because Millie mentioned the home she's renting has some issues; issues that suddenly appeared after she threw her skirt-chasing husband out, and I'd like to see if he, or anyone for that matter, is the cause."

"Why you?"

"Guilt."

"Darcy's right; you are a sap," she grinned as I turned onto Millie's street and rolled to a stop two houses down.

"I have a feeling this is pretty much a waste of time," I remarked as we hunkered down in our seats. "It's so dark out, even if we spot something, it's going to be impossible to tell what it is."

"You're probably right. Maybe we should climb that tree on the side of her house. It's a lot closer and that way we would have a clear line of sight on both the front *and* the back," Isabel said, already opening the door.

"How long has it been since you climbed a tree?"

"Come on, it'll be an adventure," she replied, pushing herself out and quietly closing the door.

I didn't have a good feeling about this, but shoving aside my misgivings, I exited the car and caught up to Isabel. We silently crept toward the huge oak and once we reached its base, I glanced up and cringed at the sheer

size of the thing.

"Why don't you climb the tree while I stay down here?" I whispered. "If you're lucky enough to catch sight of anything, you can just give me a signal and then I can try to sneak up on whoever it is."

"Chicken."

"I'm not afraid to climb a stupid tree. I just think it makes more sense to have one of us on the ground. And, if whoever it is decides to take off, I can run a lot faster than you."

"Whatever," Isabel whispered back, wedging her toes into a big knot about waist high. She stretched to reach the branch above and while I pushed on her bottom she hefted herself up. She worked her way to where the arms forked out in all different directions and just as she straddled a small branch shooting out the middle, I detected a deep, guttural growl followed by the ferocious barking of the biggest dog I'd ever seen as it flew around the side of the house and came tearing toward me.

Holy crap! I thought, shimmying up the tree at breakneck speed with the bloodthirsty mongrel close at my heels. I reached Isabel and plopped onto the branch next to her, trying to catch my breath.

In the next instant, we heard a loud cracking sound as the limb began to give way and for a split second we stared at each other wide-eyed before finding ourselves flying through the air. While battling to gain my senses, I landed with a boisterous whump directly on top of big beastie, sending a sharp pain through my back and flattening him to the ground. He let loose with a whimper and a loud raspberry sound, shooting pooch poo out of his rear-end and covering Isabel from head to toe.

"Tell me that did not just happen!" Isabel croaked, making ptooie noises as she tried to spit the dung out of her mouth, and just as I choked back a laugh, we heard someone shriek, "Muffey!" followed by a soft thud and a rustling sound.

My heart began to race as a sense of panic engulfed me, but before we could make a run for it, a small, black clad person appeared from the shadows wearing some kind of humongous tool belt looking thing, and I couldn't help but wince, knowing we'd been caught.

"Hi, Millie," I mumbled as she came into view, lowering my eyes, and as I rolled off the mutt and pushed myself to my feet, I realized I must have landed on top of the big buckle securing an unusually thick harness around the animal.

"Lexi?" she asked with surprise, straining her neck to look up at me. "What are you doing here?"

"Good deed?" I stammered, staring at my feet.

"Some good deed! Look what you've done to my poor little Muffin!" she cried as she squatted down next to her dog and began to caress its fur.

Little? Muffin?

"What the hell are you feeding that thing?!" Isabel spouted, flinging liquefied doggie poop from her shirt and wiping at her face.

"This has nothing to do with what I'm feeding her. She has bowel issues."

"No shit, lady!"

"Don't blame this on my Muffey! Your weighty friend is the one who squashed her flatter than a pancake and made her go to the bathroom," Millie spit out, trying desperately to stifle a giggle. "It's a wonder she can

still breathe. You must be a lot heavier than you look, Toots."

"The bathroom?! Lady, where I come from, the stuff that blasted out of that flea-bag's butt is called the trots!" Isabel countered.

"Who are you calling a flea-bag?!" Millie spat, straightening up and taking on a defensive stance.

"I'm so sorry, Millie," I jumped in. "I didn't mean to cause you any more trouble. I was just trying to help," I murmured in defense. "But I do have a great vet. If you'd like, I could take her to his office and have him look her over."

"Don't you think you've done enough?!"

"What's with the tool belt?" Isabel demanded obstinately. "And why are you dressed like that?"

"I was trying to be inconspicuous," Millie flared.

"And the tool belt?" Isabel countered.

"I don't have a gun," Millie stated indignantly, hefting a big hammer and holding it up in fighting mode as Muffin struggled to her feet, standing eye level to Millie.

"Muffey! Are you okay, my precious?" she exclaimed, turning her attention to the dog and working her hands through her fur. Muffin wagged her tail and licked Millie's face as I stared in awe at the immense breadth of the animal.

"That's an awful big dog, Millie. How in the world did you come up with a name like Muffin? Considering her size, *and* her demeanor, I would think Bruno or Killer would have been more suited," I commented.

"Those are boy names. Besides, she was no bigger than a teacup when I found her. Couldn't have been more than a week old," Millie smiled, burying her face in the side of

Muffin's neck.

"She's certainly no teacup now," Isabel spoke up.

"And I'd say, after that stunt you two pulled, it's a good thing."

"Well, considering her *bowl issues*, you'd think she'd be bound in a diaper instead of trussed up like some Siberian Husky sled dog."

"Yeah, what's up with that? Why not just a leash?" I asked skeptically.

"She's...um...she was helping me drag the big trash bins out to the street," Millie stumbled, and my radar instantly perked up. As I turned to her with a wary frown, she looked up at Isabel and added with a snicker, "You look ridiculous, by the way."

"You're kind of stinky, too," I half laughed, unable to shake the suspicious vibes coursing through me.

"I'm glad you two find this so amusing," Isabel smirked.

"Why don't you girls come inside? Your friend can wash up while I throw her clothes in the washer."

"Thanks, Millie, but if you have a towel I could borrow to put on the seat, we'll get out of your hair."

"Now I know you don't want her riding in that fancy car of yours covered in dog poop, so stop being so bourgeois and get your butts in here."

Bourgeois? "Actually, the Jaguar belongs to my Aunt Scarlet, and truth be known, if she smelled the poo remnants, she'd probably insist on trading it in, so I guess, if you don't mind..." I replied, hoping to gain some insight and quell my doubts, and as I turned to Isabel with a question in my eyes, she threw me a sneer, opened her mouth to spout something off, hesitated as if having second thoughts, and then clamped it shut, shrugging her

shoulders.

Millie grabbed Muffin's collar, turned her back to us, and as the two of them headed toward the house, Isabel and I trudged along behind. We were approaching the porch when I spied a discarded shovel lying in the grass close to the hedge bordering the front window, and from its haphazard position, the thought flashed through my mind that it had been flung aside in haste--no doubt the thud I had heard--and that same uneasy feeling crept down my spine.

"You might want to pick up that shovel, Millie. If someone were to step on the wrong end, it could knock them out," I commented, glancing at her dubiously as I wondered what this little person could possibly be doing with that big shovel.

"Shovel?" she quizzed, and as she turned toward me, I caught a momentary flicker of alarm cross her face. "Oh...that...guess you're right," she laughed nervously, and my gut quivered. "I was...I was just..." she continued haltingly, "going to bury Muffey's waste when I heard you two hit the ground," she finished in a rush, and considering Muffin's recent explosion, as dark as it was, I knew there was no way she would have been able to see any doggie squirts, much less attempt to bury them. That, combined with her obvious scramble to come up with an explanation, left no doubt in my mind that she was lying.

Leaving Muffin behind on the porch, she quickly stepped around us toward the bushes and as she reached down and struggled to retrieve the spade, my thoughts were racing.

I didn't remember seeing even a hint of any trash cans, so why was Muffin *really* cinched in that harness? And what could she possibly hope to dig up in the black of night?

She two-handed the shovel and carried it into the house

and as we followed her inside, she pointed the way to the bathroom, and then, with forced casualness, put on a pot of coffee while Isabel undressed.

"Don't use the toilet before you hop in the shower," she called out just as we heard it flush.

"Crap, lady!" Isabel shrieked as the sound of the curtain being pulled aside drifted out.

"Oops," Millie giggled in a hushed voice, obviously having regained her composure, and then she yelled out, "Just wash it down with the rest of the poop."

After securing Isabel's clothes and starting the washer, Millie managed to find her husband's old bathrobe and Isabel, still in a foul mood, joined us at the kitchen table.

"So I take it, from the size of this robe, your husband's not a dwarf," Isabel commented as she took her seat.

"Neither am I," Millie responded. "I'm a pygmy. Big difference."

"As Aunt Scarlet would say, tomato, tomahto," Isabel grinned, flicking her wrist, her voice and gesture imitating my aunt.

"There *is* a big difference," Millie stated indignantly. "A dwarf is small, like me, but misshapen--big head, little body, short arms, etcetera, etcetera--and I'd say there's nothing deformed about this body," she declared, sticking her chest out and twirling around to show off her attributes.

"What I don't understand, is how a midget makes babies with a normal sized guy."

"First of all, I'm not a midget. I'm smaller, but I'm *perfectly* proportioned. And we make babies the same way you do."

"His doololly must be teensy."

"How did we get from you two invading my privacy to the size of my husband's penis?"

"Just saying."

"Well, like I told Lexi this morning, my problems are none of your business. Not that I don't appreciate your good intentions, but I can't stand to be patronized. Just because I'm small doesn't mean I can't take care of myself."

"I would never look down on you, Millie," I said, and she started to giggle. "At least not figuratively," I threw in with an uncertain grin. "But I feel sort of responsible for your situation and thought, maybe, if I could help find the culprit who's making your life miserable, it might lessen my guilt."

"So, what you're trying to say is you're meddling in my affairs to make yourself feel better," she challenged.

"Guess you could say that."

"You must be Catholic."

"Takes one to know one."

"You've got me there," she laughed.

"So, what's the deal?" Isabel cut in. "Lexi said you had some kind of issues."

"Well, you experienced one of them," she grinned. "That started about a month after I kicked Mikey to the curb. Then the roof started to leak and simultaneously, the place became infested with roaches. And I'm not talking about those little German roaches; these are those big, flying suckers. And, just this afternoon, I caught a rat skittering across the bathroom floor."

"What makes you think it's not just coincidence?"

"I don't believe in coincidence."

"Then I guess the next question would be, who's got it in for you?"

"You say that like I'm a bad person," Millie responded, giving Isabel the evil eye.

"Crap, lady, you sure are defensive."

"Yeah? Well, you sure are belligerent. And my name is Millie."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Millie," I cut in. "This is my friend, Isabel. Isabel, Millie."

They stared at each other for a moment before Millie smiled and relaxed her stance. "So, Isabel, why such a big chip on your shoulder?"

"Oh, I don't know. Let's see. Could it possibly be the blast of doggie diarrhea I got doused with?" Isabel returned.

"Guess that would do it," Millie laughed.

"So, Millie, did you see anything out there tonight?" I jumped in.

"Never had the chance. I'd just stepped outside when you two hit the ground. I was planning to crawl under the house and peek through the latticework around the bottom. I grabbed the tool belt figuring maybe, if I could see that the plumbing had been tampered with, I might be able to fix it while I waited."

"You know how to fix plumbing issues?"

"Not necessarily, but how hard could it be?"

"My uncle was a plumber and he shared a few tricks of the trade with me," Isabel remarked. "I guess I could crawl under and take a look."

"Was? Is he retired?" Millie asked.

"No. Plumbing was his passion, but after the gas pipe he was working on blew up, he took his skills upstairs."

"I'm so sorry to hear that, Isabel," Millie offered compassionately.

"No biggie. He was getting pretty old and pretty ornery. But at least he died doing something he loved."

"A lot to be said for that."

"Yeah," Isabel sighed wistfully, casting down her eyes, and then, looking up, she continued, "Anyway, if you'll hand over that tool belt..."

"You're not crawling under this house in that robe. It's the only thing I have left of that good-for-nothing rascal. And your clothes are still in the washer. As soon as it's finished doing its thing, I'll throw them in the dryer. We can just hang out until they're done and then you two can be on your way. Oh, there it is now," she said, taking off around the corner and disappearing into the hallway as we heard the washer shudder to a stop.

"There's more to this story than she's letting on," I remarked as soon as Millie was out of earshot.

"I got that impression, too."

"Did you catch her stammering around for excuses?"

"Yeah, and pretty flimsy ones, too. When you asked her if she'd seen anything, she didn't mention any garbage *or* dog poop. And who buries dog poop in the middle of the night, anyway?"

"Besides, if someone's trying to force her out of her home, why wouldn't she want our help?"

"Why wouldn't she just move?"

"That's exactly what I asked."

"And?"

"She said something about not letting that slumlord get off that easy."

"Do you think she's got a thing for her landlord?"

"I'm not sure what to think, but there's no question she's hiding something and it's obvious she wants us to butt out."

"Well, I think we should come back tomorrow night and try to find out what's going on."

"Yeah, but what do we do about Muffin? Even if we dressed in dark clothes, she would sniff us out in a heartbeat and then the beast would eat us alive."

"True. Maybe we could hide a sedative in a piece of meat."

"That might work in the movies, but..." I started, then paused as Millie suddenly reappeared, and quickly shifting gears, I blurted, "Lizzie's back in town."

"Who?" Isabel said, throwing me a puzzled expression.

"Lizzie; my sister."

"So, there *are* two of you," she grinned.

"Not even close. We're nothing alike. Lizzie was always the good girl; all prim and proper and prissy and anxious to please."

"You say that like it's a bad thing," Millie challenged.

"Yeah, well, you didn't grow up with her. I was sort of the rebellious, tomboy type and I always got blamed for everything."

"Sounds like maybe you deserved it."

"Not *every* time. Lizzie did stuff, too. And when I'd get punished for her screw-ups, she'd just stand behind my parents, mocking me, with this fiendish grin."

"So, where has she been?" Isabel asked.

"New York. She left for college over ten years ago and hasn't been home since."

"Maybe she wants to make amends," Millie stated.

"No question she wants *something*. But what, is anyone's

guess."

"Perhaps you should cut her some slack. After all, you're both adults now," Millie counseled.

"I've never known Lexi to be the forgive and forget type," Isabel laughed.

"I'll never forgive her for breaking my mother's heart," I said bitterly, and then proceeded to tell them about her graduation, her wedding and about how her life had always been too busy to accommodate any visit from my parents.

"It does sound like she might have some issues, but still...oops, there goes the dryer," Millie suddenly spurted when the buzzer sounded. "Why don't you get changed up, Isabel, and then I think it's time you two hit the road."