

# TWOCAN SAM

By D. M. Buckley

## CHAPTER 1

I drove past the house on Idlewild Street, spotting no garage and no vehicle anywhere on or near the premises. All the windows were covered and by all appearances, the home was unoccupied. I continued down the street, turned the corner, and parked at the curb on the street directly behind. Fortunately, there were no privacy fences in this neighborhood, so I had a clear view of the back side of the house.

My assignment was to serve divorce papers on the poor schmuck inside, a Samuel Peck, A.K.A. Twocan Sam, and I had already been given the heads-up by Mark, a P.I. with Romano Investigations, that he was a slippery rascal.

I had recently become reacquainted with the owner of the firm, Nick Romano, a trouble-making prankster from my childhood who had needed a favor while recovering from a bullet wound he'd received on my behalf, and who also had no qualms about reminding me of that fact. Due to a temporary lapse in judgment, guilt, my current unemployment status, *and* his agreement to foot the bill for the training and fees associated with becoming a process server, I had reluctantly agreed to help him out.

Since this was my first case going solo, having just been certified by the Thirteenth Judicial Circuit Court in

Hillsborough County, and considering that Mark, unsuccessful in his attempts to deliver the documents, had handed them off to me with a condescending smirk, I had a point to prove. Never one to back down from a challenge, I was determined to seal the chump's fate. I just needed to figure out the best approach.

I was trying to come up with a game plan when I spied a shadow moving across the back window, and anxious to corner the evasive Mr. Peck, I grabbed the envelope containing the divorce papers and exited my car, figuring I would just wing it.

As I walked through the yard next door and out to the front sidewalk, an idea began to form. I was dressed in jeans and a stretchy white T-shirt with '*Cleverly Disguised as a Responsible Adult*' written across the front, and hoping I looked like a friendly neighbor just redistributing mail, I sauntered over to his mailbox, glanced up at his house and back at the envelope as if checking the address, shoved it inside and turned and started walking away. Then, acting like I had second thoughts, I pivoted on my heel, retrieved the envelope and knocked on his door.

I could see a camera peering at me from the upper left hand corner of the overhang and tilting my head in that direction, I offered a smile and a little finger wave. That must have done the trick because a second later I heard the locks being turned. The door opened and so did my mouth, in shocked surprise. My eyes immediately zoomed in on a large, bare butt, boasting a little gold hoop near the middle of the crack, with shoulders and a face above, and plaid shorts, sporting knobby knees below. My first thought was that Mother Nature had played an extremely

cruel trick on this guy. My second was that she'd gotten really confused when putting him together.

"Mr. Peck?" I stammered.

"Who wants to know?"

"Hi. I'm Lexi. The mailman must be having a bad day," I stated simply, tapping the envelope against my other hand and trying not to stare.

"You cheating bastard!" someone suddenly shrieked from behind. Startled, I began to turn around as a loud crack pierced the air and a bullet whizzed past my head, imbedding itself in the aluminum siding.

He grabbed my arm, yanked me inside and slammed the door just before we heard several more bullets connect with the front of the house.

"You crazy damn broad!" he yelled, and as he turned and ran toward the window, it didn't take a genius to understand where his alias came from. Stretching his plaid shorts across the back, taut enough to play tic-tac-toe on, was another protruding rump.

"Maggie, stop acting like a lunatic!" he yelled through the window. "And where'd you get a damn gun, for crissake?"

"I'll teach you to expose your bare ass to every pretty girl in the neighborhood, you skirt-chasing snake!" Maggie yelled, and then all hell broke loose. Three more shots were fired in succession, followed by the screeching of tires. The front window shattered and I jumped back, colliding with the table behind me. The next thing I knew the curtains were on fire.

"Shit!" Peck screamed. "You knocked over my torch! Grab that extinguisher. The whole place is going to blow if we don't put this fire out!"

Since my father was a fireman, I knew how to use an extinguisher, that, and the fact that I had recently been in need of one when someone had thrown a fire bomb through my Aunt Scarlet's window. I snatched the extinguisher from the wall, pulled the pin, and stood still as panic embraced me. The fire had spread so rapidly, I had no idea where to begin directing the foam.

"Shit! Forget it. This place is going to be an inferno in two seconds. And once it heats up those propane tanks...shit...run!" Peck barked through the shrill of his smoke detectors, clutching my arm and propelling us both outside.

He turned and ran back in, exiting less than a minute later carrying a big box. I yanked my cell phone from my pocket and called nine-one-one.

By the time the fire trucks arrived the house was pretty much toast, the flames shooting everywhere and threatening the homes on either side.

"Propane tanks...inside!" Peck shouted through the howl of sirens, waving his arms like a madman and running toward the firemen as they hopped off their truck.

"Anyone else in the house?" one of the firemen asked while another one spoke into some kind of walkie-talkie attached to his shoulder.

"No...no...but the tanks!" Peck exclaimed.

"Sir, I need you to move to the end of the block," he said calmly, donning protective clothing and a face shield as other rescue personnel knocked on doors and evacuated residents up and down the street. More fire trucks arrived and some of the firefighters started spraying the surrounding homes while others hooked up some sort of unmanned hose holders and directed the spray toward his.

Forty-five minutes later, just when we thought the fire was out, the air was shattered by a thunderous explosion, shooting a huge fireball into the sky and Peck's front door into the yard across the street.

"Holy shit, Peck. What the hell did you have in there?" one of his neighbors asked as the rest of the crowd surrounding us stared in awe.

"Propane tanks."

"Propane *tanks*? As in multiples?"

"I need them for the torch I use to make my jewelry. How was I to know this klutz would come knocking and set my house on fire?!" he declared, turning toward me.

"Don't blame this on me, double butt! If your nut case of a wife hadn't shot at me, I wouldn't have bumped into that table and knocked over your lit torch. What kind of an adlebrained idiot walks away and leaves a torch on?"

"I was working when you banged on my door. If you hadn't interrupted me, none of this would've happened."

"Lexi. Fancy seeing you here," I heard, and turning in the direction of his voice, I came face to face with my father. He was decked out in his fireman's gear and looking like some kind of alien as he eyed me through a gas mask.

"Hi, Dad," I said, cringing.

"I assume from your expression that you're somehow involved in this," he sighed, removing the mask.

"It wasn't my fault. I swear. I was just trying to serve divorce papers on Mr. Peck here when his psycho wife took a shot at me."

"It's Twocan Sam. Friends call me Touc," Peck interjected, offering his hand to my father.

"Well, *Sam*, care to explain what happened?" my father

asked, ignoring his gesture.

“Yes, sir. I was working; I make jewelry, you know. When your daughter knocked on my door I got up to answer, thinking I would only be a minute. That’s why I didn’t turn my torch off.”

“You left a burning torch unattended?” my father challenged, his look appalled and his tone berating.

“I was just going to be a minute. I’d been watching her through my camera. She stuck an envelope in my mailbox and started walking away. Then she turned around, took it back out, and knocked on my door. I thought she was just delivering some mail that was sent to her house by mistake. It never occurred to me she was serving divorce papers. I can’t believe Maggie filed for divorce. I thought she just needed some space; you know, some time to cool off. What am I going to do without my sweet pea?” he whined, his face becoming all contorted as huge crocodile tears burst from his eyes.

“I guess we’ll write this off as an accident,” my father remarked, clearly uncomfortable. “I’d advise you to consider this a warning, Sam.”

“Well, gotta run,” I said. “It’s been fun.”

“Wait a minute,” Peck exclaimed. “You’re not just going to leave me, are you? Where am I going to go? You blew up my house!”

“First of all, *I* didn’t blow up your house. If you...never mind. What about your family?”

“They don’t speak to me. They all think I’m weird.”

Imagine that, I thought. “Well, what about friends; that neighbor you were talking to?”

“Don’t have any friends. And my neighbors don’t like me either. Did you hear that neighbor call me Touc? I told

your dad my friends call me Touc.”

“Well, I’ve got to get back to the scene. I’ll leave you two to sort this out,” my father said, his eyes crinkling at the corners with amusement as he threw me a wink and walked away.

“Just come on,” I spat, turning my back to him and stomping in the direction of my car.

“Where do you live? Do you have a shirt I could wear? Maggie hates it when I don’t wear a shirt. She’s so-o-o jealous. Hey, do you think we could stop somewhere and buy a new torch? I threw a bunch of my jewelry making stuff in this box. Oh, wait. I don’t have any money on me. It all blew up with the house. Could you loan me some money? I’ll pay you…”

“Listen, Peck, this is how it’s going to work.”

“Call me Touc. All my friends call me Touc.”

“I thought you didn’t have any friends,” I said, stopping in my tracks to glare at him.

“Well, I don’t. But if I did, they would call me Touc.”

“How about I call you Sam?”

“I don’t know. I’m kind of partial to Touc,” he replied stubbornly.

I stared, flabbergasted, and unable to come up with a retort, I continued toward my car in a huff.

“You can put your box in here,” I said, opening the trunk when we arrived.

“Did I thank you yet? I don’t think I thanked you yet. How rude of me,” he giggled. “Thanks. This is great. I won’t be any trouble, promise.”

“What kind of rocks are these?” I asked, noting several different shapes and sizes of black, beige, and yellow stones in his carton.

“That’s funny,” he giggled again. “Everyone thinks they’re rocks. That’s my collection of bird droppings. It’s what I use to make my jewelry. I cover them with acrylic, attach gold or silver wires and make earrings and necklaces. Sometimes I even set them in rings. Oh, oh, and ankle bracelets. One of my customers sent me her parakeet’s droppings and asked me to make her an ankle bracelet so she could have a piece of her little Tweety with her all the time.”

“You make jewelry out of bird poop?”

“I prefer droppings. It sounds classier.”

“Well, alrighty then,” I commented, mentally rolling my eyes as I rounded the car and slipped behind the wheel.

## CHAPTER 2

We were on the Veterans Expressway, heading toward Odessa, when my cell phone chirped. I flipped it open and noting the display, I put it to my ear with a sigh.

“Where are you?” Valentini asked in greeting.

Valentini was one of the investigating cops when my Aunt Scarlet’s home was broken into a few months back. He had recently been promoted to detective and was currently hot on the trail of some bank bandit. I knew this because he was also my boyfriend.

“The Veterans, heading to Aunt Scarlet’s.”

“Feel like meeting me at Ragano’s for lunch?”

“I thought you were working a case?”

“I thought we were going to your place?” Peck cut in.

“I don’t *have* a place.”

“Who’s that?” Valentini asked.

“Why don’t you have a place of your own?” Peck persisted.

“Samuel Peck,” I answered Valentini.

“The guy you were supposed to serve?” Valentini snickered.

“Long story,” I responded.

“It’s Twocan Sam. Friends call me Touc,” Peck said loudly, leaning toward my cell.

“Why is he in your car?” Valentini asked.

“His house sort of burned down, but it wasn’t my fault. And before you ask, his family doesn’t speak to him, neighbors don’t like him and he has no friends, so if you’re ever indulgent enough to call him *Touc*, you’ll be the first.”

"I can't wait to hear this one. Tell me you at least served the papers," Valentini said, and I could hear the amusement in his voice.

"Verbally. The papers were lost in the fire. And to answer *your* question," I said, turning toward Peck, "my apartment burned down."

"Are you some kind of arsonist?"

"No. I wasn't even in the vicinity when it happened. If you must know, someone threw a molotov cocktail through my window."

"A what?"

"We're here. I'll call you back," I said to Valentini, snapping the phone shut.

"Who was that?" Peck asked.

"Valentini."

"Who's he?"

"A cop."

"Why is a cop calling you?"

"Just get out of the car," I said impatiently, slamming my door for emphasis.

"I bet he's your boyfriend. Your conversation was way too chummy for him to be only a cop. Is he jealous? Don't worry, I'll tell him we're just friends. My Maggie's so-o-o jealous. I can't believe she filed for divorce," he prattled as we walked up the steps.

"So you said."

"Well now, who is this?" Aunt Scarlet asked from the doorway, a look of curiosity on her face as she wiped her hands on a dishtowel.

"Samuel Peck. His house..."

"It's Twocan Sam. Friends call me Touc," Peck interrupted, extending his hand toward Aunt Scarlet.

"Where's your shirt, young man?" Aunt Scarlet asked.

"They all burned up in the fire."

"What fire?" Aunt Scarlet demanded, throwing an accusatory look my way.

"Long story and it wasn't my fault," I said quickly.

"How in the world did you get your ass on backwards?" an elderly woman I'd never seen before suddenly blurted as she moved within an inch of Peck, holding a magnifying lens up to her coke bottle glasses.

"It's not on backwards, you silly," Peck giggled. "I've got two of them, see," he continued, turning sideways to show off his other rump. "That's why I'm called Twocan Sam. Two cans. Get it?" he giggled again, twirling front to back and pointing to each fanny. "But my friends call me Touc."

"Isn't that something," she smiled.

"Lexi, this is my friend, Agnes Scaletti. We play bride together. She's concerned about her neighbor and I was hoping you could help her out," Aunt Scarlet said.

"Nice to meet you, Ms. Scaletti."

"Please dear, call me Agnes."

"Why are you concerned about your neighbor?" I asked.

"Because I haven't seen hide or hair of her in two days. And when I went to pick her up for bingo--we play every Thursday night; have for years--she didn't answer her door."

"Have you reported her missing?"

"Well, no. I don't want to embarrass her or cause her any trouble if she just went visiting and forgot to tell me, or maybe went on a vacation. But it's been two days now and I'm starting to have a bad feeling."

"Two days isn't a long time. How well do you know her?"

“Oh, goodness, she’s been my neighbor for nearly fifty years now. We talk every day, so I guess you could say pretty well.”

“Does she have any family you know of?”

“She never had any children and her husband kicked the bucket about ten years ago. Parents and siblings have all passed on, too.”

“What about other friends?”

“I’ve talked to all the ones I know and they haven’t heard from her either.”

“Well, I’d be worried too, Agnes,” Peck interrupted, and I realized I’d not only forgotten he was there, but that we were still standing just inside the doorway.

“Why don’t I make a pot of coffee?” I said, moving toward the kitchen.

“Maybe your friend got sick, Agnes. I mean, if she’s old like you, she could have just keeled over. And with no one there to help her out, she could be lying on the floor in her house, hoping someone will come and help her,” Peck chattered as they followed.

I grabbed the coffee maker, rolling my eyes in annoyance as Aunt Scarlet pulled a cherry cheesecake from the fridge and Peck and Agnes took a seat at the table.

“Maybe we should break into her house. I know a good friend like you would want to make sure she’s not dead or something,” Peck continued.

“What is *wrong* with you?” I asked, glaring at Peck as Aunt Scarlet and I took a seat.

“Well, if she’s dead, I’m sure Agnes wouldn’t want to just leave her lying there. And besides, someone has to make the funeral arrangements. She said herself her friend has no family.”

"I'm sure she's fine, Agnes," I said in a consoling tone, giving her hand a little squeeze and throwing daggers at Peck.

"Maybe Touc is right. Maybe we should break in," Agnes said with a grief stricken expression, as tears, magnified by her thick glasses, filled her eyes.

"Let's not jump the gun, Agnes," I said, stifling the urge to reach over and smack Peck upside the head. "Why don't you just start by telling me her name?"

"It's Dot... Dorothy... McAllister."

"And when, exactly, did you see her last?"

"Wednesday. We were excited about going to bingo the next night," Agnes sniffled.

"Okay, and how old is Dot?"

"I'm not sure. But we just had a birthday last month--we were both born on the same day, you know--and I mentioned that, considering I'd just turned eighty, I still had a lot of spring in my step. She reminded me she was five years older."

"Then that would make her about eighty-five," I said slowly, mentally crossing my eyes. "Does she have any health issues?"

"No. She just had a physical last month and her doctor said she was disgustingly healthy for a woman of her age," Agnes responded, turning toward Peck with a smug look.

"Now see there, no need to worry about any illness, so let's just concentrate on figuring out where she might be."

"I just don't have any more ideas."

"What makes you think she might have gone on a trip?"

"I don't know. It was just a thought. She *has* been seeing a gentleman we met at bingo. He's a charming man, and very handsome. They've never gone anywhere overnight,

though.”

“How long has she been dating him?”

“Oh, I don’t know. He’s been around for two Christmas seasons, so I guess over a year now.”

“Have you seen this man since the last time you spoke with Agnes?”

“Oh...yeah...he was at bingo Thursday night.”

“Then I guess she couldn’t be on vacation with *him*. Anything else come to mind?”

“He has a son. I didn’t see *him* at bingo.”

Speechless, I simply stared at her, offering a tight smile as I mentally massaged the massive headache threatening to rupture my brain.

“For goodness sake, Agnes. What has that got to do with the matter at hand?” Aunt Scarlet snapped.

“Well, she said anything.”

“Tell you what. Why don’t you give me her address and I’ll do some checking.”

“Thank you, dear.”

As Agnes recited Dot’s address, Aunt Scarlet got up and disappeared into the back of the house, returning a moment later with an old flannel shirt.

“I’m not sure this will fit, Touc, but Houty left it the last time he was here, and he’s a pretty big man. Why don’t you slip it on?”

Houty had been Aunt Scarlet’s handyman, and friend, for the past five years. He’d managed to get himself mixed up with the Jersey mob though, and was now in Witness Protection.

I’d also recently discovered, through some deceptive measures, that he was her illegitimate son. She hadn’t divulged this information to me yet, and I hadn’t let on

that I knew. I just figured when the time was right, she would tell me.

“Let me grab a shawl or something you can tie around the middle until you can get to the store,” Aunt Scarlet commented as Peck pulled at the front of the shirt. He’d managed to button it just above his front tush, but there was no way it was going to stretch far enough to cover it.

“Thank you,” Peck said when Aunt Scarlet reappeared, handing him a pink shawl.

“That’s much better, don’t you think?” Aunt Scarlet asked, looking at me as she pulled the cape across his back and tied the ends in a knot.

“If you say so, Aunt Scar.”

“When you go to the store, you need to get me a two-times large. And I like up and down stripes,” Peck remarked, turning toward me.

“I’ll take you to the store, but I’m not about to do your shopping.”

“I can’t go out in public wearing a pink wrap. Everyone will laugh at me. And besides, you owe me. After all, you *did* blow up my house.”

“For the last time, I did *not* blow up your house. I swear, Aunt Scar, it wasn’t my fault,” I insisted, catching her scowl, and then proceeded to relay my morning’s adventure.

“I have to agree with Lexi, Touc,” Aunt scarlet spoke up when I finished. “There’s no way she could have known you had a lit torch on that table, much less propane tanks in your house.”

“But if she hadn’t interrupted me, I wouldn’t be homeless,” Peck complained.

“She was just doing her job. It was your fault for

walking away from a burning flame,” Aunt Scarlet countered.

“I guess. But I’m still not comfortable going to the store. Could you *please* go for me? I’ll pay you back, promise. And while you’re out, could you pick me up another torch and an extra tank? I need to create some jewelry. It’s the only way I have to make money.”

“So you can blow up Aunt Scarlet’s house, too? I don’t think so.”

“Now, Lexi, he has to make a living, and he did ask politely. I’m sure we can set up a place for him to work in the shed until he can get back on his feet.”

“Really? Wow, that’s so nice of you, Scarlet. And I don’t want you to go to any trouble on my account. I can make do with whatever’s out there. I’m pretty handy, you know. I’ll have a workshop set up in no time. Did I thank you yet? I think I forgot to thank you. This is so generous. And I promise I won’t be any trouble.”

“Then it’s settled.”

“I love jewelry,” Agnes cut in. “All kinds. In fact, I guess you could say I’m a collector. Do you have any samples I could look at?”

“Maybe. I’m really not sure what I grabbed before the house exploded. Let me get my box and we can look through it,” Peck replied, grinning from ear to ear as he headed toward the door.

He returned lickety split with the carton in tow, and before he had the chance to set it down, Agnes began perusing the contents with her magnifying lens.

“What kind of stones are these?”

Oh brother.

“That’s funny,” he giggled. “Everyone thinks they’re gems, but they’re actually my collection of bird droppings.”

Each one is unique.”

“Isn’t that clever,” Agnes responded, egging him on.

“First, I try to match sizes, and then I cover them with acrylic so they’ll stay together and not smell. Then I attach gold or silver wires and make earrings and necklaces. Sometimes I even set them in rings. Once, I even made an ankle bracelet for one of my customers. She sent me her own droppings and asked me to make her one so she could have a piece of her little Tweety with her all the time.”

“Well, I can’t say I’ve ever heard anyone call their shit *Tweety* before. But I think wanting to wear your own poop around your ankle is pretty disgusting,” she said, making a face.

“Not *her* droppings, you silly. Tweety’s her parakeet.”

“Oh...well that’s different.”

### CHAPTER 3

Peck had slipped out to the shed to begin arranging his workshop and Aunt Scarlet had departed to the den to get her dogs ready for their weekly bath. Having finally relented, I'd left on my Peck quest, promising Agnes I'd be in touch.

After exhausting all the local discount places in search of vertical striped shirts, size extra-extra-large, I was just pulling onto Gunn Highway, heading to the fat man's outlet down the street, when my cell phone rang.

"Care to meet me at the gun range?" Isabel asked as soon as I answered.

I'd met Isabel while trying to coerce some big, bad redneck to slip up and blow his workers' comp case to hell and back. Another favor for Nick Romano.

"Wish I could, but I'm on a mission. I need to find some shirts for Peck."

"Who's Peck?"

"Long story. I'll fill you in later. Why don't you join us for dinner tonight?"

"Can't. Nick's taking me to some fancy restaurant. I think he's trying too hard to impress me."

"That would be his style."

I had introduced her to Nick Romano during a weak moment. He'd been in the hospital, recovering from the bullet wound he'd gotten while trying to save my ass, and truth be told, that day, he was my hero. Needless to say, they'd been an item ever since.

"Why are you always so hard on him, Lexi? He's a *good*

guy.”

“Because he tormented me throughout my childhood. And if I ever even considered cutting him any slack, he’d be on me like stink on shit.”

“But you were kids. We all teased each other.”

“A leopard doesn’t change his spots. Remember that dinner at my parents’ a couple of months ago?”

“I also remember he took a bullet for you.”

“There’s that.”

“Anyway, how about tomorrow? I need to get in some practice.”

“What’s the rush? Have you got big plans I don’t know about?”

“Tony set up an interview with the police department Monday for that intern position. I don’t know what will be involved, but I want to be ready for anything they might throw at me.”

Isabel was studying for a degree in criminal justice and Valentini, getting wind of it, had offered to find out if the police department still offered an intern program for students.

“I’m sure he would have told you if they were going to test your shooting skills.”

“Can you make it or not?” she asked indignantly.

“I’m not sure. I’ve sort of got a situation, and it depends on how it turns out.”

“Anything to do with this Peck person?”

“No, but that’s a consideration, too. I’m a little uncomfortable leaving Aunt Scarlet alone with him for too long.”

“Shit, after those self-defense classes, I don’t think you have anything to worry about. For a seventy-year-old

woman, Aunt Scarlet can kick some serious ass.”

“True, providing her mind’s in this galaxy when something happens.”

“Where are you now?”

“Headed to the big man’s shop on Gunn Highway.”

“I’m just around the corner. Meet you there,” she said, disconnecting.

The place was a little pricey, but I had no trouble locating the shirts Peck requested. I was at the register, signing the debit slip, when Isabel came through the door. I lifted my hand and waved her over.

“I still need to run by the hardware store before we stop by Dot’s. It’ll only take a minute.”

“Who’s Dot?”

“A neighbor of Aunt Scarlet’s friend. She’s been missing for two days and Agnes is concerned.”

“Okay, you’ve lost me. Who the hell is Agnes?”

“Aunt Scarlet’s friend.”

“Why haven’t I ever met her?”

“I *don’t* know. I’d never met her either. She was there when I brought Peck home and Aunt Scarlet asked for my help.”

“So who is this Peck person, and why did you bring him home?” she asked as we walked through the parking lot.

“If you want to ride with me to the hardware store and Dot’s, I’ll explain.”

“Just so long as I’m back by five. I need my primping time before Nick picks me up. I was thinking of wearing my new, lacy, pink thong and matching bra. What do you think?” she asked, giving me an innocent look as we arrived

at my car.

“I think you’d run the risk of being dressed alike.”

She stuck her tongue out at me in response, opened the door and slid inside.

On the way to pick up Peck’s torch, I recounted my efforts to serve the divorce papers and the resulting disaster that led to Peck ending up at Aunt Scarlet’s.

“The guy actually has two rear ends? How is that possible?”

“I don’t think the one in front is actually a fanny. I imagine that’s why he put a belly button ring in the middle. But it *looks* like a fanny.”

“You know the strangest people, Lexi.”

“Don’t I, though,” I sighed, realizing I hadn’t even told her about the bird poop yet.

We secured Peck’s torch and extra tank and as we headed toward Dot’s, I repeated my conversation with Agnes.

“Two days doesn’t seem like a long time,” she said. “The only thing that would worry me is the fact that they were looking forward to going to bingo the next night.”

“That’s what got my attention, too. I’m not sure how I can help, but I promised Agnes I would look into it.”

“What are you going to do if she’s not there?”

“Don’t have a clue,” I replied as we pulled up to the house. We were getting ready to exit the car when a white SUV pulled into Dot’s driveway. A girl about my age stepped out of the driver’s side, followed by a whale of a man from the back. He walked around to the opposite side, opened the passenger door and helped an elderly woman maneuver herself down.

“Damn! Look at the size of that guy,” Isabel exclaimed. “It’s like someone shoved an air hose up his butt and

turned it on full blast.”

“They’ve spotted us,” I said, as all three stopped and stared in our direction.

“I wonder who they are,” Isabel said.

“I assume the older woman is Dot. And if that’s the case, I don’t want to start the car and just take off. Agnes kind of wanted this on the QT. She was concerned about embarrassing her. Just follow my lead.”

As we strode in their direction, the girl and bubble man made a hasty retreat, squealing the tires as they backed out of the driveway and took off down the street.

“Do you know where forty-five eighteen West Lambright Street is?” I asked, approaching the elderly woman. “We’re looking for Robert Amato.”

“No, dear. But I imagine it’s on the other side of town. This is *East* Lambright,” she said, watching the departing SUV with a confused expression.

“Oops. Guess we need to get a map. Thanks, and sorry for troubling you,” I said.

“Oh, no trouble,” she replied distractedly.

“Are you all right?” I asked, noting her blank stare.

“I was just wondering why they left in such a hurry. We had a lovely time at the shore. Mary Alice and I did, anyway. I don’t know why she insisted on bringing Frank along. Except for meals, he stayed in his room the whole time. I don’t much care for Armand’s son. And Agnes thinks he’s a jackass. Oh, that reminds me. I need to call Agnes. I missed our bingo night. I was going to call her from the shore, but every time I remembered, Mary Alice dragged me off somewhere. Why don’t you come on in? I think I have a map inside.”

That was the thing about old people. You really didn’t

have to ask a lot of questions. But I was still curious about this Mary Alice.

"If you're sure it won't be an imposition," I replied to her back as she walked up the steps and unlocked the door.

As soon as we stepped inside my nostrils were invaded by the strong smell of urine and I spotted what looked like a tiger cub lounging on the sofa.

"Is that a tiger?" Isabel blurted, a look of fear clouding her features.

"Why, yes, a white Bengal cub. Her name is Gata. She won't hurt you. She's just a baby."

"She sure is cute," I said, offering my hand so she could sniff me out as I approached.

"Cute, my ass! Those things are dangerous! Did you know they can get up to seven-hundred pounds?" Isabel exclaimed.

"Jeez, Isabel, get a grip. She's just a baby."

"Babies grow up."

"I'm not going to keep her once she grows up. She's been abused and I'm just nursing her back to health. Then I'll turn her over to that big cat rescue place. It's like caring for a sick friend, only tiger cubs don't whine."

"Maybe not, but they can maul you to death," Isabel remarked, tentatively moving closer. The cub began to growl and Isabel jumped back, letting out a little squeak as she scurried behind Dot.

The sudden movement must have spooked the cub, because she suddenly sprang from the sofa with claws bared and leapt in Isabel's direction. Isabel made a beeline toward the door, squealing like a little piglet as she ran outside and slammed it behind her.

"Oh, my. I hope your friend is okay. Bad kitty, Gata. You scared that poor girl half to death," Dot said, picking

up the cub and cuddling it to her chest.

"She'll be fine. Guess I never thought she'd be afraid of a little cub," I said, biting my tongue to keep from laughing.

"Now, why are you here? Oh yeah, the map. I know I've got one somewhere. I'm Dot, by the way, McAllister, and this is Gata."

"It was very nice of you to invite us into your home, Dot. I'm Lexi...O'Malley, and the scaredy cat is my pal, Isabel Ortega. But didn't you say you needed to call your friend?" I prompted, knowing Agnes would be relieved once she heard from her.

"Yes, I did. Thank you for reminding me. You know, Agnes is a little bit of a worrywart. If you don't mind, I think I'll do that first, and then I'll look for the map."

"Take all the time you need."

While Dot placed the call to Agnes, I played with Gata, who had jumped into my lap when Dot went to retrieve the phone. She was actually very much like Lizzie, the kitten I had reluctantly inherited from Aunt Scarlet. At the time, I had no idea how to care for her, never having had a pet, but Darcy, my best friend since birth, had shamed me into stepping up and becoming a parent. Now, except for the shredded bedspread and toilet paper strung throughout the house, we got along just fine.

"I'm sorry, dear. I can't imagine what I did with it, but I've looked everywhere," Dot said as she re-entered the living room.

"No problem. I'll just look it up on *Mapquest* when I get home. So, how is your friend? Was she glad to hear from you?"

"Yes. It's so nice of you to ask. You know, we've lived

next to each other for probably fifty years and since our husbands passed we've sort of looked out for each other. I don't know what I'd do without Agnes, even though sometimes she can be a party pooper. I mean, Mary Alice is Armand's niece, for goodness sake. Why shouldn't I take a little trip with her?"

"Who's Armand?"

"He's my gentleman friend. We've been seeing each other for a little over a year now. And don't ever tell her I said so, but actually, I think Agnes is a bit jealous."

"My lips are sealed. Anyway, thank you, Dot. I guess I'd better go make sure Isabel's recovered. Thanks again for your hospitality. Take care now."

## CHAPTER 4

“What the hell took so long?” Isabel demanded when I returned to the car.

“Dot doesn’t move real fast. If you hadn’t run out of there like a scared rabbit, you’d know that.”

“My cousin was mauled by a tiger when we were kids.”

“You’re kidding. How the hell did that happen?”

“We were at the zoo.”

“How did it get out?”

“That’s not the point. It happened. And after seeing what that tiger did to him, I don’t want any part of them, or lions, or bears...or snakes. They give me the willies.”

“Lily liver.”

“Don’t tell me you’re not afraid of snakes?”

“I have to admit, they’re not my favorite. Spiders and roaches aren’t high on my list, either. Especially those flying palmetto roaches. They creep me out.”

“Good to know,” she replied, glaring at me with a devilish smile.

“And no pillow talking with the master prankster,” I said, glaring back.

“Paybacks are hell.”

“Keep that in mind.”

“So...did you find out anything new?”

“Dot told me Armand is her gentleman friend and the girl, Mary Alice, is his niece. She seems awfully young to be his niece, though. Anyway, she called Agnes while I waited, so I guess I’m done with that.”

“Good. Let’s go practice.”

"I want to drop this stuff off at Aunt Scarlet's first. After this morning, I'm a little nervous about carrying a propane tank around in my car."

"Maybe Aunt Scarlet would like to join us. She could sure *use* some practice."

"I don't think we should mention where we're going. That would leave Peck there by himself and I don't know anything about him."

"Why the hell did you bring him home then?"

"Guilt."

As I turned into the dirt drive that led to Aunt Scarlet's, my cell phone buzzed.

"I guess lunch is off," Valentini said.

"Sorry. I had to take care of something."

"Anything to do with this Peck guy?"

"No, but it's a long story."

"You're full of those today, aren't you?"

"Seems to be my life."

"I talked to your dad."

"So, I guess you know all about the mishap."

"That's not how he told it."

"He does tend to exaggerate."

"I gather there was some kind of explosion. He was laughing so hard he could barely spit it out, but it also sounded like he said this Peck guy has two butts."

"Seems to be damned proud *of* it, too."

"I don't know what I did for entertainment before I met you," he said with a chuckle. "So, where did you take him?"

"Aunt Scarlet's."

"And you left him alone with her?"

"He's harmless; just an oddball. Besides having two rear

ends, he makes jewelry out of bird poop, chatters too much and he's been whining about losing his '*sweet pea*' ever since he found out I was there to serve divorce papers. I'm pretty sure she's safe. Besides, like Isabel said, Aunt Scarlet can kick some serious ass."

"Maybe when her head's on straight."

"Great minds think alike."

"Where's he going to stay tonight?"

"Haven't figured that out yet, but Aunt Scarlet told him he could set up shop in the shed, so I imagine with us. It's just a shame Houty's trailer was destroyed. That would have been perfect."

"How long are you planning to put this guy up?"

"You sure ask a lot of questions," I remarked.

"You sure give me a lot of headaches."

"A second ago you said I was amusing."

"In a migraine kind of way. I'll see you tonight," he replied, hanging up.

As we pulled up to the house, I spotted Aunt Scarlet standing beside a ladder, and glancing up, I saw Peck on top, sweeping out the gutters, the pink shawl flapping in the wind behind him. I parked the car and we strode in their direction.

"I see you put him to work," I said.

"When he finished up in the shed, he told me he noticed my eaves were full and asked if I'd like him to clean them out. You know, since Houty's been gone, this place has gone to hell in a hand basket."

"I'm glad to see you're earning your keep," I called up to Peck.

"I'm real handy, you know. There's lots of stuff I could do around here. I'm going to fix that dripping faucet in

the kitchen when I'm finished. And I could help with the dog's baths and trim the hedges and mow the lawn. Scarlet's too old to be doing those things."

"Don't be shy, now."

"Oh, I won't. And we really should do something about that dirt driveway. We could get some shell delivered and I could level it out. Or better yet, I could build a concrete driveway and lay those pavers on top. That would look real nice."

"You know how to do all that?"

"Yep. My dad's in construction. He taught me *all* the tricks of the trade."

"And to think you make bird poop jewelry."

"Did you get my torch?"

"Yeah. It's in the trunk, along with your shirts and extra tank."

"Thanks. Did I say thanks yet? I'll pay you back as soon as I sell some jewelry. You've both been so kind to me," he choked, pausing to wipe at his eyes, and the guilt burrowed deeper.

"Where's he going to sleep tonight?" I asked, turning my attention to Aunt Scarlet.

"Oh, dear, I hadn't thought of that. On the sofa, I guess."

"I don't suppose we could ask him to stay in Houty's old trailer."

"Heavens, no. That place is a disaster."

"You have a trailer on the property?" Peck asked.

"It's where Houty lived, but it's not very cozy now. Some thugs demolished it," I said.

"I can finish this later. Let me take a look. I bet I could fix it right up."

If you're a miracle worker, I thought.

"What about the gun range?" Isabel grumbled.

"Don't get your panties in a wad. Let me show him the trailer and we'll be on our way."

"Gun range? I want to go, too," Aunt Scarlet chimed in. "I'll get ready while you two take Touc around back."

"The trailer's at the opposite end of the property, Peck. It's about a thirty to forty-five minute walk. If you're planning on doing any work, you might want to bring some tools with you," I said, giving Isabel the evil eye as Peck stepped off the bottom rung.

"Good idea. The shed is full of tools, and I saw a wheelbarrow in there, too. I can load it up and cart it with us. I don't ever remember seeing so many tools in one place. Every kind you could imagine. That Houty must have been real handy."

"This is my friend, Isabel. Isabel, Peck."

"It's Twocan Sam. Friends call me Touc," he grinned.

"I'll bring your torch and tank around while you gather what you need, but make it snappy. We have places to go and things to do," I threw back, rolling my eyes as I headed to the car.

When we finally started toward the trailer, we reached the edge of the clearing surrounding Aunt Scarlet's house and the brush had grown so much since Houty went into WitSec, the opening to the trail was obscured.

"It's really overgrown," I said, pulling aside branches. "No one's used this path since Houty left."

"Here, let me," Peck said, hauling a machete from the wagon. He made surprisingly quick work of chopping away at the overgrowth, and before long we could make out the start of the trail.

"I'll go first and clear the way if you can push the wheelbarrow," he declared, already moving ahead.

As Peck swung the blade, chopping away at the thick brush, Isabel and I managed to maneuver the wheelbarrow over tree roots and potholes, and by the time we finally pushed through to the open space housing the trailer, we were all soaking wet from the humidity and physical labor.

"I hope you're planning on leaving this thing here," Isabel panted. "I'm not about to push it back."

"I saw a tiller in the shed," Peck commented. "A good one. It's a twenty inch Honda rear-tine. And there's a stump grinder, too. I could use that to break up those tree roots. Then I could level out that path, if you'd like, and maybe put down some pavers."

"That would be an awful lot of concrete. And how would you get the cement mixer through there?"

"You don't need cement for a path, you silly. No one will be driving on it."

"You sure seem to be a man of many talents, Peck, but even so, I'd be surprised if you could do much to make this trailer livable again. Anyway, take a look inside and see what you think."

"Good grief, look at this mess," Peck blurted, poking his head through the door.

"I told you it wasn't pretty," I remarked to his back as he climbed the steps.

"So, I guess that pink thing is covering his other ass," Isabel said once he was out of sight.

"You sound disappointed."

"I've never seen a front fanny."

"Lucky you."

"I think I can make this work," Peck called out through

the open door, sounding excited. "There's not much damage in the bedroom or bathroom. Most of it seems to be in the front. Do you think I could borrow some sheets and towels from Scarlet?"

And my mood instantly brightened.