

DEATH, TAXES,
AND A SKINNY
NO-WHIP LATTE

DIANE KELLY



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and a Skinny
No-Whip Latte

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St. Martin's Paperbacks

To Mom, for kicking my butt when I needed it

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Teaser

Also by Diane Kelly

Praise for Diane Kelly's Death, Taxes, and a French Manicure

About the Author

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CHAPTER ONE

It's a Terrifying Job, but Somebody's Gotta Do It

"I'm scared shitless, Eddie."

I looked over at my partner as he pulled his maroon minivan into the parking lot of the downtown Dallas post office. Eddie Bardin was tall and lean, sporting a gray suit and starched white dress shirt with a mint-green silk tie. Though Eddie was African-American, he was more J. Crew than 2 Live Crew, like a dark-chocolate version of President Obama. Not that Eddie'd ever condescend to vote for a Democrat.

Despite the fact that my partner was a conservative married suburban dad and I was a free-thinking single city girl, the two of us got along great and made a kick-ass team. Problem was, the current assignment we were aiming to kick was a very frightening one.

A row of cars stretched out in front of us, a solid red line of brake lights illuminating the early evening drizzle. Apparently I wasn't the only slacker who waited until April fifteenth to file their tax return.

Eddie pulled to a stop behind one of those newer odd-looking rectangular cars. Cube, was it? Quad? Shoebox? He glanced my way. "Scared? You? C'mon, Holloway. You've been slashed with a box cutter and shot at and lived to brag about it." His scoffing tone might have been more believable if he hadn't noticed his grip tighten on the steering wheel. "We're invincible, you and me. Like Superman. Or toxic waste."

I scrunched my nose. "Ew. Couldn't you have come up with a better metaphor?"

"I'm exhausted, Tara. And besides, it was a simile." He muttered something under his breath about me being the child the education system left behind.

I might have been offended if I thought he truly meant it. You didn't become a member of the Treasury Department's Criminal Investigations team without a stellar academic record, impressive career credentials, and a razor-sharp intellect, not to mention a quick hand on both a calculator and a gun. Not that I'm bragging. But it's true.

I toyed with the edge of the manila envelope in my lap. "Battaglia and Gryder were chump change compared to Marcos Mendoza, and you know it."

Eddie and I had recently put two tax cheats—Jack Battaglia and Michael Gryder—behind bars, but not before Battaglia had sliced my forearm with a box cutter and Gryder had taken pot shots at me with a handgun and pierced Eddie's earlobe with a bullet. Not exactly polite behavior. What's more, neither of those men had a history of violence prior to attacking us. The focus of our current investigation, Marcos Mendoza, was an entirely different matter.

Due to a lack of evidence, Mendoza had never been officially accused of any crimes. Yet his business associates had a suspicious history of disappearing.

And resurfacing.

In Dumpsters.

In pieces.

They'd found parts of Andrew Sheffield, a former employee of Mendoza's and presumably his most recent victim, spread among garbage receptacles from Harlingen, to Houston, to San Antonio, and beyond. The sanitation department of El Paso found Sheffield's right foot, still clad in a pricey Ferragamo loafer, in the trash bin behind the police headquarters. Andrew had yet to be fully accounted for.

Hence my scared-shitless state of mind.

We inched forward, the only sound the occasional swish of the intermittent wipers as they arced across the windshield.

I knew Eddie well enough to know his lack of response meant he agreed with me. But perhaps some things are better left unsaid.

Think happy thoughts, I told myself. *Fluffy kittens. Colorful rainbows. Big tax refunds.* Of course it would be easier to think happy thoughts if my right arm wasn't bearing a plaster cast. I'd fractured my wrist diving out a window to evade Gryder. The con artist was rotting in jail now.

Hey, now there's a happy thought.

Finally, we reached the bleary-eyed postal worker standing in the parking lot. She wore a dark blue rain slicker and held an umbrella in one hand, a white plastic box bearing the postal service eagle logo in the other.

I unrolled my window, letting in the dank air, and dropped my return into her nearly full bin. "Thanks. See you next April fifteenth."

A drop of rain rolled off the tip of her nose as she forced a feeble smile.

How much longer would I file single? I wasn't yet ready for diapers, playdates, and PTA meetings, but the thought of joint tax returns didn't frighten me as much as it used to. Maybe because of Brett Ellington, the sweet, brave, and incredibly sexy landscape architect I'd been dating the past few months.

I rolled up my window and checked my watch. "Six thirty-seven P.M. That's a personal best."

Eddie snorted. "I filed my return two months ago. Already got my refund."

I cut my eyes to him. "Oh yeah? And what did Sandra and the twins spend the money on?"

He turned away, letting me know my jab had hit home.

"Ha! You are whipped, dude."

"Better to be whipped than to be a procrastinator."

"Hey, I've been busy." Busy shopping and packing for my upcoming trip to Fort Lauderdale with Brett. I'd made no less than three trips to Victoria's Secret before deciding on the red satin teddy with black trim and those little clip thingies to hold up a pair of old-fashioned fishnet stockings. I couldn't wait for Brett to see me in it. He was a perfect gentleman in public, but in the bedroom, well, let's just say he left his decorum at the door.

A new red chiffon cocktail dress had made its way into my shopping bag, too. The spaghetti straps and handkerchief edge gave it a feminine and festive feel. It was the perfect outfit for the American Society of Landscape Architects' awards banquet, where the society would bestow its prestigious Landmark Award on Brett for his work at city hall. I'd scored the dress forty-percent off at an after-Easter sale. Christ may have risen, but Neiman's had lowered its prices. Hallelujah!

I stifled a yawn. Not surprising I was tired since we'd been on the job since nine o'clock the morning and at the office until midnight the last few nights reviewing paperwork. The Mendoza case

was so highly sensitive we'd been forbidden to discuss it with anyone, even our coworkers. To maintain secrecy, we'd been forced to perform some of our work after hours.

Why the secrecy? Three years ago, a special agent named Nick Pratt had infiltrated Mendoza's operations and purportedly obtained evidence that Mendoza had earned enormous sums of illegally unreported income. Though the details were sketchy, Mendoza allegedly got wind of the investigation, bought off the agent, and set up the traitor in a luxury beachside condominium in Cancún, Mexico.

Tough life, huh?

Lawyers at the U.S. Department of Justice fought to extradite Pratt back to the U.S. on charges of obstruction of justice and theft of government property, but the Mexican judge refused to cooperate, claiming all Pratt did was quit his job at the IRS, which wasn't illegal. He argued the theft charges wouldn't stick since Pratt's government-issued cell phone and laptop were mailed back to the department. Of course all of the data had been wiped clean, the hard drive erased. Presumably Mendoza had the judge in his pocket.

If only money were at stake, the government might have let the case go. But given the recent increase in body count, the case was reopened.

Come hell or high water, Mendoza had to be stopped.

And it was up to Eddie and me to stop him.

We'd been on the case only four days, since Eddie had returned from his medical leave, sans one bullet-damaged earlobe. We'd finally finished our review of the documentation. We'd painstakingly searched through Mendoza's tax filings and those of the businesses linked to him, document by document, page by page, entry by entry. But this guy knew how to cover his tracks.

We'd found no evidence. No leads. *Nada*.

Nada damn thing.

CHAPTER TWO

Caffeine Fiend

Eddie drove on, pausing at the exit to the parking lot. “Where to?”

I pulled the papers out of the manila envelope and riffled through them until I found the printed listing directions to Pokornys’ Korner Kitchen, a small Czech bakery and café located in an old section of Garland, one of the many mid-sized cities making up the sprawling Dallas suburbs.

“Central north to Loop Twelve,” I instructed.

Eddie gave me a salute. “Aye, aye, captain.”

He took a right turn out of the parking lot and in minutes we were driving north on Interstate 75, known to locals as Central Expressway, one of a dozen freeways that crisscrossed the extensive Dallas metroplex area. We had a seven-thirty appointment scheduled with Darina and Jakub Pokorny, the owners of the bakery.

Early last week, the head of the Treasury’s Criminal Investigations Department had flown in from Washington, D.C., to meet with our boss, Lu Loboinski, aka the Lobo. George Burton had asked Lu to put her top agents on the Mendoza case. She’d immediately assigned Eddie to the investigation. Eddie was one of the more senior special agents, experienced, clever, and intuitive, the *crème de la crème* of the Dallas team. As a rookie, I hardly qualified as *crème* of any sort yet. I should’ve been flattered to be put on the case. But I feared it was my skills with weaponry rather than my skills with a calculator that landed me the assignment. If ever there’d been a case that called for an agent adept with a gun, this case was it.

As far as career enhancement was concerned, this was definitely the job to be on. As for my boyfriend Brett, well, if he knew what I was up to he’d shit a brick. Maybe even a cinder block.

Before coming to work for the IRS, I’d spent several years in the tax department of Martin and McGee, a large regional accounting firm. I’d learned a lot at the CPA firm, earned a lot, too. But sitting in a cubicle day after day, week after week, year after year, sorting through paperwork and staring at a computer screen, had eaten away at me. I’d felt unsatisfied, caged, trapped. It was a good job, but it wasn’t right for me.

Of course I still dealt with a fair share of paperwork and computer screens at the IRS, but I loved the action in Criminal Investigations, hunting down clues, the thrill of the chase, the sense of purpose and justice. My job called for financial savvy, investigation expertise, and weapons proficiency, a unique skill set possessed by very few. This job was made for me.

Still, Brett worried about the risks my job posed. Who could blame him? He’d recently witnessed me cowering in a hole amid a shower of bullets and risked his own life to rescue me from certain death. Of course I’d done my best to convince him that the attack was a fluke, that the vast majority of tax evaders surrendered peacefully, that most special agents went their entire careers without facing

real danger.

But I wasn't most special agents. As Eddie'd once pointed out, something about me brought out the homicidal tendencies in people.

Forcing that ugly thought aside, I rubbed my eyes, which were beginning to feel heavy. "I sure could go for a latte."

"Not a bad idea."

Eddie took the next exit and pulled into the drive-thru of a twenty-four-hour coffeehouse. New York isn't the only city that never sleeps. Dallas doesn't doze, either. "The usual?"

"Yep."

The barista at the drive-thru opened the window, releasing the invigorating aroma of French roast. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "Mmm."

Eddie placed our order. "Small coffee. Black." Eddie was a purist. I was anything but. "And a large caramel latte. Extra whipped cream, heavy on the drizzle, sprinkle of cinnamon on top."

Just the way I liked it. Eddie knew me well. I handed Eddie a ten from my wallet. "My treat."

When we received our drinks, I removed a dark-skinned doll from one of the cup holders. "Nice job on Barbie's hair," I said, holding up the doll. One of Eddie's girls had pulled the doll's hair up into a ponytail on the top of her head and the black locks cascaded down on all sides of the doll's head, making her look like a palm tree.

"That's not Barbie," Eddie said. "That's Christie. Barbie's black BFF."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. My girls set me straight on that right away."

I tossed the doll into the backseat. "Girls'll do that for ya'." I sipped my hot drink. Yum. I could live on these things.

Eddie stuck his cup in the holder, pulled out of the drive-thru, and headed back onto the freeway.

My thoughts returned to the case, to Mendoza and the earlier agent he'd bought off. What kind of guy would turn like that? Give up his job, his reputation, his life for money? Nick Pratt had to be one sorry-ass son of a bitch. "Hey, Ed. I was wondering. How well did you know Nick Pratt?"

Eddie hesitated a moment, seeming to consider his words. "Nick and I partnered on several big cases, had a beer together after work every now and then. He covered for me when the twins were born."

I snorted. "You make him sound like a nice guy." As if. Nice guys don't sell out.

"You would've liked him. He was a country boy, wore snakeskin cowboy boots with his business suits. Didn't take crap from anybody." Eddie cut his eyes my way. "He was a lot like you, only with more ___"

"Guy junk?"

"I was going to say more muscle and less mascara. He could handle a gun almost as good as you could, too."

I offered a derisive snort. "Nobody handles a gun as good as me." They didn't call me the Ann Oakley of the IRS for nothing.

Eddie rolled his eyes. "I said 'almost.'" He stopped talking for a moment and looked solemnly out his window as if looking for answers to questions that had none. "When Pratt disappeared, Lu told the rest of us he'd turned in his resignation. Claimed the stress of the job got to him."

"Did that seem odd to you?"

"Odd? Yeah. He was smart as they come. Hardworking, too. But he could be a little intense at times, so we bought the story. Figured he'd burned himself out. It happens." Eddie's jaw flexed as he

clenched angry teeth. “But I can’t believe he turned on us.”

“Guess you never can tell, huh?”

Eddie turned back to me then, our eyes locking. “People aren’t always who they seem to be.”

CHAPTER THREE

Nice Buns

Twenty minutes later, our nerves buzzed with caffeine as Eddie and I pulled into the cracked asphalt parking lot next to the bakery. We climbed out of his minivan, lugging our briefcases with us.

Pokornys' Korner Kitchen was clearly a mom-and-pop—or should I say *matka-and-tata?*—operation. The redbrick storefront was narrow with plate-glass windows bearing white eyelet curtains. Their posted hours were from six A.M. to three A.M., their market primarily the breakfast and lunchtime crowd. A sign saying SORRY WE MISSED YOU! sat in the front window next to a cardboard clock with red plastic hands noting the bakery would reopen at six o'clock the following morning.

The front porch light flickered in the evening dusk as we approached the door. Although the seating area at the front of the café was dark, a light shone through an open doorway leading into the kitchen and storage areas at the rear. Moving shadows indicated people working in the back.

We stepped up to the door and Eddie rapped on the glass. A short, plump woman poked her head out of the backlit doorway inside. She gave us a wave, set aside her broom, and headed toward us. As she unbolted and opened the door, the warm, enticing scents of cinnamon and vanilla greeted us. Apparently the couple was getting a head start on the morning's baking.

Darina Pokorny was an attractive woman in her early fifties, with a round face and pink cheeks. Her blond hair bore undertones of white, her short curls springing from her head like a pack of frisky poodles. She wore white cotton pants and a long-sleeved white shirt covered by a red-and-white checkered apron that, in turn, was covered by powdered sugar and smudges of what appeared to be lemon cream filling.

Mrs. Pokorny flipped on the lights and offered a pleasant but cautious smile. "Come in, please." Her Czech accent was still thick despite more than two decades in Texas.

I stepped through the door. Before me stood a lighted glass-front display case containing cookies and cakes, pastries and pies, tarts and tortes. Some were slathered in chocolate, others oozed vanilla cream. Sugar crystals sparkled, glazes glistened. It was all I could do not to rush to the case and press my face to the glass.

Should've had more than a latte for dinner.

"Down, girl," Eddie said from behind me. I swear the guy could read my mind.

Forcing my eyes from the display case, I stuck out my hand to Mrs. Pokorny. "Tara Holloway," I said by way of introduction.

"And Eddie Bardin," my partner said from behind me, likewise extending his hand.

After we shook hands, Mrs. Pokorny directed us to one of the red vinyl booths. "Make yourselves comfortable."

"Thanks." I slid into one side of the booth, Eddie slid in after me, and my gaze slid back to the

refrigerated case. A pastry on the bottom shelf oozed thick purple goo. Grape jelly? Blueberry filling? Blackberry jam? Couldn't tell for sure. Regardless, the thing looked delicious.

"Jakub?" Mrs. Pokorny called back to her husband. Since she spoke in her native tongue, I wasn't sure what she said next. The only part I understood was "IRS."

A few seconds later, Jakub Pokorny emerged from the back room and joined us at the table. He, too, was dressed in white, including his apron. Like his wife, he bore a sturdy build, fair skin, and fair hair. Unlike his wife, he wore a burr haircut, a thick mustache, and a St. Christopher medallion around his neck. Some believed such medallions would keep the wearer safe. I wasn't usually superstitious, but, under the circumstances, figured the medallion couldn't hurt.

Jakub nodded to me and Eddie as he took his seat.

I nodded back. "Good to meet you, Mr. Pokorny. You two have a nice place here."

The Pokornys smiled, obviously proud of their little bakery. And rightfully so. They'd built the business themselves from scratch. According to the information Burton had provided, the couple had left their homeland shortly before the Berlin Wall fell and the Velvet Revolution put an end to communism in Czechoslovakia. They'd been in the U.S. just long enough to settle in and squeeze out a couple of children. They chose to stay here to raise their family rather than tear up their newly formed roots and return to Europe.

On the wall above the booths hung framed recipes written in both Czech and English, including one for *palacinky*, which, according to the translation, was a type of Czech crepe. Large photographs of Prague landmarks, including two identified by hand-lettered tags as Prague Castle and Saint Vitus Cathedral, hung on the wall behind the display cases.

Another frame contained a dollar bill, the first the bakery had earned, alongside a photograph showing a smiling Darina and Jakub in their bakery garb with their arms around the shoulders of their now-grown son and daughter. Both of the children were fair skinned and fair haired like their parents. Their son sported a green-and-gold Dallas Stars jersey, their daughter an excess of eyeliner, skintight jeans, and a low-cut tee. All-American kids.

Mr. Pokorny's thick brows pulled together as he folded his hands on the tabletop. "Is there a problem? We thought everything was settled now."

"No. No problem," I reassured them. "We just had some questions about your loan." And about the fruit tart calling to me from the middle row of the glass case. "Is that lemon cream or custard filling the tart with the kiwi on top?"

"Lemon cream," he said.

A soft sigh escaped me.

During a recent routine audit, the auditor had noticed the Pokornys' interest deductions seemed unusually high. When asked for documentation relating to the loan, the couple produced a faxed copy of a "Loan Contract." Although the contract identified Darina and Jakub Pokorny by name, the party making the loan was identified in the documentation only as "The Lender." The signature block contained lines for Darina and Jakub's signatures but none for the lender's representative. The contract required all payments be in the form of a money order made payable to bearer and be sent to a post office box in Dallas. The contract charged an interest rate of thirty percent, far above market rates and in excess of the legal rate for loans between private parties.

When the auditor traced the Pokornys' money orders, she discovered they had not been deposited in a bank account. Rather, they'd been cashed at various check-cashing businesses in the small agricultural towns of south Texas, otherwise known as "the Valley."

What caught the attention of higher-ups in the IRS was the fact that Mr. and Mrs. Pokorny had

first approached their financial institution, North Dallas Credit Union, for a business loan. NDCU shared corporate DNA with other entities owned, at least in part, by Vicente Torres, who'd been the initial target of Nick Pratt's investigation years earlier.

All of NDCU's stock was owned by a parent company, AmeriMex Inc., which also held interests in horse-racing tracks throughout the U.S. and several *maquiladoras*, factories in Mexican border towns where labor could be obtained cheaply. Venture capitalists not involved in the day-to-day operation of AmeriMex owned a combined 49 percent interest in the company. The remaining 51 percent controlling interest was owned by Torres.

Torres was a Mexican national. American citizenship was not required to establish a business in Texas. Anyone willing to set up shop here in the Lone Star State and provide jobs and tax revenue was more than welcome. That's Southern hospitality, y'all.

Torres lived in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, a city situated just across the border from Laredo, Texas and just outside the jurisdiction of U.S. law enforcement, including the Treasury Department Criminal Investigations Division.

Muy convenient.

But Marcos Mendoza lived and worked primarily in the U.S., within our jurisdiction. Mendoza was designated in paperwork as the assistant manager of AmeriMex, a position for which he was purportedly paid a salary in the mid six figures. His reported salary was high enough to support his lifestyle in the U.S. But it wasn't nearly enough to cover the cost of the enormous mansion he owned in Monterrey, Mexico, not to mention the extensive full-time staff who ran the place.

Things didn't add up.

I eyed a chocolate drip on Mr. Pokorny's sleeve, my stomach rumbling audibly now.

"You sound hungry." Mrs. Pokorny motioned to the case. "Can we get you something?"

I thought you'd never ask.

Two minutes later, we were again seated at the table, the gooey purple pastry and fruit tart in front of me. Of course I'd paid for the treats. Didn't want to be accused of abusing my authority. Now which to try first? Eeny, meeny, meiny, mo ...

Given that my mouth was stuffed with pastry—*blueberry, mmm*—Eddie began the questioning. "It's our understanding the two of you first approached your credit union for a loan. Is that correct?"

Jakub nodded. "Yes. We needed eighty thousand dollars. But the credit union would not give a loan to us." He explained they'd needed the funds to replace their industrial ovens, refrigerators, and display cases, all of which were outdated and not heating or cooling properly.

The loan officer at the credit union denied the loan due to a lack of collateral or consistent income to cover the loan payments. The Pokornys' home and shop were mortgaged, their retirement and investment accounts held only nominal balances, and, thanks to the sluggish economy, their bakery business was barely hanging on. It was no wonder their loan application had been refused. No legitimate financial institution would take such a risk.

I swallowed. My God, the thing was delicious! These people should sell franchises. "After your credit union turned you down, did you apply for a loan at any other banks?"

Jakub shook his head. "We thought if the place where we kept our accounts would not lend to us, we would have even less hope elsewhere."

Eddie jumped back in now. "So how did you end up getting the loan?"

Jakub nervously twisted the end of his mustache. "Just a few days after the credit union turned us down, we received a call from a man who said he could help us."

"Did he tell you his name?" I asked.

“Yes,” Jakub said. “His name was John Smith.”

~~John Smith. Sheez. Why didn't crooks come up with more interesting aliases? Like maybe Isai Steele, I. Steele for short. Now there's a good alias for a crook. Or maybe Rip Yuoff. If these crooked artists were smart enough to set up complicated loan transactions, the least they could do is show a little imagination when it came to their imaginary identities.~~

Eddie and I exchanged glances. Presumably there was a connection between the loan application at the credit union and the subsequent phone call from the alleged “John Smith.” How else would the caller have known the Pokornys needed some quick cash?

Darina leaned forward. “We were afraid we would have to close the bakery. When Mr. Smith said he could loan us the money, it was a godsend.” She raised her hands and looked heavenward. “He saved our business.”

Mrs. Pokorny's comment highlighted the problem with loan sharks. They never seemed like sharks at first, more like lifeguards tossing out a ring to save a drowning victim from going under the waves. It wasn't until the borrower got behind on payments that the shark's pointed teeth came out and began to tear bits of flesh from its victims.

“How is your business doing now?” Eddie asked.

“Not much profits,” Jakub said, “but we are able to pay our bills.” Shortly after obtaining the loan, he explained, they'd had the good fortune of landing a deal to supply kolaches to a local grocery store chain. They were managing to stay afloat. At least for now.

When we'd obtained as much information as we could from the couple, we thanked them for their time and stood to go.

“One last thing,” Eddie said, meeting their eyes to ensure they were paying close attention. “It's very important you tell no one that we've been here. Understand?”

The couple nodded.

Eddie and I left with their promise to keep mum and a half-price day-old apple strudel.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Pressure Builds

I arrived at the office Friday morning with another extra-whip, heavy-drizzle caramel latte in my hand. As I stepped off the elevator, Lu's secretary, Viola, glanced up from her desk down the hall, her gray curls bobbing. She eyed me over her plastic-rimmed bifocals, keeping an eagle eye on the office activity, as always. I gave her a smile and a wave, and headed to my office.

Josh Schmidt, one of my fellow special agents, passed me on his way up the corridor. Josh wore his standard attire of khaki pants and blue button-down shirt. He stood just five foot five, with a deceptively cherubic face given he was such a huge pain in the ass. Yep, no amount of Preparation H could counter the effects of *Little Lord Fauntleroid*.

Though the computer geek could interface with technology like a pro, his people skills were sorely lacking. We other agents tolerated Josh only because he had the best cyber-sleuthing skills around. The guy could crack computer code in less time than the rest of us could crack our knuckles. But his condescending attitude, competitive nature, and sarcastic jabs made the rest of us want to crack his skull.

"Morning, Josh," I managed. Just because I didn't like the guy didn't mean I wouldn't be cordial. I'd been raised in the South, after all, where we're taught to always be pleasant. Or were we taught to be hypocrites? Fine line there.

His eyes cut to my briefcase. No doubt he was trying to summon X-ray vision so that he could read the documents inside. *My case is bigger than your case*, I wanted to say. *Neener-neener, you little wiener.*

"Uh, yeah," he said, when he realized I was eyeing him. "Morning."

I continued on to my office and slid into my wobbly desk chair, dropping my purse into the bottom desk drawer. The red voice-mail light on my phone blinked, alerting me to an awaiting message. I dialed into the system and listened.

The message was odd and cryptic. Loud techno dance music in the background and a deep male voice that muttered a single, frustrated word. "Fuck."

Strange. Must've been a wrong number.

I pulled out a pen and legal pad, ready to get to work. Unfortunately, when I went to write the date on the pad, the tip tore at the paper. Out of ink. Not a good start to the day.

I rummaged around in my pencil cup, then my desk, then my purse. Not a pen to be found. Dang.

The supply cabinet was way at the other end of the floor so, being the lazy ass that I was, I'd taken to pilfering supplies from the unoccupied office across the hall, an office that had once belonged to the infamous Nick Pratt. I headed across the corridor and pulled open the top drawer of the desk. Empty. Looked liked I'd already cleaned it out. The second drawer contained a squishy blue stress ball.

and a half-used stack of sticky notes, both of which could come in handy. I slipped them into my pocket. In the bottom drawer I hit the jackpot. An entire box of ballpoint pens.

Also in the drawer was a box of business cards. I opened the box and fished out a card.

Nicholas Pratt
Senior Special Agent

Humph. *Double Agent* was more like it.

I glanced around the room, wondering what else I might find. Surely the room had been thoroughly searched after his defection, so I didn't hold out much hope of finding anything important. Still, maybe something here would yield a clue about Nick, why he'd traded a good job and a good life for a dirty bribe, why no one had seen it coming.

The desk blotter calendar was three years out of date. I flipped through the oversized pages. When handwritten notes appeared on the top page, the following pages were pristine, unused.

His bookshelves held only the standard special agent manuals and a dusty Dirk Nowitzki bobblehead doll. Looked like Nick was a Mavericks fan. Were NBA games broadcast in Mexico? I hoped so. Would serve the guy right to miss out on them.

In the credenza I found an aluminum baseball bat and a blue nylon duffel bag. The duffel bag contained a pair of athletic shorts, a pair of tennis shoes, a T-shirt that read IRS-CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIONS, and a jock strap. Size extra large according to the tag. Not surprising. Accepting a bribe and fleeing the country knowing you'd become a federal fugitive would take some pretty balls.

I returned the items to the bag, zipped it up, and closed the credenza.

Nothing I'd found had told me anything useful about Nick. But now I wondered something else. Nick had been gone for three years. Why hadn't Lu reassigned the office to another agent?

* * *

I spent the rest of the morning on the phone, speaking with the managers of the check-cashing businesses where the Pokornys' money orders had been cashed. The calls proved to be a total waste of my time. Given that money orders are prepaid and virtually risk free, the check-cashing businesses had been more than happy to cash them, for an exorbitant fee, of course. Moreover, because the money orders were payable to "bearer," meaning anyone possessing them had the legal right to cash them, the staff had taken only a cursory glance at the identification proffered by the customer. No permanent record had been kept.

A dead end.

Dang.

* * *

I met my best friend, Alicia, at a downtown sandwich shop for lunch. While I was a part-time bargain-basement sophisticate, Alicia was überchic, a platinum blonde with a short, angular haircut and a cutting-edge sense of style. Today she wore a royal blue satin blouse with a dark gray pencil skirt, along with a pair of pointy-toed black stilettos. Her look was polished and professional, yet feminine. I looked professional in my gray suit, too, though far less feminine. Hard to look too girly when your clothing has to accommodate a hip holster. And since I never knew when I might have to chase down a suspect, rubber-soled loafers were more my style.

I glanced up at the menu board and debated. Soup, sandwich, or salad?

~~Alicia stepped up to the counter in front of me. “Bottled water. Garden salad. Fat-free ranch dressing.”~~ Always watching her figure.

“I’ll have the same,” I said, “but not with that icky fat-free stuff. Give me regular dressing.”

Alicia cut her eyes my way. “You’ll regret that decision someday.”

“Maybe,” I said, “but it won’t be today.”

Alicia and I had met in college, in our first accounting class, and instantly hit it off. When we graduated, we’d both taken jobs at Martin and McGee. Though I’d felt stifled and had since moved on to my special agent position at the IRS, Alicia thrived at the CPA firm. She’d recently been promoted to a junior management position, a job which came with a cushy office and a twenty-percent pay increase.

We paid for our lunch, took our trays, and found seats at a table in a corner.

The skin under my cast itched like crazy. I grabbed the plastic fork that came with the salad and eased it under the plaster near my thumb, scratching at my skin. Relief. *Aaah*. Unfortunately, the fork became stuck inside my cast. After several attempts, I managed to fish it out, though two plastic tines broke off and eluded me. I retrieved another fork from the bin on the counter to eat my lunch.

When I sat down again, Alicia looked at me across the table and frowned. She plucked two slices of cucumber off her salad and held them out to me. “Here. Put these over your eyes. They’ll help with those dark circles.”

“That bad?”

She nodded.

I took the cucumbers from her, but dipped them in my ranch dressing and ate them instead.

She spread her napkin in her lap. “When was the last time you got a full night’s sleep?”

The night before the Lobo and George Burton assigned me to the Mendoza case. “About a week ago.”

Alicia didn’t push me further. She knew I was working a highly sensitive case and couldn’t share the details. “When this case is over,” she said, “I’m taking you to the Four Seasons spa for a massage and facial. My treat.”

“Wow, thanks.”

“I’m a junior manager now. I can’t be seen with you looking like death warmed over.”

I shot her a look across the table. “Feeling a little less grateful now.”

She smiled for a brief moment then her face scrunched in concern. “Be careful, okay? I don’t want to have to find a new best friend.”

I didn’t want her to have to find a new best friend, either.

* * *

The scent of menthol cigarettes and industrial-strength hairspray registered with my nose a split second before my boss stepped into my office later that afternoon. Lu sported a strawberry-blond beehive, heavy on the strawberry, along with false eyelashes over blue-shaded lids and bright orange lipstick. Her outfit today was a sixties-style pantsuit with a Nehru jacket in size twenty-two Velveteen colored velveteen.

Though Lu’s fashion sense was questionable, her other mental faculties remained acute. She reached the minimum retirement age and had previously planned to retire once the department collected a hundred million under her watch. But when Eddie and I had recently helped her reach her goal, she’d changed her mind, decided she wasn’t yet ready to throw in the towel.

Lu closed my office door behind her. "Tell me you've got some solid leads on Mendoza."

"Wish I could, Lu." I told her about our interview with the Pokornys, my futile calls to the check-cashing facilities.

She chewed her lip in an uncharacteristic act of anxiety. It wasn't like the Lobo to worry. But the Mendoza investigation wasn't the typical case, either. No doubt George Burton was breathing down her neck, wanting it resolved ASAP.

"They found more of Andrew Sheffield," she said, pulling a cigarette and lighter out of her pocket. "His left hand turned up in the weeds near a rest stop outside Abilene."

"Oh God." I put a hand over my mouth, hoping my salad would stay down. If not, well then it really didn't matter that I hadn't opted for the fat-free dressing, did it? "How'd they know it was him?"

"Wedding ring. His initials were engraved on the inside."

When Andrew Sheffield vowed to love his wife *till death do us part*, I'll bet he never realized just how short that time would be.

Lu stuck the cigarette between her lips and clamped down, speaking out of the side of her mouth. "I don't want any more dead bodies on my conscience."

"Sheffield's death isn't your fault, Lu."

"Oh yeah?" she spat. "Tell that to Sheffield's widow. Tell that to his little boy. If we'd taken Mendoza down three years ago, Sheffield would still be alive." Lu lit the cigarette, took a deep drag, and then pointed it at me. "If you and Eddie don't nail that bastard soon, the next body's on your heads."

The stomach that had just threatened to spill its contents now shrank into a tight, painful ball. "Great motivational speech."

Lu ignored my sarcasm. "I'm counting on you, Holloway. Mendoza hasn't just cost the government a bunch of money, he cost me the best special agent I ever had."

"Gee, thanks," I replied dryly.

"Don't get your panties in a wad. You're better with a gun, but Pratt was a workhorse. Smart as a whip, too. Brought in more money for this agency than any other agent in history."

Ironic, then, that he'd been bought off. I wondered if Mendoza would try to buy off me and Eddie, too, if he got wind we were after him. No amount of money was worth sacrificing my personal integrity, of course. Still, I was curious what personal integrity was going for these days.

"How much do you think Mendoza paid Pratt?" I asked Lu. "Five million? Ten? More?"

She shrugged. "Don't have a clue."

"If Nick was willing to leave his entire life behind, it must've been a shitload." Hmm. What was the exchange rate between shit and U.S. dollars?

Lu looked down at the floor and took a slow, sad drag on her cigarette.

I eyed her. "Seems like you took his leaving personally."

Lu was quiet for a moment. When she spoke, her voice was unusually soft. "You have no idea just how personally, Tara."

Nick Pratt had been assigned to the earlier investigation after U.S. customs agents made an interesting discovery during a routine border stop in Laredo. The agents found a large stash of Mexican five-hundred peso bills concealed in a box among others filled with children's foot pajamas. The pj's had been produced at one of the *maquiladoras* that cropped up in Mexico's border towns after the enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994. In the preceding presidential election debates, Texan candidate Ross Perot had warned voters that, if passed, the pending bill would result in a "giant sucking sound" of jobs heading south of the border. Bill Clinton was elected and had promptly signed the controversial bill. Then again, President Clinton was known

for sucking sounds.

The *maquiladora* factories were supposed to be a win-win situation, bringing jobs and money into Mexico while eliminating tariffs and thus keeping prices down for products imported into the U.S. Instead, the end result had been the exploitation of Mexican workers paid so little they were forced to live in slums, with the bulk of the profits going into the pockets of the factory owners on both sides of the border. The rich get richer ...

After the cash was found hidden among the pajamas, the customs agents did some research into the driver's purported destination only to discover an abandoned warehouse was located at the address. After further interrogation, the driver admitted he'd been provided the warehouse address as a decoy and had been told he'd receive a call on his cell phone later that afternoon with instructions on where to deliver the shipment.

When the call came in that afternoon, the agents intercepted it. Unfortunately, the call came from an untraceable prepaid cell phone. The caller asked the driver for his current location and, when the driver hesitated, the caller realized things were not right and terminated the call without giving a delivery address.

The lackey driving the truck claimed to have no knowledge he'd been transporting cash. After several hours of interrogation, the agents determined he was telling the truth. Officials did more digging and linked the pajama shipment to a Mexican textile company owned by Vicente Torres. A little more digging linked Torres to AmeriMex in Texas. Unfortunately, Torres was on the wrong side of the border and there wasn't enough evidence to arrest anyone in the U.S. The Mexican authorities were notified, though Torres asserted his innocence, claiming the driver must have been transporting the cash for someone else.

The pajamas and funds were seized. No one showed up to claim them. The sleepers were sent to a local children's charity, while the funds went into the U.S. coffers. *Muchas gracias*. Customs tipped off the IRS about the questionable cash and Pratt had been discreetly dispatched to investigate whether AmeriMex was engaged in financial shenanigans.

Pratt discerned that, despite being listed only as an assistant manager for AmeriMex, Marco Mendoza was really the head honcho of a vast financial enterprise. Unfortunately, that tidbit of information was all Pratt shared with the Lobo. He'd told Lu that he'd need to go undercover inside AmeriMex to obtain proof. He'd subsequently checked in a few times, indicated he was building a solid case, then *poof!* The traitorous asshole disappeared quicker than a man served with a paternity suit.

Weeks later Pratt mailed back his laptop and cell phone from Cancún. But without the cooperation of Mexican authorities, there wasn't much else the IRS could do at that point.

So here we were, trying to resurrect a case against Mendoza, to rise like a phoenix from the ashes of the previous investigation, to boldly go where one man had gone before. The only viable lead George Burton had been able to provide us was the Pokornys, and the only lead the Pokornys provided us was the post office box to which they'd sent their loan payments.

"Eddie's gone to the post office," I told Lu. "Maybe he'll come up with something."

"Keep me informed," Lu said. "I want daily reports. Got it?"

"Got it."

The Lobo turned to leave.

"Lu?"

She turned back.

"How about we go ahead with your party?" I said. "Even though you've decided not to retire"

collecting a hundred million is still reason to celebrate. It's a huge achievement." Not to mention the fact that I'd called the country club and been told we'd forfeit our sizable deposit if we canceled.

"What the hell," Lu said. "Wouldn't be right to be the pooper of my own party, would it?"

I was glad she agreed to go ahead with the celebration. Something told me we'd need something fun to look forward to.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lie with Me, Not to Me

Brett and I had standing dates each Friday night, though ironically, these standing dates usually ended with us lying down. We'd been dating for a few weeks and suffered a rough patch when I'd suspected he might be involved with a con artist. Thankfully, I'd been mistaken.

Brett wasn't perfect. He sometimes mumbled in his sleep and liked to watch golf on television. Somebody kill me, please! He also didn't understand my enthusiasm for bargain hunting and target practice. But we shared a fondness for furry four-footed creatures, ethnic foods, and offbeat British comedies, not to mention incredible chemistry. Not a bad start for a relationship, right?

Brett had suggested dinner and a movie out tonight, but I'd countered with pizza and a DVD in. After the long hours I'd put in all week, I wasn't sure I'd be able to stay awake for an entire movie and if I were going to fall asleep I'd rather it be on Brett's couch than in a public theater where I might drool all over myself.

I drove to Brett's house and let myself in with the key he kept hidden under the decorative birdhouse on his front porch. Two wagging tails greeted me. One belonged to Napoleon, a small Scottie mix, the other to Reggie, a pit bull–Rottweiler cross Brett took in after I busted the dog owners and got stuck with the enormous beast. Given his large size and muscular build, Reggie looked scary as hell, but Brett's dotting care had transformed him from a wary and intimidating watchdog to a sweet, spoiled-rotten mutt.

I gave each of the dogs a quick scratch behind the ears and took them out to the backyard for a potty break. After changing into my comfy red nightie, I flopped onto Brett's overstuffed sofa, dug my cell phone out of my purse, and checked the screen. No messages. Eddie hadn't yet called to tell me how things had gone at the post office. Either it had been another dead end or he was still there.

As long as I had the phone out, I figured I might as well call my parents. It had been a few days since we'd last talked. I dialed my mom and dad's number in Nacogdoches, my hometown back in East Texas.

Mom answered, her voice coated with a sugary Southern accent. "Well, hi there, sweetie."

Given that I'd been a rough-and-tumble tomboy during my growing years and was now a gun-toting, ass-kicking federal agent, "sweet" wasn't a word most people associated with me. But my mother would forever view her only daughter through rose-colored glasses.

We chatted briefly. After she lamented the heat that had scorched her heirloom tomato plants, I told her about my upcoming trip with Brett to Florida, describing the beautiful chiffon dress I bought but neglecting to mention the sexy lingerie. No sense shattering those rose-colored glasses.

"Be careful if you go into the ocean," she warned. "Your father's been watching shark week on the Discovery Channel. Those creatures like to scare me to death."

I didn't fear the predatory fish nearly as much as the loan shark Eddie and I were after. But, again, no sense telling my mother something that would just cause her to worry. "I'll be careful."

"I'd love to come out and see you," she said. "Maybe do a little shopping?"

Though Nacogdoches offered a relaxing pace and a small-town sense of community, it offered little in the way of retail. Mom routinely made the drive to Dallas, her frequent visits allowing us to bond while shopping for clothing, jewelry, and assorted housewares.

"I'll check my schedule and get back to you." I hated to put my mother off, but until Eddie and I figured out how we'd bring Mendoza down I had no idea when I'd have time for a visit.

Mom begged off then. She and Dad were off to a dance at the VFW hall, where they reigned as the king and queen of swing. Their jitterbug wasn't bad, either.

"Y'all have fun."

"Always do." Mom made a kissing sound in the phone. "You take care, hon."

As I ended the call, I noticed my cell phone battery was nearly dead. I also noticed the dogs looking up at me with hunger in their eyes.

"Who wants some dinner?"

Their wagging tails said what their mouths couldn't—*we do!*

I carried my phone into the kitchen and plugged the device into an outlet beside the microwave to charge. Then I opened a can of dog food and split it between Napoleon and Reggie.

A half hour later, the dogs and I were curled up together on the couch when Brett arrived with warm, delicious-smelling pizza. With his sandy brown hair, sage-green eyes, and lean athletic build, Brett could certainly turn a woman's head. He'd turned mine. And it hadn't since turned elsewhere.

He shifted the pizza box in his hands and gave me that special smile, the one where he cocked his head, locked his gaze on mine, and just slightly raised one side of his mouth. "Hi, honey. I'm home."

"How was your day, dear?"

It was a silly, clichéd spiel, but what the heck. What we lacked in originality we made up for in sincerity.

Brett slid out of his suit jacket. "My day was long and hard."

"Long and hard, huh?" I pointed a finger at him. "That's just how I like you."

He gave a lustful groan.

"I'll give you two minutes to get out of that suit and into me." I lifted my nightgown and playfully flashed my lace panties.

He all but threw the pizza box on the coffee table and dashed to his bedroom to change out of his work clothes.

I wanted Brett, sure, but I wasn't quite the sex-crazed skank I may seem to be. The fact was, I was tired to the bone and if we didn't get the sex out of the way first I was afraid I'd be too tired later. Wouldn't be right to leave my man disappointed, would it? Besides, he might be offended if I fell asleep and started snoring in the middle of the act. This stretch was the longest we'd gone without making love since our first time a few weeks ago. I hoped Eddie and I would bust Mendoza soon. The case was costing me too much sleep and seriously impeding my orgasm quota.

While Brett changed out of his suit, I grabbed a couple of plates and napkins from the kitchen, as well as two stem glasses and a bottle of our favorite wine from the stash he kept in his pantry. I'd learned to manage pretty well despite the darn cast on my wrist. Nothing was going to slow Tara Holloway down.

Napoleon and Reggie had followed me back into the kitchen, and now sat side by side on the tile floor, patiently watching me with their big, brown eyes, their expressions hopeful. *Arf?* asked

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