

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# RHONDA POLLERO

IF ONLY EBAY  
SOLD CLUES . . .



# Slightly Irregular

A NOVEL

"Witty, upbeat.  
A great read with

all-around entertaining. . . .  
plenty of attitude!"

—Janet Evanovich on *Knock Off*

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“If you like Stephanie Plum, you will love Finley Anderson Tanner.” —*Fresh Fiction*

**Kidnapping is so last season.**

Couture-conscious paralegal Finley Anderson Tanner knew it was risky to break her cardinal shopping rule—never pay full price—for a last-minute date with her gorgeous new boss, but the hidden costs of her little black dress have put her whole life in the red. After the romantic evening turns into a disaster thanks to impossibly sexy and utterly infuriating private eye Liam McGarrity, Finley finds herself down two thousand dollars and out two potential boyfriends. Naturally, she turns to eBay.

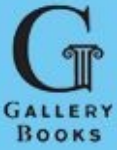
To help pay off her debt, she tries to sell the vintage pageant jewelry she received for doing law partner Ellen Lieberman a favor. But when Finley’s best friend abruptly disappears while helping to wrap up the auction, Finley fears the worst. Does frumpy Ellen have a sinister double life as a beauty queen? Is the auction’s high bidder, Tiara64, more suspicious than her name suggests? Can Finley possibly hunt for clues without irresistible Liam swooping in to bail her out of trouble ... again?

Rhonda Pollero’s hilarious new novel featuring fashionista crime-fighter Finley Anderson Tanner is the must-have mystery of the season.



“Amateur detection and designer shopping on a discount play equally entertaining roles ... in Pollero’s addictively acerbic series.” —*Booklist*



**RHONDA POLLERO** is the *USA Today* bestselling author of *Knock Off*, *Knock 'Em Dead*, and *Fat Chance*—the first three novels in her delightful series featuring amateur sleuth Finley Anderson Tanner. A perpetual student with six degrees from seven colleges, she lives in south Florida with her family, where she is currently writing the next Finley book, *Bargain Hunting*. Visit her online at [RhondaPollero.com](http://RhondaPollero.com).



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COVER DESIGN BY JAE SONG

**Browse the critics' glowing praise for *USA TODAY* bestselling author RHONDA POLLERO and her "totally entertaining"\* Finley Anderson Tanner novels**

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“A fun, fascinating journey you won’t want to miss.”

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—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“Bright, breezily written.... Full of humor and quirky characters.”

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# SLIGHTLY IRREGULAR



Rhonda Pollero



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Gallery Books  
A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.  
1230 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, NY 10020  
[www.SimonandSchuster.com](http://www.SimonandSchuster.com)

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First Gallery Books trade paperback edition April 2012

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Designed by Jaime Putorti

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pollero, Rhonda.

Slightly irregular / Rhonda Pollero. -- First Gallery Books trade paperback edition.

pages cm

1. Legal assistants--Fiction. 2. Law firms--Fiction. 3. Missing persons--Fiction. 4. Beauty contestants--Crimes against--Fiction. 5. Dating (Social customs)--Fiction. 6. West Palm Beach (Fla.)--Fiction. I. Title.

PS3616.O5684S58 2012

813'.6--dc23

201104828

ISBN 978-1-4165-9073-6 (pbk)

ISBN 978-1-4391-0099-8 (ebook)

*To Katie Scarlett, who reminds me to love; for Bob, who reminds me to laugh; for Amy, who reminds me to sit in the chair; and for Donna who reminds me to hyphenate everything.*



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**SLIGHTLY IRREGULAR**

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*I looked, I liked, I bought.*



*Freedom was three hours away.* Technically, only two hours and fifty-one minutes of work time, if I subtracted any time I'd be away from my desk. So, five minutes to answer my summons from the fourth floor; two minutes to go through the motions of straightening my office—we have a cleaning crew and it isn't me; then two minutes to gather my belongings, hit the elevator, stroll through the lobby, walk out the front door, and unlock my practically brand-new, champagne pink Mercedes CLS convertible. Since it was Friday, I might even be able to shave a few minutes off my exit plan.

Fridays are the only days of the week when Maudlin Margaret Ford, firm receptionist and all-around pain in the ass, did not get her feathers in a twist when I ducked out a few minutes early. Any other day of the week and she'd be sounding the alert to the senior partner. I could practically hear her voice in my head. "Mr. Dane! Finley left the building at four fifty-five!" Margaret was passively aggressive—with an extra order of aggressive on the side. She was a fifty-five-year-old woman with no life outside the law firm of Dane, Lieberman and Zarnowski. Technically speaking, it was not Dane, Lieberman, Zarnowski and Caprelli. It's a small but prestigious firm just off Clematis Street in West Palm Beach, where, until a few months ago, I was exclusively a trusts and estates paralegal.

The elevator door finally blinked open, and I stepped inside the small compartment. A one o'clock command to the executive floor rarely results in anything good about to happen. A summons used to have me shaking in my Jimmy Choos, but not so much now that Tony Caprelli occupied one of the partners' suites, and he was the one who'd requested my presence.

I sighed and fiddled with the cloisonné clip holding my blond hair off my face. Before leaving my office, I'd carefully checked my lipstick, added some Stila gloss, and smoothed the front of my vintage Lilly Pulitzer dress. The pale periwinkle and spring green dress with ribbon and lace accents was—if I did say so myself—one of my finest bargain moments. I'd come across it on [antiquedressing.com](http://antiquedressing.com), and talk about a find. Classic Lilly, circa 1960, with the metal zippers and original labels, is well beyond my meager means (made more meager since I was now carrying a hefty mortgage and most of my credit cards were near their limits). The catch? The hem was faded and dirty. A disaster for most women, but since I'm just shy of five-four, it was a snap for me to have the seamstress at my cleaner's turn up a new hem without destroying the line of the dress.

I'd turned bargain hunting into an art. Short of an inspection by Tim Gunn and Heidi Klum, no one—not even my best friends, would ever know that I was a walking, talking tribute to gently worn, factory-damaged, and slightly irregular. And I wanted to keep it that way.

The elevator opened into a circular lobby. *The* secretary sat sentry at her desk. She glanced up at me over the tops of her reading glasses, then pressed the button on her Bluetooth.

"Miss Tanner is here to see you," she said. "Yes, thank you." She lifted her head and met my gaze. "You may go in."

I quelled the urge to salute her, but c'mon, the woman was so stiff she'd be a natural at Buckingham Palace. We'd worked together for more than eight years and never evolved past the point of addressing each other by last names.

"Thank you, Mrs. Greenfelder," I acknowledged before pivoting to the right and heading toward Tony's office.

My heart rate climbed with each step. Tony had joined the firm a little more than a month ago, and in that short amount of time, he'd generated quite a bit of interoffice buzz. And while everyone else was buzzing, I was actually training to work at his side.

No, I didn't like balancing the continuing education classes on litigation, evidence, witne

preparation, or police procedure with the renovations on my new cottage. But I did like Tony. And not in an employer-employee way. The guy was hot and polished and, well, perfect. He was over six feet tall, with dark brown hair and eyes the color of rich imported chocolates. He wore tailored suits, monogrammed shirts, and a top-of-the-line Rolex. A perfect man with a perfect watch. What more could a woman want in a man?

A date.

I sucked in a breath and let it out slowly. Therein lies the rub. I'm almost thirty, not thirteen. I don't know when a man is interested in me. I've caught Tony watching me when he thought I wasn't looking. His fingers have brushed the back of my hand a few too many times for it to be accidental. He's interested. But he's also my boss. There are times when sexual harassment laws totally get in the way of good old-fashioned get-to-know-you dating.

Maybe I should slip into the ladies' room quickly, paint ASK ME OUT in liner on my lids, and then spend the whole meeting with my eyes closed. Naw, too desperate. Then again, I am on the precipice of desperation. Since I'd dumped Patrick after wasting two years of my life on him, the only men in my life were the ex-convict who was still doing some minor finishing work on my house, and Sam, my dear, dear friend, who had worse luck with men than I did.

Oh, and Liam.

Kinda.

A shiver ran along my spine as I conjured his image. Liam McGarrity is everything I never wanted in a man. Very little polish and way too much testosterone. But one look into those piercing blue eyes and I start to think I can rework him into the man of my dreams. The practical part of me knows better. The libidinous part of me doesn't care.

The only way I've been able to avoid the lure of those incredible eyes has been to keep my distance and screen my calls. So far, I've been successful, but who knows what will happen the next time we have to work together? Liam does a lot of the PI work for my firm. I won't be able to avoid him forever. I'll worry about that when ...

"Sorry," Tony said as his hands bracketed me, keeping me from falling on my butt.

He smelled good, so good that for a second his cologne rendered me mute. Or maybe it was the feel of his large hands gripping my arms. My sweater had slipped, so the heat from his palms was against my bare skin.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, stepping back so I could pick up my sweater and the pad I'd dropped when I accidentally ran right into him. "Sorry, I must have zoned out there for a minute."

*Zoned out? I grimaced inwardly. Zoned out? Really? What kind of dumb blonde thing is that to say to your boss-slash-lust interest?*

"Not a problem," Tony said, stepping aside to allow me to enter his office first. He looked good enough to eat in a dark well-cut suit, crisp creamy shirt, and dark blue tie. Very GQ. Very much the opposite of shaggy, rumpled Liam. Both men are sexy, but they're polar opposites in appearance. Both men, however, sent my pulses racing and my libido into hyperdrive.

Tony had a great office. Used to belong to Mr. Zarnowski, but he was gone now, too bad for me. Zarnowski had liked me, unlike Vain Victor Dane, the managing partner who always treated me like some annoying insect bite he couldn't scratch but couldn't ignore. Or Ellen Lieberman. The woman—a term I'm using in the broadest possible sense—thinks I'm a slacker because I didn't go to law school. She seems to forget that I didn't *want* to go. I never wanted to be like her—working seven hours a week with no life. And in her case, no access to proper hair care. She wears her red-and-gold curls pulled back in a rubber band—doesn't even bother with a scrunchie from the dollar store. Her dresses are little more than sacks with slits, and her signature look includes those god-awful Jes-

sandals from Birkenstock. Ellen might be a great contracts attorney, but she is devoid of discernible estrogen. Still, Ellen was kind of taking me under her wing. I was her pet project of sorts. I didn't doubt that her awkward attempts at friendship were sincere. I just figured it was a new tack to get me to further my career.

I started to clear a spot for myself on Tony's couch when he reached out and placed his hand over mine. "No need. This is going to be quick."

Turning slightly so we were face-to-face, I smiled up at him. "What do you need?"

"You."

The room spun for a second as my brain tried to wrap itself around that word. "E-excuse me?"

He took my hands in his and gave a gentle squeeze. "I have tickets to *The Magic Flute* tomorrow night."

"Nothing like a Saturday night with Mozart."

Humor flashed in his eyes, and when he smiled, I was treated to a look at the near-legendary dimple on his right cheek. "Right, your mother was a singer with the Met."

"Yes, she was. Now she's a professional widow, divorcée, or bride-to-be, depending on when you catch her."

"Sorry?"

Reluctantly, I pulled away from his grasp. I waved one hand in the small space between us. "Bad joke. My mother is very fond of getting married. She just has a problem *staying* married. That said, she made sure my sister and I were exposed to opera from birth."

Why had I offered that up? Nerves, I guess. Still, it made me sound like a babbling fool. Not exactly the impression I was going for. I regrouped.

"How do you feel about *The Magic Flute*?" he asked.

"I liked the Kenneth Branagh movie version. Very stylized, like a Target commercial."

Tony glanced at his watch. "I've got to be at the courthouse in like ten minutes. Is there any chance you're free tomorrow night? I know it's short notice, but—"

"Short notice is fine."

"Great," he said on a relieved rush of breath. "Can you be at my place at about six?"

"Absolutely."

He reached into his jacket pocket and handed me a piece of paper with an address on it. I gave it a cursory glance, then tucked it under the blank pages of my legal pad.

Tony walked around to his desk and crammed some files into his briefcase. As he came around again, he gave my hand yet another squeeze. "Thanks, Finley. See you tomorrow night."

"At six," I called as he left in such a hurry that the collection of drawings piled on his desk fluttered.

I picked up the one that fell on the floor and placed it in the center of his desk. It was a pencil sketch of some sort of bird, but I didn't give it any attention. My entire brain was fixated on the knowledge that tomorrow night would be my first date with Tony.



"Just like that?" Becky asked the next morning when we met at the Gardens Mall. "No preamble, nothing?"

"Preamble?" I asked, laughing. "He wasn't writing the Constitution, he was asking me out on a date."

We were standing outside the about-to-close Crate and Barrel, our usual meeting place. And also as usual, Liv was late. And since Jane was riding with Liv, Becky and I stood chatting while we waited.

Becky and I have been friends since college. We graduated from Emory together, then Becky went



on to law school while I came back to Palm Beach and went to work for Dane-Lieberman even after I'd aced the LSATs. Becky joined the firm after earning her J.D., and I was thrilled to have my best friend back in town.

Becky works for Ellen in contracts, and until the surprise addition of a criminal specialist, everyone assumed she'd be the next and youngest-ever partner at the firm. I knew she was disappointed, but I also knew she'd get there eventually. Becky is a smart, savvy attorney, and clients love her—major clients especially. She's tall, attractive, and always put together. She's on a very bright rust-orange and amber binge right now. She wears high-end clothing in various shades of orange to set off her reddish-auburn hair. She softens the tailored look with fun, funky jewelry.

Jane, on the other hand, doesn't tone down anything. She was fifty yards away in the parking lot and I could tell it was her. I met Jane at a two-for-one gym promotion. We pretended to be friends to get the better price. The friendship lasted. My membership at the gym did not. Jane exudes sensuality. She can't help it. She has long, dark hair and a toned body that most women would kill for. Everything up top is cut low, and everything down below is hiked high. And why not? She has a perfect body and somehow manages to show skin without looking cheap. She's an accountant, though to anyone getting their first glance at her, they'd probably think she was one of the Pussycat Dolls.

Liv was with her, handing something—most likely a generous tip—to the valet attendant. Liv makes the rest of us look like trolls. She's a very successful event planner. Almost no one hosts a party or a wedding on Palm Beach without hiring Concierge Plus to deal with the details. Liv is an exotic-looking woman. She has eyes that match the ocean, clear turquoise, with midnight black hair like a modern Cleopatra. The biggest perk in knowing her—aside from the fact that she's a great friend—is she can slip us into a lot of the über-rich parties on the island.

Once the four of us were together, we made a mandatory swing through one of the mall's two Starbucks. I was so excited about my first date with Tony that I'd had a hard time sleeping. Thank God for caffeine and MSC concealer.

"He just asked you out of the blue?" Liv asked as we waited for our coffees.

"Geez! Why does that seem to surprise all of you?" I asked, minorly irritated.

Jane passed me my skinny vanilla latte. "Men aren't usually that spontaneous. Think about Tony Finley. He e-mailed, asking you to come to his office so he could ask you out? Why not go to your office?"

"Or for that matter," Becky said, "why run the risk of asking you out at work and leaving a paper trail to do it?"

"The e-mail was harmless, and what risk?" I asked.

Becky rolled her eyes. "We all know there was no risk you'd say no, but Tony didn't know that. He's a smart guy—and he is that—would call you after work so there could be no misunderstandings."

"Like?"

Becky took a long sip of her chai tea. "Like asking while at work could be construed as harassment. You could claim you felt pressured to go out with him because he's your boss."

"That's ridiculous."

Becky's green eyes bored into me. "You'd better hope Dane and Lieberman don't hear about this. Especially Ellen. She'll freak out if she thinks he's creating a hostile work environment."

"Anybody ever tell you you're a major buzzkill?" I asked.

Becky raised her hands. "Sorry I mentioned it."

"Okay," I said, happy to have that bit of unpleasantness quashed. "It's got to be black. I'm thinking something subtle, but I don't want to look like a mortician. Shoes and a clutch."

"Um," Jane began cautiously, "where does this fit into the budget we did for you?"

"Whatever I get for tonight, I'll wear to Lisa's rehearsal dinner. That cuts the cost per wearing."

half right there.”

“How many little black dresses do you have in your closet?” Liv challenged.

“Not as many as you and besides, the LBD never goes out of style.”

“And Finley never gets out of debt,” Jane grumbled.

I looped my arm through hers. “Lighten up. I’m splurging this once, then I promise to return living like mortgaged-to-the-gills Mary. Okay?”

“You’re pulling equity out of your house. You have every right to do that. I’m just telling you, my capacity as your financial planner, what I think.”

“Fine. Then be my friend, not my financial planner.”

Jane smiled. “Well, in that case, I say we go to Nordy’s and find you *the* perfect dress.”

“And shoes,” Becky said.

“And a purse, and maybe some new jewelry,” Liv weighed in.

Three hours and four lattes later, I had a stunning BCBG Max Azria, belted, one-shoulder sheath dress. It was fitted jersey and fully lined and, according to the saleswoman, required nothing but a thong.

I’d found the perfect shoes in a matter of minutes. Stuart Weitzman silk-satin platform sling back with a wrapped heel. The saleswoman raced over and grabbed the matching clutch as I yanked my debit card from my wallet. I found a stunning Judith Jack double-strand pendant necklace and chandelier earrings to go with my new ensemble, finishing it off with three skinny bangles.

As I drove home, I didn’t have buyer’s remorse so much as paid-full-price remorse. If Tony had given me a week’s notice, I could have put something together online, and even with expedited shipping, I wouldn’t have spent nearly two thousand dollars. Then again, it was worth it. If I parcelled the cost between the Tony date and the rehearsal dinner, it didn’t seem so bad. If I could think of another occasion to wear it, I could keep dropping the CPW—cost per wearing—down to a more reasonable number.

Who was I kidding? I looked, I liked, I bought.

I stopped on the way home for a polish change and a brow wax. Add another fifty dollars to my ever-growing debt. By two thirty I was on my way over the bridge to Palm Beach. Thanks to selling my soul to the devil—that would be my mother, the only living heart donor—I owned a very modest cottage on the beach. Thanks to my friend Sam, it was a showplace. It was sleek and beachy, comfortable and posh all at one time. Handyman Harold still came by almost every day to tighten something or hammer something else, but for all intents and purposes, my home renovations were finished and stunning. And had me several hundred thousand in debt. Oh, Liam helped too, but I wasn’t in the mood to give him credit for anything. Not after he’d kept Patrick’s secret. And was still taunting me about the whole “three wishes” thing. It was silly, really. Liam had come to my rescue and pulled some lame *I Dream of Jeannie* thing, telling me he was now entitled to three wishes. I figured he’d used up more than three wishes by hiding the fact that my boyfriend was cheating. Well, maybe cheating was an understatement. At any rate, I wasn’t playing.

My mother sold me a shack on primo land. I couldn’t wait to see her reaction when she finally decides to accept my standing invitation to see what I’ve done with the place. She’s currently back in Atlanta helping my sister get ready for her enormous wedding. In two weeks, Lisa will be walking down the aisle to become Mrs. David Huntington-St. John IV. Actually, she’ll be *Dr.* Mrs. David Huntington-St. John IV. Except that David is a doctor too, so I guess they’ll be Drs. David Hunt—of whom who gives a shit.

Don’t get me wrong, I adore my little sister, and I’m happy she found the man of her dreams. But her dreams are amazingly dull. David is nice enough, but he’s a nontalker and a big rich geek. Of course my mother loves him. He’s rich, he’s a doctor, and his family is old money. They are pillars of

Buckhead, the tony suburb of Atlanta. Like my sister, Lisa, David is an oncologist. He and Lisa met one of those Doctors Without Borders things.

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I'm all for humanitarianism, but do you have any idea what it's like to have to compete with a perfect sibling? Lisa went to med school. Managed to finish the first seven years of academic work in three and a half. Lisa made something of her life. My mother considers me a failure. Maybe I am uninspired, but I'm happy in my mediocrity. Lisa never looks happy. Maybe you can't be a pediatric oncologist and be happy. Who knows?

But that wasn't the real reason I resented David and found fault whenever I could. If I was being totally honest, I was suffering some sibling envy. It was bad enough to be second on my mother's list, but once David was part of the family, I'd drop down to a distant third. Hence, I kept trying to find something, anything, wrong with my sister's fiancé. So far all I'd come up with was slightly large lips. And by slightly I'm talking millimeters. But I'd take what I could get.

I lingered in my spa tub, allowing the warm water to relax me. First dates always make me tense. It's like opening a can and not knowing whether there's a diamond in the bottom or if a dozen spring-loaded fake snakes will explode out of the top.

Tony didn't impress me as the fake-snake kinda guy.

Post soak, I carefully applied my makeup, savoring every second of the anticipation building in the pit of my stomach. I wasn't looking forward to sitting through *The Magic Flute*, but imagining all the delicious ways the evening could end made the notion more palatable.

I was really pleased when I finished dressing. The only thing that would have made it perfect would have been a pink oyster-face Ladies DateJust Rolex. Unfortunately, I didn't own one. Yet.

I was well on my way, though. Since I couldn't afford the actual watch, I'd begun collecting parts on eBay. To date, I had several links, the screw-down crown, an authentic box, and a pending bid on the watch face. At my current rate, I should have all the parts for my build-it-from-scratch Rolex by the time I'm thirty-five.

Grabbing a black pashmina from my closet, I took my keys and headed out to my car. It was a beautiful night but there was no way I would sacrifice my perfectly coiffed hair by putting the top down. I punched Tony's address into the onboard GPS, and after a second a map appeared and a cheerful male voice with a touch of a British accent began giving me instructions.

I exceeded the speed limit on I-95 north since I hadn't bothered actually to look at Tony's address. I didn't realize he lived in Hobe Sound, seventeen miles north. I had eighteen minutes to make the twenty-five-minute trip.

I made it too, hitting the Bridge Road off-ramp with six minutes to spare. Making a left on Federal Highway, I went a few miles, and then followed the signs to the Falls at Lost Lake. I wouldn't have pictured Tony as a golf-course-community kinda guy, but as I scrolled through the keypad at the gate I quickly came to "Caprelli" and pressed the button.

"Yes?"

"It's Finley," I said, my heart pounding in my ears.

There was a beeping sound, and then the gate swung open like a horizontal mouth of an alligator.

The British voice told me to turn right at the stop sign, and then Tony's house was the third one down on the left.

I pulled into the driveway and parked next to a vintage red Porsche. I'd never seen it at the office, so I figured it had to be his "fun" car. I couldn't imagine being so flush with cash that I'd have a car for work and a car for recreation, but I'm sure I could get used to it.

I tucked my keys into my clutch as I walked past the garage and up a pathway to what was easily a five-thousand-square-foot house. Like all the other homes in the community, the stucco was painted a shade of beige—in this case peachy beige—and the trim was fresh and white.

I went up one tiled step, took a deep calming breath, and then stood in front of etched glass doors. I pressed the doorbell. I mentally reminded myself not to look overly excited. Be cool and collected.

I heard a playful chuckle just as the door swung open. I lowered my gaze maybe an inch and found myself looking into a pair of big chocolate brown eyes. The mini-Tony had to be the daughter, Isabella. She wore rolled-just-below-the-knee sweatpants that were turned down at the hips, and double tank tops. Her long dark hair was pulled up in a ponytail, and when she snarled at me, I saw that she had inherited her father's right cheek dimple as well. Attitude and a killer dimple—dangerous combination.

"I'm Finley. Your dad is expecting me."

I heard the giggle again. It wasn't from the daughter. Maybe she had a friend over.

Isabella rolled her eyes as the sound got closer. I looked past Isabella, expecting to find another child.

Wrong.

Very wrong.

A goddess of a woman dressed in a strapless red Prada gown came around the corner giggling in her champagne flute. Tony was right behind her, looking dapper and handsome in a tux. His eyes met mine. He scanned me up and down as all the humor drained out of his face.

I took in his uncomfortable expression, the woman dangling from his arm, and then replayed the invitation in my head:

*"Are you free Saturday night?"*

*"What do you need?"*

*"You."*

*"E-excuse me?"*

*"I have tickets to The Magic Flute tomorrow night."*

*"Nothing like a Saturday night with Mozart."*

*"Is there any chance you're free tomorrow night. I know it's short notice, but—"*

*"Short notice is fine."*

*"Great. Can you be at my place at about six?"*

*"Absolutely."*

*"Thanks, Finley. See you tomorrow night."*

*Ohgod, ohgod, ohgod.* He'd never actually asked me out. I wasn't his date. I was the freaking babysitter.

*Laughter fades; humiliation is forever.*



“Finley, meet Pepper. Pepper, Finley.”

The statuesque woman put down the champagne and dangled an arm in my direction, making impossible for me not to notice the gazillion-carat tennis bracelet on her wrist. Well, I had one thing on her: at least I didn't have a name better suited for a parakeet.

“My pleasure,” I lied, shaking her hand. “Excuse my attire, I hurried here from a private cocktail party on the island.” Kinda true, I'd had a glass of wine at my place. And I did live on the island.

The date stealer's artificially plumped lips lost a little of the curve in her superior smile.

“Have you seen *The Magic Flute* before?” I asked, fake sincerity dripping off each syllable.

“No.” She tightened her grasp on Tony's arm. “I'm looking forward to it.”

“It helps if you understand some German. The Queen of the Night's “Der Hölle Rache kocht in Meinem Herzen” is an amazing piece. It requires a range of a high F6—a true rarity on the scientific pitch notation.”

I ignored Isabella's muffled, slightly choked laugh.

“We're seeing an English version at the Kravis,” Tony supplied, steering the statue toward the door. “I should be back by midnight. Is that okay?”

I nodded. “I don't turn into a pumpkin until two a.m.”

“Night, Izzy,” Tony said as he placed a kiss on the top of his smiling daughter's head. “Behave.”

“Always,” she said, with teenage boredom. As soon as Tony and his arm candy left, Izzy glanced at me and grinned broadly. With one earbud dangling from her purple-encased iPhone, she slowly shook her head. “You like totally slammed her, and she didn't even know it. I'm going to have to try that on Lindsey Hetzler.”

“I didn't slam her.” *Much*. “I was just making polite conversation.”

“Right,” Izzy said, placing one hand on one budding hip.

“Who's Lindsey?”

“The queen bitch of the eighth grade.”

“Are you supposed to use that kind of language?”

She shrugged. “Only when my dad can't hear me.”

I tossed my clutch on a chair, noticing the decor for the first time. Midcentury modern. My guess was original Herman Miller. Unlike me, Tony didn't impress me as a knockoff kinda guy.

“Welcome to the 1950s,” Izzy said on an expelled breath. “I hope you like chrome and molded plastic.”

“Not so much,” I admitted as I tossed my pashmina on my clutch.

“Me either. But my dad had a decorator do this. It's what happens when you tell some stranger you are all minimalist and junk.”

“So what do you want to do?” I asked, spying a fifty-two-inch flat screen in the adjacent family room. Hopefully, my charge was a TV freak and I'd be able to use the computer I saw sitting on the bisymmetric glass-and-walnut table while she vegged out in front of the massive TV.

“He said you liked board games.”

“He?”

“The friend of Dad's. The hot guy with the black hair and blue eyes. He works with you guys,” she prompted. “Liam.”

“When did you talk to Liam?”

“He set Dad up with that lanky chick. He's the one who suggested my dad get you to babysit. N

that I need a babysitter. My dad still treats me like I'm three instead of thirteen."

*That bastard.* "Tonight was orchestrated by Liam?"

Izzy smiled. "You look seriously pissed."

Pissed didn't begin to describe the fury boiling in the pit of my stomach.

"You can leave. We can tell my dad something like you had a major family thing or some other excuse."

"Oh no. We're going to play board games until we get freaking carpal tunnel syndrome from throwing the dice."

She shrugged. "Whatever."

Four hours later Izzy was kicking my butt at Scrabble. Again. The kid was like a thirteen-year-old dictionary. I thought I'd finally gotten the best of her when I'd placed "camphors" on the board. What does she counter with? "Benzoxycamphors," for a flipping point total of 1,593. Apparently, it's some sort of chemical, but I had to Google it. I felt totally outclassed. Especially when we moved on to Trivial Pursuit, the Pop Culture Edition. She kicked my butt in that too, so quickly that I tossed in the pie-shaped pieces when she was beating me four to one.

"How are you at eBay?" I asked.

"But eBay isn't a board game."

"It's better than a board game," I insisted as I swiped the Scrabble tiles into their brown cotton bag and folded the Trivial Pursuit board. "It's a real competition. No benzoxycamphors bullsh... *stuff*. I'm a master, and I will dazzle you with the finer aspects of the Web site."

"I like shopping," she said, grabbing a cute Coach purse from a bar stool and pulling a matching wristlet from inside. From that, Izzy produced a credit card with her name imprinted on it. Somehow she knew she had a higher credit limit than I did and probably wasn't even close to maxing it out. Yeah, well, I had PayPal Buyer Credit.

I stood and shook my foot, which had fallen asleep during hours of sitting cross-legged on the floor. Silently, I added that to my list of reasons to find some way to make Liam's life miserable. Not just miserable. Unbearable. Painful. Excruciating.

"Have a log-in?"

She shook her head. "Nope. But I can set one up."

"Are you allowed to shop online?"

"I'm allowed to do anything but date," she whined.

"Tell me what you like."

Izzy's head dropped to one side, and she pinched her lips together. "There's a dance at school in a few weeks. Everyone says Lindsey Hetzler does a solid color theme, so I guess I'd like something totally not that."

"Betsey Johnson," I said with confidence. "Her new teen collection has an adorable pink bunny dress."

"What's that?" she asked, skeptical. "I don't want to look like a bunny."

"Come here." I quickly typed in the URL and showed Izzy the dress. "There's a pretty bow accent in the front, and it's short, which will show off your long legs."

"But it's strapless. My dad will have a coronary."

"So we get a chiffon sweater and you just leave it on until you get to the dance. He'll never know."

"Then let's buy it," she said, passing me her credit card.

"No, no, no. We look for it on eBay and save a ton of money."

"But I don't have to save money."

Jealousy washed over me. "But if you save on the dress and the sweater, you can buy the perfect shoes and a purse and still not spend as much as full retail. It's called shopping smart."

“More like shopping cheap. What if it’s been worn?” she asked, her nose scrunched.

“Then you have it cleaned. What size are you?”

“A two, I think.”

Now I was majorly jealous and feeling chubby in my size four. I satisfied myself with a mental reminder that she wasn’t done growing yet. “Create a log-in, and let’s get to work.”

We found the dress and the sweater, and I showed her how to place an initial bid, then clued her on the finer points of eBaying. The dress was a “buy it now,” but instead of the full price of four hundred twenty-eight, Izzy got it for three hundred eighty-nine. The sweater was more of a bargain. Gently worn and offered at half of the normal two hundred thirty-eight. Izzy would just have to wait the site in two days to make sure she wasn’t outbid at the last second. “To be extra careful, do you have a laptop in addition to this desktop?”

“Yeah.”

“Log in on both computers just in case one has a hiccup in the last minutes of the auction. Now for accessories.”

“This is pretty cool,” Izzy said. Her tone was now soaked in enthusiasm, and the snarl had morphed into a smile.

*Freking took long enough.*

Once we’d theoretically saved her a bundle, we went looking for shoes and found a killer pair of kitten-heeled gladiator sandals with an adorable feather accent. Of course I practically commanded her to buy the matching hobo bag, insisting that it was necessary to stash the sweater she needed to fool Tony into thinking she was wearing a more modest dress. Unfortunately, neither was on eBay, so she had no choice but to buy them off BetseyJohnson.com, where she paid close to six hundred dollars for the accessories. To make up for the extravagance, I showed her my favorite funky online jewelry store, where she found a necklace and earrings to complete her look.

“That was seriously fun,” Izzy said as she took pages out of the printer and clipped the images like paper dolls.

“And you’re sure your father won’t get pissed? I can’t afford to lose my job.”

“If he does, I’ll play the mommy card.”

I watched her, finding it hard to keep my jaw from dropping. The girl obviously had no respect for the dead.

“Get over yourself,” she groaned, obviously reading the expression on my face. “It’s hard to mourn someone you don’t even remember. I was like eleven months old or something when she died. But everyone thinks I should have like issues or whatever.”

As cold as it sounded, the girl’s logic was flawless, and if anyone could understand that feeling, it was me. We left the computer area and sat on the hideously ugly—in my opinion—mustard yellow sofa with chrome armrests. I sat at one end, kicking off my expensive shoes and tucking my legs under me. Izzy did the same with her fuzzy slippers. She looked so comfy dressed in fuchsia Victoria’s Secret Think Pink sweatpants and a pair of spaghetti-strap tanks. The bottom one was also fuchsia while the top one was a pale pink. With her jet black hair, even darker brown-black eyes, and flawless olive complexion, she was stunning. Tony would have his hands full when she got older. No wonder he didn’t want her to start dating.

“Do you have both your parents?”

I shrugged. “Not sure.”

Izzy’s Brooke Shields-like brows pulled together. “Huh?”

“My mother’s alive. My birth father is a wild card.” I’d just told an underage virtual stranger more than I shared with most of my adult friends. Great, when did a thirteen-year-old girl become my confidante?



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