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*The greater danger for most of us lies not in setting our aim too high and falling short; but in setting our aim too low, and achieving our mark. – Michelangelo*

Running out of money weeks after my life came crashing down around me and unable to convince Peter, my Soon-To-Be Ex, to sign our divorce papers – a divorce he had asked for I might add – I took the only job I could find in a bad economy with a Master's in art history and museum studies. I became the marketing director for Butterfield Funeral Homes. Making it clear to my lascivious boss that as soon as my divorce was final, I'd be leaving. Heading as far away from the Midwest as humanly possible and getting a job in the biggest museum I could find, preferably within driving distance of an ocean. It was win-win. They needed someone cheap and temporary, I needed the money.

I had other plans, so many other plans. When Peter and I first moved to Peoria for his new job almost ten months ago, we bought a cute little bungalow in less than ideal condition. It was all we could afford and I had meticulously renovated and restored it over the first six months. I had hoped to turn our showplace into a walking advertisement for my small

business idea as a project manager for other homeowners. There were a plethora of rundown bungalows and Victorian homes all over Peoria that needed tender loving care. That idea went up in the same blaze as my marriage. So now I was renovating the reputation of the local funeral home empire instead.

Butterfield had recently acquired the second largest funeral home in a three funeral home town, Suggs-Haney. This now made them the largest funeral home in Peoria and earned them the ire of many in the community. They were seen as predatory, greedy and suspect. My job was to put a compassionate, community-centered face on things. That proved to be more difficult than it sounded. Butterfield was now in the hands of Nick Butterfield, the son of Alton Butterfield, Jr. (semi-retired) and grandson of Alton Butterfield, Sr. (deceased) who founded the Butterfield conglomerate.

Nick does not have the family passion for the dead nor the family work ethic. He has dreams of being a musician. Many nights he could be found in the basement of the old Victorian mansion that houses the business – smoking a fatty and rocking out on his Gibson guitar. Luckily, the overnight guests are dead. He’s also growing a small crop in the old carriage house at the back of the property. If that weren’t enough, he has a reputation for being handsy with the help and maybe a few grieving widows.

Yup, this was the guy I had to make compassionate and respectable. Good thing I liked a challenge.

“We interviewed quite a few people for this job, TJ, but you were definitely the hottest. It’ll be nice to have a pretty

face here every morning,” he told me on my first day. “Coffee?”

“Did I mention in my interview I’m a first degree black belt?”

“You did. Think you can take me down?” he asked suggestively. To my credit, I did not slug him.

Two weeks into the job I knew I needed a raise when he told me I should wear my “skirts tighter and flirt with the old guys.” This was my penance for giving up painting.

That same day, I watched a beautiful, dark-haired man step out of a navy blue Hyundai. I was sitting in my office, a lovely windowed alcove off the main floor. It was an Impressionist dream. Full of light, the windows perfectly framed the grand porch that served as the front entrance. I had a splendid view as he walked up the front steps.

I took notice because ever since Soon-To-Be-Ex-Peter had cracked open the closet and decided to let some light in and announced, “Honey, I think I might be attracted to men, but that doesn’t mean I don’t still love you,” and then asked for a divorce, I needed a beautiful man in my life. And here he was, walking through the big hundred-year-old double doors and into the foyer.

On my first day at Butterfield, I discovered that if I opened my door a crack, I could hear everything in the foyer, hallway and reception area. This came in handy on several occasions, as I was able to anticipate the next Nick-centered public relations crisis. I was about to open said door in order to eavesdrop when there was a knock on it. I leapt like a startled cat, took a deep breath to gather myself, and opened the door to Deep Blue Eyes smiling at me.

He was easily six two, filling the doorway as he asked to come in. He was no Michelangelo's David, but then, who was? He was pretty fine on his own. He showed me his badge and I caught a glimpse of his big gun. I learned that Deep Blue Eyes was Deputy U.S. Marshal Michael Fraser. He was there to inquire about Mr. Arthur Shiedeger, a prominent member of the Peoria River Dogs minor league baseball management team. Mr. Shiedeger was currently in embalming room two, waiting for family instructions. The family was waiting on the report from the coroner. The coroner was waiting to meet with police. Seems Mr. Shiedeger was a victim of foul play.

The Marshals had Mr. Shiedeger under surveillance and were about to serve him with a felony fugitive warrant when he turned up dead. The rest of the River Dogs management team were under suspicion of racketeering, money laundering and interstate gambling. It appeared that while the River Dogs were suffering four straight years of financial losses, despite record attendance, some members of the management team were seeing record profits. The State Police had been investigating the possibility of fraud, gambling and embezzlement when Mr. Shiedeger decided to take a trip to Vegas.

While in Vegas, he met up with some not-so-nice people and engaged in alleged criminal activity. This alleged activity included expanding the sports gambling and money laundering from small-town Illinois to big-time Vegas. That's when the Marshals had to get involved. That led Marshal Fraser on the hunt for Shiedeger's killer and to my office looking for my help.

I was eager to help. He was sitting close and whatever he was wearing was intoxicating. I asked Marshal Fraser why in the world he would enlist my help, even while thinking I would be the best damn Girl Friday he had ever seen if he'd just keep smiling at me like that.

"Call me Mike," he said with a smile. "Look, it's unorthodox, I know, but I've done a little checking and you're not from around here. My guess is you have no ties and no one to gossip to about what I'm going to ask you to do."

"You've been checking up on me? Creepy."

"My job, sometimes it's creepy," he said, his eyes twinkling.

I took a deep breath to calm my overzealous endocrine system and asked him what he needed me to do.

"Watch. Take notes. Let me know who is coming and going. Who looks in on Shiedeger. Be discreet."

Okay, I was totally hooked on the idea of spying for the federal government. How insane is that? And, I got to report back to Deep Blue Eyes? Yup, this did not suck. We spent the next hour discussing the task ahead as I ignored the work piled on my desk.

I'll admit it, this was exactly what I needed to shake things up in my life. Sure, I was sorry about Mr. Shiedeger lying naked in limbo on a cold steel table, but since I had no emotional connection to him or his family, it was relatively easy to push away any remorse to the dark recesses of my mind. Remorse would have a lot of company: denial, confusion, and self-doubt were currently visiting that section.

Mike had suggested we meet at a pizza parlor near his hotel that evening so I could debrief him. Oh, look at me, I'll be doing a debriefing. Hot damn. I kept an eagle-eye out the

rest of the day, but unfortunately, with the exception of the Widow Martin coming to collect her husband's cremains, the day had been a dud. I discretely inquired about Mr. Shiedeger's disposition and was told he was in limbo for the foreseeable future. He'd been transferred to a refrigeration unit. I managed to dig through his paperwork and found who was listed as his next of kin. I was surprised to see that instead of a spouse, it was his brother. Maybe this information would be helpful to my Beautiful Marshal, but I had my doubts. I was afraid on my first day of surveillance I was neither brilliant nor successful.

At home after work, I touched up my makeup and threw on what I hoped would be a cute-casual-pizza-bar look of jeans and a pink tee. I pulled on my favorite three-inch heeled Coachella boots. I finished up with a delicate pair of silver and pink dangle earrings, stepped back and took a long look in the full-length mirror on my closet door. I might be damaged goods but I could still pull off cute and fresh. At least I had that going for me. I grabbed my leather jacket and headed to the pizza parlor on Sheridan. Over pizza and a local brew, I filled Mike in on my day.

"Not much help I'm afraid."

"It's early yet. And you've learned one of the first lessons of investigative work: tedium."

I sighed heavily. Tedium was not what I was looking for.

"Why the big sigh?" he asked as he grabbed another slice.

"Honestly? I was looking for a little excitement to distract me from my disastrous personal life."

"Careful," he said with a smile, "you might get more excitement than you can handle."