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DEAD COPY



MIDNIGHT INK
WOODBURY, MINNESOTA



*A friend is someone who knows the song in your heart
and can sing it back to you
when you have forgotten the words ...*

ONE

ANSWERING THE PHONE IS always a crapshoot . . . it's usually the electric company checking to see if I'm dead because they haven't received a payment in two months or my mother calling to remind me that I'm on a swift approach to thirty and time's a-wasting.

It's never a good call, like my dream guy ringing from the driveway or Publishers Clearing House calling to tell me they're circling the block with a big fake check for a million dollars. Although if it was one of the guys from Publishers Clearing House, he would definitely be at the top of my Dream Guy list.

The phone trilled again. From the foot of the bed, Marlowe growled low in his husky-mutt throat. I cracked open one eye. Family or creditor, it was clear the phone was not going to stop ringing. My answering machine was broken, so, short of faking my own kidnapping, I was going to have to answer it. Searching through the tangle of sheets, I nearly knocked Muse's grouchy little calico butt off the bed. *Jeez, what time was it anyway?*

"Sorry, cat," I muttered, ferreting the cordless out from a pile of pillows.

“Cauley MacKinnon,” I said into the receiver, my voice heavy with sleep and sounding a bit like Lauren Bacall.

I waited.

Nothing.

“Hel-loooo,” I said into the silence, and there it was.

The unmistakable sound of heavy breathing. The little hairs on the back of my neck lifted, and I blinked myself awake. I’d been getting calls like this since word got out I was testifying in the upcoming federal trial of a beautiful, blond Argentinean gang leader who looked like Grace Kelly with fangs.

“Look, you big jerk,” I said with a mix of fear and false bravado. I was about to blast the bozo with a string of anatomically impossible suggestions when a deep voice drawled, “I need somebody dead.”

Aha! This time it really was my dream guy.

Grinning like an idiot, I wrapped my quilt around me and snuggled deep into my big, empty bed. “Somebody *already* dead, or somebody you want to *get* dead?” I said. Just for clarification.

“The latter.”

I nuzzled the phone to my ear and could practically see Special Agent Tom Logan leaning against his battered gray bureau car, looking like a tall, dark-haired, square-jawed Eagle Scout on high-octane testosterone. “Is this going to be one of those things where I have to help save the world and I get stabbed in the ass and then I *don’t* get to write a Pulitzer Prize-winning article when it’s all over?”

After a long pause, he said, “Probably you won’t get stabbed again.”

“Tom Logan, how you talk. FBI agents are so mercurial.”

“How many FBI agents do you know?” he said.

“Enough that you shouldn’t leave town again anytime soon.”

I could practically hear him smile over the line, and I wondered where things stood between us. The last time I'd seen Tom Logan, he'd thoroughly inspected my tonsils at the Fourth of July picnic and then disappeared into the night to go interrogate fugitives or use thumb-screws or whatever it was FBI agents did when they were called away in the line of duty.

"Yeah, sorry to leave in such a rush," he said, and he sounded like he really meant it. After a short pause, he said, "I need a favor."

"Right now?" I rolled my head to look at the little analog clock ticking away on the antique nightstand.

Four in the morning. It is my opinion that four o'clock should only come once a day, and it should come firmly entrenched in a happy hour.

In his deep Fort Worth drawl, Logan said, "I need an obituary."

I frowned. "An obituary?"

Anywhere else in the world, a request for an obituary in the middle of the night might seem crazy. But in Texas, we have a special affinity for crazy. I hear up North they lock their crazy people in the attic. Down here, we prop them up on the sofa and invite the neighbors over for iced tea. In Texas, crazy is relative.

Rubbing my eyes, I said, "An obituary for who?"

"I can't get into it on the phone," he said. "I just need to know if you can do it. If you can't, I can get somebody else..."

"Well, of course I can do it," I said irritably. "Besides. How many obituary writers do you know?"

"One is all I need," he said, and I blinked in the darkness. Was Tom Logan flirting with me at four in the morning?

"It needs to look authentic," he went on, "with the right wording and on newspaper, printed on both sides so it looks like the real deal.

And this has to be off the record. No files laying around. No ghost images floating in the hard drive.”

I sighed. Not flirting. But then, that was Logan: all business.

“Well,” I said. “The last part’s no problem. We’ve got a Dead Copy file we use to obliterate information from confidential sources. The *Sentinel’s* reaction to you feds tippytoeing all over the First Amendment.”

“We never tippytoe,” he said, and I smiled.

“So. Let me get this straight,” I said. “You want a fake obituary on a tear sheet?” I said, wondering how I was going to pull that off. “And when would you need this real-looking fake obituary?”

“Now.”

I bolted upright in bed. If Tom Logan said he needed something now, he wasn’t kidding.

“Okay, just . . . give me a minute,” I said.

Stumbling out of my old four-poster, I stepped on the sharp corner of a DVD case of *The Searchers*. “Ow!”

“You okay?”

“It’s four o’clock in the morning,” I growled, snatching up the DVD.

Logan had given me the flick right after my house had been burgled and my movie collection trashed, probably hoping to win over another John Wayne convert. The movie wasn’t noir, my favorite, but it was pretty good—if you like endings where the hero wanders off into the sunset alone. Which I don’t.

But wandering off into the sunset alone is something I seemed to be doing a lot more of since I met Tom Logan.

“Is this going to be a problem?” he said.

“No . . . I’m ready, sort of . . .” With the phone wedged between my shoulder and ear, I tossed the case onto the dresser and yanked open a drawer for a pair of jeans and a tee shirt, wishing I had time to find a

killer summer sweater that fit so well it would make him think twice before leaving again.

I glanced in the mirror above the dresser and immediately wished I hadn't. Ordinarily, no self-respecting southern girl would be caught dead going out of the house with Stage Three Bed Head. But I have found that self-respect is often highly overrated. I swiped a brush through my hair and gave up.

“Cauley? You still there?”

“I said I'm ready,” I huffed, juggling the phone as I hopped on one leg, wriggling into a pair of jeans. “Where do you want me to meet you?”

“No need for that,” he said. “I'm in your driveway.”