THE RAIN CITY HUSTLE

. . . move fast, stay one step ahead

a Danny Logan Mystery Novel
by

M.D. GRAYSON

ALSO BY

M.D. GRAYSON

Danny Logan Mystery Series

ANGEL DANCE

NO WAY TO DIE

ISABEL'S RUN

MONA LISA EYES

BLUE MOLLY

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To Carol Mazzeo

. . . move fast, stay one step ahead

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CHAPTER 1

Midnight at Hunts Point

The tall cedar trees on the sloping grounds of the majestic Hunts Point home swayed back and forth in the moonlight, moving to the warm night wind like sensuous dancers, casting long wavy shadows across the expansive, carefully manicured lawn. Within these dark, undulating shapes, Seattle private investigator Danny Logan silently made his way up the incline, dashing from one shadow to the next, pausing briefly here and there to make sure he'd not been discovered, then moving on. One hundred yards from the shore, he ducked behind a tall rhododendron and carefully parted the branches.

Ahead, perhaps another fifty yards up the slope, a low brick wall with wrought-iron pickets marked the top of the rise. Beyond the wall, a huge home lay shrouded in darkness—quiet, dimly lit, the outline barely visible.

Danny took his time and scanned the building and the grounds. Glancing back, he could see the waters at the eastern edge of Lake Washington lapping quietly against the shore. Three miles across on the lake's far western side, the lights of Seattle cast reflections that shimmered all the way across the surface, rippling in rhythm with the waves. A dark hole in the lights near the water's edge marked the spot where a jet-black Zodiac Hurricane inflatable waited for him, engines idling. At the helm was a lone darkened figure—a woman, dark hair flowing in the gentle wind. Toni Blair, Danny's business partner and fiancée, watched the home and the grounds through the green lenses of night-vision goggles while the small boat's powerful twin engines gurgled softly, barely audible above the crickets and the breeze whistling through the trees.

The sound of the boat's engines was further masked by a rhythmic *thump-thump-thump* of a hip-hop tune coming from ahead up the slope. Danny studied the source of the music—the estate's guest house—a small cottage offset from the main house and situated just below the brick wall near a walkway that led all the way down to the water and a large boat dock.

In stark contrast to the quiet main house, the guest cottage was alive with activity. Lights spilled out through a sliding glass patio door, rolled across the deck, and then washed over the lawn. Loud voices came from inside the house—laughing, yelling.

Danny continued to study the guest house a moment longer before the earpiece he wore crackled to life with Toni's voice. "It's noisy up there."

"Yeah. How 'm I looking?" he whispered into the microphone at the end of his earpiece.

"You're clear. You sure you still want to do this?"

"Yeah—got to. I promised Kate." He paused. Then, looking up at the main house, he added, "You were right—this place is something."

"Told ya. Frank Thorne's doing all right for himself."

"Sure is." A moment later, he said, "Okay, I'm moving." With a final look around to make sure all was clear, he started to take a step forward when suddenly he froze.

He slid back into the shadows. "One other thing—almost forgot. What about the dogs? You said the boys saw dogs this afternoon."

"I did. But not now. You're clear . . . still."

Danny furrowed his brow. "Still?" he mouthed, raising an eyebrow. He waited a moment, then he moved out. He sprinted up and across the yard to his left, making a beeline for the corner of the guest-house deck, deviating slightly only to avoid the areas of lawn illuminated by the lights from the party. Ten seconds later, he reached the safety of the shadows and ducked alongside the building. While he caught his breath, he waited and listened. No alarm, no dogs.

The layout of the guest house and deck was simple—a small L-shaped building wrapped around a wood-planked deck oriented toward the lake. A steaming hot tub dominated the middle of the deck and was flanked by a table with a folded umbrella and a couple of wooden chairs. Two sliding glass doors opened onto the deck from the house—one from each side of the L. Both were closed. The room behind the first slider was dark, the window covered with curtains. The other glass door appeared to lead to the small home's brightly lit living room. It was not covered.

Danny glanced upward and noted a single security camera on the eave, but it was mounted directly above him and aimed at the hot tub. It should not be a factor. He stepped over the low rail and swung himself up onto the deck. Pressed against the wall to stay out of camera view, he began a stealthy shimmy toward the living room slider. At the edge of the door, he paused for a moment. He took a breath, then he stole a very quick glance inside. No one there. An empty champagne bottle sat on the coffee table alongside an ashtray full of cigarette butts. Although the music still played, he no longer heard any voices. He ducked back behind the wall.

Hidden in the shadows, he tilted his head and pursed his lips. A moment later, he shrugged and shook his head. Then he took another look, slower this time—more careful, more deliberate.

Still no one there.

Peering around the edge of the door, Danny began scanning the room from left to right, one segment at a time. Halfway through, he froze when he spotted a large oil painting resting on

an easel in a corner of the room, perched like an information poster in a hotel lobby. He stared at the brilliant orange, yellow, and blue painting, barely breathing. This was no hotel poster.

"It's here!" he whispered into the radio, his eyes still fixed on the painting. "It's right here—right where she said it would be, right out in the open, not more than fifteen feet away."

"Good. Now you can tell Kate. Take a picture, and then let's get out of here."

"Roger."

"Make sure your flash is off."

He smiled, but still he double-checked before he grabbed a picture with his phone. He continued to stare at the painting, studying the masterpiece, his head tilted first one way, then the other. After a long minute, he started to turn away at the very instant the motor on the hot tub behind him suddenly burst to life with a low scream like a jet's turbine engine. The steaming water began to boil with bubbles.

He fumbled his phone, snatched it out of midair, then jumped sideways, back into the shadows, where he flattened himself against the wall. Almost immediately, the music inside the guest house clicked off, and the night fell silent, save for the whine of the hot tub. The bedroom glass door began to slide open. Danny froze, barely breathing, his muscles tensed.

A moment later, someone inside pushed the heavy blackout drapes aside, revealing the corner of a bed. Bright lights spilled out onto the deck, illuminating the hot tub and half the deck—fortunately the half on the other side of the hot tub, away from Danny. A shapely leg appeared, then a short young woman with long blond hair stepped outside.

She wore a scanty white bikini, barely more than a collection of strategically placed strings. In her hand was a half-full champagne flute. The young woman took a couple of tentative steps, wobbling slightly, her empty hand extended as she tried to find her equilibrium. She steadied for a moment, seemed to sniff the air, then took another unsteady step forward. The movement was apparently too abrupt for her, and again, she started to lose her balance. She lurched toward the doorpost behind her and spilled her champagne on the deck.

"Oops!" she said, giggling, grabbing on to the post and swaying, sloshing champagne on the rail.

She caught her balance and looked up—directly at a frozen-in-place Danny. He was in full stealth mode, dressed in black, from his dark trail-running shoes to his stocking cap. Even his face was painted with black and green camo grease. He remained completely motionless, holding his breath.

The young woman stared for a moment, but her eyes had not yet fully adjusted to the dark. She turned away and, gathering herself, took a few lurching steps toward the deck rail facing Lake Washington, opposite Danny. When she reached the safety of the rail, she braced herself and stared at the lights. A minute later, she leaned forward and threw her arms wide in a classic

I'm-the-queen-of-the-world-Kate-Winslet-on-the-bow-of-the-*Titanic* pose, her long hair flowing in the breeze. She breathed deeply of the night air. Then she called out, "Billy! Come here. You gotta see this. It's awesome!"

Danny shifted his gaze back to the door and shook his head slowly. "No, you don't, Billy," he whispered. He started to slink toward the rail and escape, but then a new noise came from inside the bedroom, a quiet *tap-tap-tap* behind the curtain. He froze again.

"Come on, Billy!" she called out.

"I'll be there in a minute," a man answered from inside. "I've seen them lights a million times." The tapping resumed. "Hey, I'm cuttin' some lines here. You want one?"

The woman didn't answer, her attention captured by the lights.

"Chloe!"

"What?" She paused, then said, "Oh yeah. 'Course I do." She turned around and took a step toward the door, and this time, her eyes now acclimated to the dark, she saw Danny.

She stopped and rocked backward, then forward, her eyes wide, mouth open. She wobbled slightly and struggled to make sense of the dark shape hiding in the shadows before her.

Danny remained still for a couple of seconds, but when the young woman took another step toward him, he slowly raised his finger to his lips.

She gasped and stopped, but she didn't cry out. Danny smiled. Nodding slowly, as if to reassure her, he started to take a side step toward the rail. This broke her trance, and an instant later, the young woman let loose a blood-curdling scream that shattered the quiet night.

* * * *

Danny was airborne before the scream was done echoing off the main house. He easily vaulted the deck rail but landed hard in the soft dirt of a planter, where he stumbled and sprawled forward on his hands and knees on the lawn. He recovered quickly, though, and burst into a sprint down the hill, toward the water. He'd taken only a few steps when he heard the unmistakable *RACK!* of a pump-action shotgun being cocked from close behind him.

"Damn!" He zigged hard to his left, toward the shadows, just as a huge divot in the lawn exploded into the air not more than a yard to his right, accompanied by a deafening *BOOM!*

"Stop!"

"Like hell!" he gasped. He zigged again, this time to the right. Another loud *RACK! BOOM!* followed, along with another piece of exploding turf, this one to his left and not quite so close.

His radio crackled to life. "You need help?"

"No! Be ready to go!"

He raced down the middle of the hill, weaving wildly in a random fashion as the shots continued sporadically.

Halfway to the boat, near the rhodie bush where he'd paused on the way up the hill, the shots stopped. "I think . . . I'm okay," he gasped into the radio, slowing slightly.

Then he heard the dogs. "Uh-oh!"

"You need help?" Toni said again.

"No! Wait there!"

He leaned into his sprint with renewed vigor as the barking dogs quickly drew closer. Seconds later, lungs bursting, he reached the bottom of the slope and sailed over the seawall, landing on the soft gravel beach without the slightest stumble or buckle this time. The dogs were close enough that he could hear them panting. Danny shot across the beach in three long strides and hit the water with an awkward splash just as the dogs flew over the seawall.

He took two giant floundering steps in the dark lake water and then hurled himself clumsily over the boat's inflatable side tube, landing hard on the fiberglass floor of the forward deck. Behind him, the dogs skidded to a halt at the water's edge, barking furiously. Danny turned to Toni. "Go! Go! Go!"

Toni slammed the throttles forward, and the boat shot backward away from the shore. Fifty yards out, she throttled back for an instant and shifted into forward. "Hang on!" She spun the wheel hard to starboard and shoved the throttles full forward again. The small boat nearly leaped completely out of the water as it spun around and sped away to the west, soon disappearing into the night.

CHAPTER 2

Fade to Crimson

The morning dew had yet to burn off the cherry laurels fronting the Chihuly Garden and Glass exhibit at Seattle Center when Danny and Toni walked toward a line of low white barriers. The barriers were connected to one another by shiny yellow tape emblazoned with the words POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS that surrounded a circular area extending from the museum all the way to the Space Needle and back.

"That way," Danny said, yawning. He nodded toward an opening in the barriers.

Toni glanced at him. "You need a nap already?"

"After last night? Probably."

"Better suck it up, old man."

Within the cordoned-off space, a dozen men worked at moving a small mountain of lighting, sound, and camera equipment, wheeling dollies, and pushing loaded carts from two large trailers. The gear was being assembled under the careful direction of a young woman with bushy auburn hair gathered in a loose ponytail. "No, not there!" she said to one of the men. "Look, Brian—pay attention! There's already a shadow on that door." She pointed to a spot five feet left of where the man had just set up a light stand. "Light's gotta go over *there* so it washes the door."

"Is that Kate?" Toni asked.

Danny shook his head. "No. I don't know who that is. I—"

"Hey!" A voice behind them interrupted him. "We don't let just anyone in here!"

Danny jumped as he spun around. A rotund, silver-haired Seattle PD officer stood guard at the entry next to a sign that read:

FADE TO CRIMSON
CLOSED SET
AUTHORIZED PERSONS ONLY

The cop had a wide grin on his face.

Danny broke into a smile and chuckled. "Eddie G! You scared the hell out of me."

"Hiya, Eddie!" Toni said. She leaned forward and hugged the short, round policeman.

Eddie embraced her, then stepped back. "Oh, boy! Now we gotta watch out! Logan PI is in the house!"

"Darn straight," Toni said. "And don't you forget it!"

"Never!" He lowered his voice. "Actually, I knew you were coming. Kate told me to watch out for a couple of tall, good-lookin' PIs, so I been on the lookout. And now here you are! You're good-lookin'—he's tall!"

Toni laughed. "Don't kid yourself, shorty. I'm taller than you."

Eddie sucked in his gut and stood up straight. "That ain't sayin' much, doll."

Danny shook Eddie's hand and glanced around. "Doing some moonlighting, huh, Eddie?"

Eddie nodded. "You bet. It's easy money: Kate says, 'Public stays on that side of the line, crew stays on this side of the line.'" He shrugged. "I can do that." He paused, then he reached into a folder sitting on a nearby chair. "They made up some set passes for you two. Keep you from having one of the other guys giving you the toss."

"Thanks."

"No sweat, man," Eddie said. "Say—I bumped into the lieutenant yesterday. He told me to tell you hello. He says wedding bells are fixin' to ring for you two."

"Word gets around." Danny said.

"Around here it does, you lucky dog."

Toni beamed. "I finally got him tied down. Third time's the charm."

Danny glanced at her. "Finally tied down? Yeah, right. For the record, all the delays have been a *mutual* decision. We—"

"No!" A woman nearby raised an angry voice, cutting him off. Thirty feet away, in front of a row of three trailers parked beside the equipment trailers, the woman and a man were arguing.

"No!" she said again. "We cannot change this part of the schedule again, Ray!" She glared at the man, motionless.

"Oh, boy. Here they go again," Eddie said, his voice lowered.

Danny leaned over and whispered to Toni, "*That's* Kate."

Toni nodded. "I see. And the poor guy getting lit up?"

"I'm not sure. That would appear to be Ray, the boyfriend she told me about."

"That's Ray, all right," Eddie said.

"This happen a lot?"

"The fight? Let's just say the two of them been havin' their fair share of what you might call 'creative disagreements' here lately."

The argument continued, Kate and Ray furious with each other. Finally, after Kate emphasized a point by poking Ray in the chest, Toni rolled her eyes. "We'd better go separate

them before Eddie has to ring them up for domestic violence."

* * * *

"And besides, you know good and well that you're in no position to be making demands." Kate's voice was lower now, but no less resolute.

Ray's face dropped. "That's not fair and you know it."

"Yeah? It is what it is. Fair or not, deal with it." She leaned forward. "Production's running late and getting later, and for some strange reason, you don't seem to give a rat's rear end." She paused, then she tilted her head. "Speaking of which, you never did say why you cut out early yesterday. Where were you? Murphy had to step in and take over. Again."

"You know where I was. I had a meeting with the new editor, an interview."

"All that time?"

"It went longer than I thought. We had a lot to go over. Besides, yesterday's shot was simple, and Murphy knows what she's doing. It's not a big deal. I'll get us back on track—we just need a few more days. We'll be better than ever. And reshooting today's scene over at the stadium won't take more than—"

"Stop!" Kate held up her hand. "We are *not* reshooting the scene over at the stadium!" She leaned in even farther.

Kate was in her early thirties with long, dark hair. She wasn't exactly short, but Ray was basketball-player tall, so the closer she leaned in, the more she had to tilt her face upward. "Look around you. We paid good money to get a permit to film here. The rental meter for the space and for all the gear is ticking away. If you screw this schedule up, that means the setup is wasted, the permit is wasted, all this"—she waved her arms toward the set—"all this will be wasted. We won't get finished shooting on time, and then we'll be in trouble. Big trouble." She paused. "You do remember what that means, right?"

Ray stared back, his mouth clenched shut.

"Right?" Kate repeated.

Ray still said nothing, so Kate continued. "So, you *make* it work, Ray. Just like it is. Make. It. Work."

The stare-down lasted another five seconds or so, then Ray folded, his shoulders drooping. He pursed his lips and blew out slowly, then he nodded. "Okay, sure. We'll do it your way. Again." He gave her a thin smile. "We always do it your way, right, Kate? So we'll do it your way this time, too. But I'm telling ya, the film won't be as good." He glared at her for a final moment, then he spun around and marched off toward the set.

"Let's go!" he shouted to the crew, several of whom stood nearby, pretending not to watch.

Then, more angrily, "What are you all doing standing around? Let's get back to work!" He paused. Then, glancing back at Kate, he barked, "Meter's running!"

Kate watched for a second, taking several deep breaths before she turned and noticed Danny and Toni standing nearby, holding back at a discreet distance. She rolled her eyes, then she grimaced and walked over. "I'm sorry you guys had to see that little . . . disagreement."

"No problem," Danny said. "Just like old times, right? Kickin' ass, takin' names."

Kate rolled her eyes. "Yeah, I suppose." She shook her head. "Worked better in the army. Didn't know I'd be having to do it with the guy who's supposed to be my partner."

"Kate Morgan," he said, "I'd like you to meet my fiancée and business partner, Toni Blair."

Kate reached for Toni's hand. "Toni, it's nice to meet you. Danny told me about you yesterday." She smiled. "'Course he left out the part about you looking like a model, though." She turned and gave Danny's sleeve a tug. "Then again, he is a man of few words, right?" Turning back to Toni, she said, "He tell you we were in the army at the same time? In Iraq?"

"He did."

"We were buddies. We watched out for each other, had each other's back."

Danny nodded. "That's true."

Kate smiled, then she playfully slugged Danny in the arm. Before he could respond, she turned back to Toni and continued. "So, I don't know what he told you, but I hadn't seen this guy here in, like, I don't know, ten, twelve *years*, not since his deployment ended, and he rotated back, and they turned him into an army cop. Then, yesterday morning, out of the blue, I'm walking out of Starbucks, and I literally bump right into him—after all that time! Almost dumped my latte on his shirt." She smiled. "Sergeant Logan, in the flesh. We used to . . ." Suddenly, the smile left her face. "Last night?"

Danny glanced around. "You think there might be a place we could sit down for a few minutes in private? I gave Toni the rundown on what we talked about yesterday, but she has some questions. Now a good time?"

Kate pointed toward the trailers. "Yeah, you bet. I've got a conference call with the bankers at ten, but that gives us an hour or so. I'm in the middle rig there."

* * * *

Kate's production trailer was a mobile office with a desk and a small conference table. Two telephones and a fax machine were perched on a small kitchen counter. "Okay," Kate said, "I'll hit the highlights, then you can fire away with questions. Ray and I own the world's smallest independent film company. Well, technically, *I* own it, but we run it together. We're here near the end of the production phase of our third film, *Fade to Crimson*. It's a murder mystery set

here in Seattle. We're shooting a few scenes here at the Space Needle now. A couple of months ago, Ray offered to run over to my father's condo in Bellevue. He has a place on a lake in Italy where he spends the summer, but he's got a small army of people who take care of his condo here while he's gone—maids, window cleaners, houseplant keepers, and the like. Once a month, he wants me to check up on them—make sure no one stole the silverware, mooched his Scotch, that sort of thing. Knowing my father, he's probably got someone checking up on me, too." She smiled. "Sort of a 'super checker.' Anyway, that particular day, I was slammed, so I said, 'Sure, honey, that'd be great if you could do that for me.'"

She gave a broad theatrical smile. "So thoughtful, right?" She paused for an instant, and the smile disappeared. "Nope. Not even close to right. I should've known better. Turns out that while he was there 'picking up the mail,' Ray was also planning to do a little corporate financing. All of a sudden, he was worried about the company's financial position, so he figured it'd be a swell idea to swipe a very expensive oil painting right off Dad's living room wall, which he then proceeded to take downstairs past the bellman and right out the front door. They'd seen him before with me, so no one even thought to ask what he was doing. Without saying anything to me, he turned the painting over as collateral for a loan that we may or may not need in order to finish our film. His bright idea was to finish the film, get our next round of funding, then pay off the loan and get the painting back on the wall before anyone noticed. Including me."

She smiled. "I run the finances, and we *were* running a little tight, but c'mon! I had it under control, more or less. Of course, Ray knew what I'd have said if he'd run this genius scheme of his past me, so naturally, he kept his mouth shut."

"Danny showed me the picture of the painting," Toni said. "*Lys dans de Champs de Moret—Lilies in the Fields of Moret*."

"That's the one. Alfred Sisley. 1887."

"I looked it up yesterday afternoon. It's beautiful. It must be worth a fortune."

Kate nodded. "It is. A small fortune, anyway. It's an Impressionist piece. Not like a Monet, but valuable, for sure. My father paid two million for it three years ago. No doubt it's gone up in value since then."

Toni's eyes opened wide. "Whoa! That *is* a fortune. Your dad's a collector?"

Danny nodded. "Did I mention Kate's dad is Taylor Morgan?"

She glanced at Danny and raised an eyebrow. "Morgan? Bellevue shopping centers Taylor Morgan?"

Danny nodded. "Yep."

She stared at him a moment, then she gave him an amused smile and shook her head. "No, you forgot to say anything about that."

"Sorry. But, yeah, that's him—Bellevue shopping centers. Wait, though, it gets better."

"Okaaay."

Kate continued. "Right. So Ray plays cute. To keep the deal hidden from me, he puts the loan money in a separate account that he opens and doesn't tell me about. Shame on me, I noticed that the bills weren't coming through at the same pace, but I thought that the vendors were just slow with their invoices. Like I said, funds were starting to get a little scarce, so I wasn't going to complain." She shook her head. "Turns out the bills weren't late after all. Ray was intercepting them and paying some of them out of his secret account, and that's why I never saw them." She shrugged. "I'm embarrassed to say that I never caught on—I didn't know anything about Ray's arrangement."

"How'd you find out?"

Kate smirked. "How'd I find out. Three weeks ago, I'm over on the set, and these two gangster-looking dudes walk up, acting like they own the place or something. They had set passes, and at first I thought they were extras Ray had brought in without telling me. They looked the part, and spending money on extras without telling me is something Ray's pretty good at."

"Let me guess," Toni said. "One of those guys was Billy Thorne."

"You got it. There were two of them. He was the younger one, but he was in charge, you know? The other guy didn't say a word. Anyway, Thorne was all dressed up in black, got his hair all slicked back, he's got this attitude, all puffed up. He looks like a vampire from *Twilight* or something. He comes up to me, and he goes all Tony Soprano and says, 'Hey, babe, Ray says you control the purse strings around here. I'm wonderin' when you're gonna pay me back.'"

She shrugged. "I had no idea who this clown was or what he was talking about. At first, I actually thought it was some kind of a strange way of hitting on me. So I told him to take a hike. He laughed, but they left. Afterward, I mentioned it to Ray. Damn if he doesn't start getting all twitchy, like he knew! I could see it on his face! I said, 'What the hell, Ray?' He hemmed and hawed for a bit, but he finally came clean. He said he thought we were tight and that he'd been given the name of a guy concerning a loan—Billy Thorne. So he met with him. Ray doesn't have much in the way of good judgment, but any that he did have all flew out the window when he met Thorne. Ray said Thorne said he'd make the loan and when he met him for their second meeting, Thorne proceeded to open up a duffel bag with five hundred thousand dollars cash in it. Ray was a goner."

"Whoa," Toni said. "*Big* cash! I can see where that could have been tempting."

"I guess that was Thorne's point. Shouldn't have worked, but whatever, it was too much for Ray to turn down."

"So Billy Thorne gives five hundred grand to Ray, who then turns over your father's two-million-dollar painting as collateral?"

"Yep. Five hundred thousand dollars, plus interest. They want a hundred thousand bucks for a ninety-day loan."

"Geez," Toni said, taking a deep breath and blowing it out slowly. She glanced at Danny. "With those kinds of rates, I guess that's how Frank Thorne ends up with the big house on the water."

"It would seem," Danny said, nodding.

"Oh, it gets worse," Kate said, rolling her eyes. "Late last week, Thorne shows up again. This time, I knew who he was, so I was better prepared. I told him we were close to being able to pay him back, but we might need an extension—a month or so—and that we'd be willing to pay for it, another twenty-five grand. He doesn't even give it a thought. He immediately says, 'We don't do extensions.' Then he drops the big bomb. He's like, 'But don't worry about it. You don't have to bother about paying me back at all.' That was a surprise, so I say, 'Why's that?' And he says he'll forgive the loan in exchange for the painting—says he's got it set up in his living room, and he likes it. Plus, he says he's also got a buyer lined up who wants to pick it up right away."

Kate narrowed her eyes. "I couldn't believe it. I was floored. But it gets worse. Before I could answer, he says that if that particular buyer falls through, he even has a backup plan—he's going to take it to an auction in New York next month. Either way, I don't have to worry about paying the loan back. When I could finally function again, I told him to hold on. I wasn't interested in letting him have my father's painting and that he could forget about selling it. We had until September 16, and we'd definitely be paying him back."

"What'd he say?"

"He laughed. He said, 'Don't be late.' Then they left." Kate sat back and took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She looked at Danny, then back at Toni. "I don't know exactly where things are at now, but it's looking pretty obvious to me like Thorne's done the math. He knows what the painting's worth. Ray was stupid enough to turn it over, and now Thorne doesn't want to give it back. He wants to keep it and sell it for big bucks, and I'm afraid he's gonna play every angle he can to make it happen. Not that he has to, with this ticking time bomb running. If we miss our payoff deadline by ten minutes, he automatically gets the painting, and it's game over anyway. So we can't have any more delays." She rolled her eyes. "Which is a problem since Ray's the director, and he considers himself an 'artist.' He wouldn't know a schedule if it jumped up and bit him in the ass, which is why I have to ride him constantly."

"You think you can make it happen?" Toni asked.

Kate took a quick breath. "It's gonna be close. Our next round of funding, which would be our post-production loan, is already arranged. But *post*-production means *after* we're done filming. It's doable. But things have to go right."

Toni glanced at Danny, then she turned to Kate. "Kate, I gotta ask the obvious. I mean,

your father's, like, a gozillionaire, right? Why not just ask him for the money? Protect the painting. Pay off Thorne right now and remove the heat. Then, later on, use your normal financing to pay your dad back. Problem solved."

Kate smiled. "I may have forgotten to mention that my father knows nothing about this little calamity—nor can he ever. You guys don't know him, but take my word for it, he's not the most understanding man in the world. If he *ever* found out what Ray's done—and that means me too, by association—there'd be this gigantic shift in the space-time continuum. Ray would get to spend the next several years in the state penitentiary, which, despite our current problems, is not something I'd wish on him. And my relationship with my father—admittedly not always the best—would essentially come to a shattering end." She shook her head. "*I* need to solve this. Bringing my father in is not something I'm inclined to do."

"Fair enough," Toni said.

"Besides, this is fixable. We can pull the next financing off, as long as Ray sticks to the schedule. And as long as Billy Thorne actually gives us the time."

Danny pursed his lips. "Sorry to hear all this, Kate, but I do have some good news." He pulled out his phone and held it up so she could see the photo of the painting.

Kate glanced at him, then her eyes widened. "You found it?"

"Yeah. Thorne might have a buyer arranged, as he claims—no way to tell. But as of last night, anyway, the painting was definitely still in his possession. It's sitting in his living room all right, just like he said it was."

Kate started to smile, then she turned and slugged Danny in the arm. "I can't believe you! You let me sit here all this time, sweating this thing out, and you didn't say anything? Why didn't you call me when you found out?"

"At two a.m.? Here, I'll send you the picture."

She exhaled sharply with relief. "Thank God for that. Maybe we still have a shot." Kate looked from Danny to Toni. "So, now that you two have heard the whole story, is this the kind of thing you guys work with? Helping people get out of jams like this? You think you could help?"

"We've never actually worked with someone in a jam like this before," Danny said. "And I'm honestly not sure what we can do. Ray's put you in a tough spot, but although a bad business deal might not be very smart, it's not necessarily illegal. About all you can do is get the funds together and pay him off."

"He can't sell it, though, right?"

"No," Toni said. "He has to give you the time you guys agreed to. Danny's dad's a lawyer. One thing we *can* do is talk to him, ask him what he thinks. Maybe he could send a letter to Thorne, ask for an extension. At least demand that you get the time promised."

Kate nodded.

"Meanwhile," Danny said, "we could do a little digging around on our own as well, see what we can find."

* * * *

"It's happening again, isn't it?" Toni said. She and Danny were stuck in traffic on the way back to their office.

"No, it's not." Danny stared straight ahead, eyes on the road.

Toni glanced over at him. "You don't even know what I'm talking about."

Danny smiled. "We've been together seven years. —I know what you're *thinking* even if you don't say it. You think the wedding's going to get pushed back. Again."

"Well?"

"Not happening."

"This is how it starts, though. A big job comes up, something we can't ignore."

Danny said nothing.

"What about your army buddy? What if she needs our help?"

Danny raised an eyebrow, took a deep breath, let it out slowly. Then he shook his head. "Trust me. No more postponements. We're getting married on September 12, as scheduled. Period."

Toni looked at him a moment longer, then she turned and stared straight ahead.