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PAINTED TRUNK



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presents

THE PAINTED TRUNK MYSTERIES
BOOK 1

THE PAINTED TRUNK



An August Grove MYSTERY

SYBIL WARD



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PEOPLE ARE TALKING

THE PAINTED TRUNK



"The Painted Trunk is a fun, genre-bending romp. It's got an engaging heroine and a great premise, with enough twists and turns to keep the reader racing headlong through its pages."

*Barbara Rogan
author of A DANGEROUS FICTION*



HOLE CARDS

"An engaging opener that's fun, fast-paced, and full of heart. You're going to want to see more of Dash."

*J.D. Horn, USA Today Bestselling Author of
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THANK YOU!

To say, "Thank you for reading *The Painted Trunk*,"
I've placed a prequel to this story on my website at
sybilward.com/darkmoon

SCAN THE CODE BELOW



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*This book is dedicated to those who love a
little paranormal in their mystery.*

THE PAINTED TRUNK



MYSTERIES

THE
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Allow me a moment, please.



Growing up isn't the easiest task for us humans, even in a town like August Grove. We have to learn to grow, live to learn, and cope to live. Parents, siblings, friends, authority figures... so much to grasp and come to terms with. Sometimes, the timelines are skewed, inverted and twisted, and at a certain age, we find we're not exactly where we had hoped to be. That's when life can get messy.

Especially when the mess belongs to the ones we love the most.

Or even the ones we hate the most.

I am the August Grove Herald.
Hear me.

It's a bright day in August Grove, one with the promise of fall on the breeze, hope on the horizon, and shiny toys within everyone's reach. New buildings, new trends, new friends, and new money. But alas, many of the same tired issues remain.

Pressing issues.

Dangerous issues.

Old and current matters are congealing—the future and past colliding, while hard-kept grudges are fueling questionable, perhaps even evil, ambitions.

All in motion.

All in conflict.

All leading to murder.

And the mystery writer, Tabitha Spencer Pruitt, will have to acknowledge both the strengths and limitations of a Paper Detective.



Sometimes, despite all we do to the contrary, we acquire thorns, brambles, and pains in the... butt. Still, when we deal with them long enough, sticky and prickly as they are, they become part of our lives. Until they're not.

Tabitha Spencer Pruitt



PART I
Death of a Queen



CHAPTER 1

PEOPLE STARTED AND TURNED... some even stared. I guess I was making quite the racket with the sharp pop-and-clack of my heels striking the sidewalk. The sound ricocheted off buildings despite early evening foot traffic and noisy vehicles. I imagined the hard wooden heels chanted, resounding for everyone to hear, “The woman is pissed... the woman is pissed... the woman is...”

And I was. I’d left angry, maybe even furious, a quarter-block back. “That sorry, pinched-nosed, pencil-necked asshole!”

My father... “Oh, that... man!” He had set me up. Again. A date with the offspring of a buddy. A cop’s kid who wasn’t a cop. Dad’s son-in-law of choice, apparently. And like the many times before, this guy was an absolute ass. But make no mistake, he far excelled the other idiots. This one was extraordinary.

He began the evening by criticizing my wardrobe, followed by snide comments about my hair. He even wondered, out

loud, if I really had to wear glasses. Maybe I wore them because I thought they made me look smart.

“UUUGGGGHHHH!” I should have punched his ugly smirking face right then.

But no. I tried to smile it all off, to just once, make it through one of these nightmare encounters. But he had more to say.

The ass insulted my name. He didn't like the name Tabitha. “Why didn't you pick another name to put on your books? I mean, Tabitha... what a stupid name. Spencer's not too bad, but that's not your name, is it? Do you even sell books with a corny name like that?”

How desperate would I have to be to spend a nanosecond in that jerk's company?

Someday, I'd get Dad to understand that all I needed was time... if he'd only give me a break. And I had to wonder... if my mother hadn't died when I was nine... if my dad hadn't nearly died... would any of my issues be issues... now?



CLEOPATRA TRACED A GENTLE FINGER along the raised imagery on the sarcophagus. Embossed with gold by a master craftsman, the ornate coffin was indeed a resting place for a queen. Perfect lighting illuminated the carved aspects of the elaborate lid, highlighting not only the gold, but the inlay of crushed rubies and emeralds. With its face so much like her own, the figure on the sarcophagus stood sentry at her door, its eyes gazing beyond time into the Afterlife. Cleopatra stared into those eyes, transfixed, the faint murmurs of servants and the aroma of food for the night's feast easing her away...

Shrill tones from her cellphone startled her. The ringtone shouted in the corridor, despite the sound dampening effect of

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people working in the main gallery. She supposed that was the penalty for stone-covered walls in a technological age. The raucous noise reverberated in the high, arching ceiling.

Cleopatra groaned. She had insisted on the best energy-saving products for the building. Heating and cooling a space with twenty-foot ceilings was costly, even in Georgia. “I should have thought of special soundproofing, too.” Signs asking visitors to silence their phones might be necessary, but she’d have to come up with something discreet. Yet another thing to work out.

Again, the phone rang.

“Ms. Gleason?” someone called out from the floor.

Cleopatra sighed and nodded before responding to the call from PRIVATE CALLER. She tapped the speaker button. As soon as the line opened, a vitriolic stream poured from the device.

“Listen, you egomaniacal...”

All she had wanted was to get the preparations for the gala done. There were only a few paintings left to be hung, but she had a miles-long list of all the little things that assured an event’s success. Things that had to be done in a short two hours. Cleopatra frowned.

That’s all she wanted—to complete the arrangements—in peace. Which meant a day without another death threat.

“You can’t steal from me! I’ll kill you before I see...”

So much for that. Cleopatra sighed. There are days when life doesn’t care who you are. You just can’t get a break.



CHAPTER 2

TABITHA WONDERED HOW FAR she'd have to walk to vent the fury she had accumulated. A mile. Two?

She continued to mutter, but Tabitha slowed as she reached the intersection. She adjusted her glasses and blew out the steam collecting in her mouth, shrugged some of the tension out of her shoulders, and considered the best route to her new destination. Satisfied the alley across the street would take her to the bar she sought, she hoisted her favorite backpack into a more comfortable position on her right shoulder and ran across the street. A meeting with a stranger in a dark alley was preferable to the crap she'd already endured that evening.

In the confines of the narrow alley, Tabitha shortened her stride, which wasn't easy for a darned-near six-foot-tall woman. But she did, because she needed the heels of her shoes to be quieter here. Everybody knew the establishment at the end of the passage was a hangout for some of August Grove's

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shadier residents. A female alone might seem an excellent target. Best not to attract attention.

But attract attention, she did. Tabitha's attire was appropriate for the place she entered. She wore jeans and a simple notched-necked popover blouse. But her clothing was new, and alcohol and drugs hadn't ruined her face and figure. Thus, she got plenty of eyes on her as the door swung closed behind her. And all she could do was stand there.

It would take a few seconds for her eyes to adjust to the gloom, so she remained still, not wishing to stumble into an embarrassing situation. She waited on a narrow landing, but she couldn't yet see well enough to know if there were multiple steps down or just one. Haste wasn't the best move here.

The person she was meeting must have recognized her, because he shoved away two descending denizens as he approached. "Miss Pruitt?"

"Mr. Proctor?"

"Yeah." He held out a hand. "Let me help you. I've got a table over there."

She nodded and took the proffered hand. Tabitha noted the hard callouses in the palm she grasped, and the strength of the fingers. This man might be a thief, but he had a day job where he used his hands. She thought he might be a brick mason.

They wove their way through a crowded labyrinth of tables, back to an even darker corner. As her vision adjusted to the low lighting, Tabitha noted the less than sterile condition of the establishment. The sense of smell never lies, she thought. The place was as dirty and scummy as her nose had thought it was. Ratty joint from floor to ceiling, but the drinkers filled the bar almost to capacity. Tabitha had the pained feeling more than a few of those people spent their lives there.

Those customers turned as she passed. A woman reached out to touch her backpack, but Proctor was quick to intercede. "Keep your hands to yourself, Pitty."

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“I didn’t mean any harm. I never seen anything like that. It’s a bat, ain’t it?”

The woman peered up at her, and even in the gloom, Tabitha could see she was just shy of drunk. She nodded in response to her question.

Empty spaces made up more than half of Pitty’s smile. “Yeah, and it’s silver. Bats ain’t bad luck for you?”

Tabitha smiled. “No. Especially not this one.”

Proctor gave her a tiny tug to get her walking again. There were two tables away when he pulled out a chair. He wiped the seat with his hand before stepping back so she could sit. Tabitha thought these were some manners he dusted off for this occasion.

“Thank you for meeting with me, Mr. Proctor.”

“No problem. Sergeant Canaday said you’re a writer, and I was to answer your questions as if he was asking them.” He smiled. “Sergeant Randy is a good man. I’d be in prison if not for him. Anything I can do for him, I’m glad to do it.”

“Randy’s a gem, and I’m grateful for your help.” Tabitha swung her backpack off her shoulder and placed it between her knees while it rested on her feet. She didn’t want it to touch the floor, and she wasn’t about to put it on the back of the chair. Naïve wasn’t who she was. She didn’t doubt there were some nimble-fingered thieves in the place. “I won’t take a lot of your time. Order what you’d like to drink, my treat, and we’ll get to it.”

He smiled, nodded, and signaled to a waitress Tabitha hadn’t seen. The woman’s perfume reached them several steps before she did, and when she got to the table, it was all Tabitha could do not to cough. Whatever she was wearing was a terrible Chanel knock-off. Tabitha hoped it hadn’t been as expensive as it was stinky.

“Proctor!” The waitress smiled, stretching scarlet lips over large white teeth. “It’s been a minute since you showed your

face in here.” She leaned down to him. “You ain’t falling off the wagon, are you?”

“Hey, June.” Proctor grinned. “No, I just needed a place to talk to this young lady. I’m going to have one of those new juice things Mooch brought in.” He turned his gaze on Tabitha. “Imagine. Something healthy in this place.”

June eyed Tabitha. “Well, I know you ain’t no customer here, Ms. Pruitt.”

Tabitha squinted at her. “I’m sorry. Do I know you?”

The waitress laughed. “Heck no. But I know you and your books. I’m a big fan of Jasper Talent. Named him after your daddy, didn’t you? Imagine that. A bestselling mystery writer in the Mooch Bar.”

Tabitha felt her neck heating from people turning to stare. “Thanks for being a fan, June.”

June tore a sheet off her pad. “Can I get your autograph, Miss Pruitt? Or do you prefer Spencer?”

“Either will do.” Tabitha smiled as she wrote, “It’s always wonderful to meet a fan. Thanks, June. Hugs and love, Tabitha.” She handed the slip of paper back to June. “And if it’s not too much trouble, I’ll have what Mr. Proctor is having.”

The woman took the piece of paper from Tabitha’s fingers with care, and then beamed as she read it. “Oh, this is so sweet.” She pressed the autograph to her chest. “Thank you! I’m going to frame this.” She looked at Proctor. “You’re keeping fine company, Proctor. Fine company.”

“June!” someone yelled.

“I’d better get your order. I’ll be right back.” She gave Tabitha another huge grin before rushing away.

It was only then that Tabitha realized how quiet the bar had gotten. This was also an eavesdropping bunch.

“So,” Proctor said. “You have questions about breaking and entering?”

Tabitha smiled. “Yes. Specifically, about getting caught.”

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The conversation went well over their drinks—Tropical Coconut and Mango Chunk—which Tabitha liked, and Proctor gave her all the insights she needed for her burglar’s capture. He even showed her the best technique for picking a lock. “Always have something on you... a nail, a nail file, a hairpin... they all work on a cheap lock. Now, if your character gets herself tossed in one of them heavy doors with the fancy security locks, there’s only one thing she can do.”

Tabitha found herself scooting forward in her seat, pen poised, totally intrigued. “What’s that?”

Proctor laughed. “Scream for help, like bloody murder.”

She grinned and added that to her notes. It never hurt to have a sense of humor.

Tabitha filled up six pages with notes. She was in the middle of her new mystery, and she wanted to fortify the midpoint with as much realism as possible. Mr. Proctor was erudite, concise, charming, and funny. Thanks to him, her burglar was taking on a real personality. They had only been talking an hour when three men entered the bar. The atmosphere changed immediately. Silence.

“This was fun,” she said. “I had a dinner date earlier. A shame he wasn’t as gallant or entertaining as you.”

Proctor laughed. “Must have been an honest man.”

They chatted a bit longer before Proctor apologized. “I’m sorry, but I’ve got to go. I have some dinner plans of my own.”

Tabitha stood and gathered her backpack. “And I need to get back as well. I’ve got a deadline.” She held out a hand, which Proctor took and shook. “It was a pleasure.”

“Mine as well,” he said. “If you ever need a decent thief, or at least thieving advice, I’m available.”

They laughed as they exited the bar. Before he departed, Proctor cautioned her to move with conviction, and to get back to the main street as quickly as possible. She thanked him again, and then they went their separate ways—him to the left, and her straight ahead the way she’d come.

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But she didn't get far.

"Heard you're some kind of fancy writer," came a voice from the shadows.

She was halfway to the street, but still in an area far enough away that traffic would drown out a call for help. Tabitha knew the worst thing she could do was show fear. Giving herself time to think, she reached up and twisted her braids into a knot at the base of her neck. "Now that those are out of the way," she said, "what can I do to help you?"

The man had stepped out, barring her way, his back to the street. That put his features in darkness, but it didn't matter. He wasn't much taller than Tabitha at five-ten, and with her heels, they were almost probably eye-to-eye. He didn't outweigh her by much, either, in her estimation. She slid the backpack off and held it with both hands.

"Well, you're smart. That's what you can do, especially if you've got a nice fat wallet in that pretty bag. Toss it to me, turn your pockets out so I can make sure they're empty, and I'll let you get on home where you belong."

"Where I belong?" Tabitha raised an eyebrow. "A thief and a misogynist."

The man came a few steps closer. "A what?"

"I have nothing of value in here." Tabitha clutched the top of the backpack into the fist of her right hand. "I don't even carry a phone."

"Then you're a fool," the guy said. "And not a great liar for a writer." He stepped closer. "Just give it to me before I take it and make you wish you had."

Tabitha took four steps toward him. That almost put her within his reach. Almost. "What if I dump everything out and keep the backpack? It's my favorite."

That comment had the desired effect. "This ain't no damned negotiation."

The guy strode forward. Tabitha stepped back as he lunged and swung the backpack as hard as she could. It made contact,

but not with his head, as she hoped. Still, the metal sewn into the base of the carryall did damage to the point of the guy's left shoulder. He staggered as he grabbed his arm.

They both jumped, startled, as overhead a building's night security lights bloomed on.

Tabitha didn't waste a moment. She drove a heel into the side of his left knee. As his leg buckled, she rushed him with the shiny, silver bat, now detached, in her fist. She held the glinting, pointed wings aimed at his throat.

Her attacker's eyes widened as he stumbled backward into the wall of the building behind him. "Is that thing sharp? Be careful with that!" He nearly fell over a garbage can.

Tabitha brandished her weapon. "You be careful who you're trying to rob." With one hand, she snatched her cellphone from a rear pocket.

"I knew you were lying." He growled and threw up his arm to shield his face, but she had already snapped his picture.

"Hey!" he shouted.

As he lunged for her cell, Tabitha kicked him hard in the groin. He dissolved in a heap to the ground, and with all her good sense intact, she ran. When she looked over her shoulder, he was limping down the alley in the opposite direction. She got another shot of him as he turned the corner near the Mooch Bar.



IN HER SUV, TABITHA LAID THE PHONE down on the seat beside her and placed trembling hands on the steering wheel. She imagined the Explorer trying to comfort her, but there was no consolation for stupidity. She should have

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asked Mr. Proctor to walk her back to the street. “There are times, Pruitt, when you’re an absolute idiot.”

She cranked the vehicle and waited for the phone and Explorer to exchange pleasantries. “Call Randy.”

After a second, the familiar voice answered. “Did Proctor behave himself?”

“Mr. Proctor was an absolute gentleman. The other men I encountered tonight...” She picked up the phone. “I’m sending you a couple of photos. I can’t prove it, no witnesses, but this guy tried to rob me tonight.” She hit send.

“You said, men.” Randy’s phone pinged loud enough for her to hear.

“The other jerk was my dinner date.” Tabitha dropped her cell into the backpack. “He was a bigger ass than the man in the alley. He tried to take my self respect.”

“Is this another one of Jasper’s connections?”

Tabitha snorted. “You know it is. Dad’s got these guys thinking his daughter is desperate for companionship... or something.”

“Do you want me to pay your escort a visit?” His chair’s wheels. “I’m leaving for training on Wednesday, but I have time to issue a few... citations.”

Laughter burst from her without warning and lightened her heart and mood. “Could you give one to Jasper Pruitt for obstructing his daughter’s existence?”

Randy laughed. “I’m a sergeant, Tabs. Jasper’s been the boss all my life, so I’m thinking not. He squares us all up. And speaking of, I’ll make sure alley boy gets a strong talking to, but if we can put together a case, someone will call you down to the station.”

She stared through the windshield. “I won’t feel good about it, but yes, whatever it takes to ensure he doesn’t do that again.”

“How bad did you hurt him?” Randy asked with a chuckle.

“Who says I hurt him?” She slid the car into gear. “I’d better get home.”

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“About that date.” Her friend was full on laughing now. “What are you going to tell your pops?”

“Not funny.” Tabitha frowned in the rearview. “I’ll have to listen to Dad bitch about the experience as if he’s the victim.”

“No doubt,” Randy said. “Oh, almost forgot. Ardis wants you to give her a holla’. My lovely wife has some gooey gossip, she says. Probably about Dash.”

“Yum. It’ll be great to hear what Dash is up to.”

“Yeah. We might need Dashira back in August Grove. She’s the only person we know who can handle your father.” He laughed. “Alright, I’m out. Get home safe.”

The call disconnected as Tabitha backed out of the space. Go figure. She’d had more fun talking to a criminal about a felony than with the son of a police officer over a high-priced meal. Not a note she would share with her family. In fact, all she wanted was to ease back into her room to write. There had been enough drama in her life for one day.



CHAPTER 3

LOUD NOISES WEREN'T UNUSUAL with so much construction in and around the gallery, but screaming profanity, threats, and obscenities... Cleopatra drew a sharp line at that type of demonstrative behavior. Even for herself. To say the rude voice on the phone was out of the ordinary would be... correct.

A few of the workers turned to her, concerned, and Cleopatra immediately tapped the button again to quiet the phone. She turned her back to her employees and stared at the phone as if to glimpse the person on the other end of the call. Not that she wanted to see his ugly face, but she'd had enough of this particular brand of crap. But professionalism overcame her urgent need to retaliate, and she stepped inside her office before she spoke.

“Who are you calling an egomaniacal bitch, you washed-up-never-has-been? I’ve got nothing that belongs to you, understand? You’ll never, ever see a dime from this gallery.”

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Her voice, normally mellow as a one-hundred-year-old triple malt Scotch, pitched obscenities almost beyond the range of human hearing. Words ricocheted off the walls like pellets from an air rifle. Now in the center of the room, Cleopatra pounded the desk with her fist, oblivious to the bone-jarring impact.

The caller's response was yet another threat. "I'm going to do..."

"Not a damned thing, you demented little shit." Cleopatra's fist tightened about the phone as if it were the caller's throat. "Bother me again and I'll call the police."

The call ended.

Cleopatra caught herself, elbow cocked, prepared to fling the palm-sized device across the room. She glared at the phone. What an asshole! Her chest heaved as she struggled to regain control. We'll see who pays. I'll make sure that little rat bastard...

"Ms. Gleason?"

Cleopatra looked up as one of the gallery's security guards tapped at her office door. She dropped the phone into an open desk drawer before shoving it closed. A deep, cleansing breath restored her regal bearing. "Yes?"

"Got a delivery for you." The man held a cardboard box in his arms.

"Scott, watch out for your shirt." She had dressed the guards in white shirts, custom made, the cotton imported from Egypt. The guards were also part of the gallery's aesthetic and needed to look the part. Could have been another annoyance, but this man always improved Cleopatra's disposition. She smiled and signaled for him to join her. "Can't have you getting your uniform dirty before the guests arrive, can we?"

The guard's lips broke into a broad smile as he approached, his teeth bright in the dull light of the office. "No, Ma'am."

Scott Drexler was a dark-skinned man of better-than-average height, and he carried himself like someone who had served in

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the military. His large brown eyes sparkled when he laughed, and Cleopatra found her heart speeding up a bit when he was around. She had a thing for tall, broad, and strong... She suppressed a sigh. Too bad he was only a security guard.

“Just put that down on the floor.” A ruby-tipped finger pointed to the space beside her desk. “Everything okay outside?”

“Yes, ma’am. It’s going to be quite a party.”

The former supermodel grinned and winked. “Forty of my nearest, dearest, and richest will be here tonight. After a spectacular dinner, I’ll christen the gallery. Then, after drinking cases and cases of champagne, they will write me huge checks to make the gallery even better.”

Scott stooped and deposited the box on the floor. “A person steps back in time when they come here. I’m not sure the gallery could be any grander.”

He rose, his gaze sweeping over her, his eyes lingering in all the right places. Cleopatra decided those eyes missed nothing. Tiny explosions peppered her skin.

He dropped his gaze. “I know I’m out of line, Ms. Gleason, but I have to say, you’re a work of art yourself tonight. That dress—it’s amazing.”

Cleopatra spun and the gown, white and ethereal as spider’s silk, lifted and shimmered with a thousand tiny points of light. The bodice clung and dipped to emphasize her curvaceous figure, and a diamond necklace—a sixty-carat teardrop supported by fifty perfect stones as brilliant as their electronic cousins in her garment, set off her graceful neck and glowing bronze skin. More diamonds and LED gems glittered in her long black hair—thick and luxurious hair that twisted in large waves about the face that once sold millions of magazines, perfumes, and haute couture fashions. A genuine smile broke across her generous, ruby-red lips.

“Why, Scott, so inappropriate—”

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“Chitchat?” Jessica Patterson, Cleopatra’s assistant, strode up to Scott and snarled. “I’m sure you have work to do.”

Cleopatra’s smile vanished. “Thank you, Scott. Please return to your post.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The security guard departed without a word or a nod to the glowering assistant.

As soon as the guard cleared the doorway, Cleopatra spun on her assistant. “Who do you think you are?”

“The only person covering your ass.” Jessica’s eyes glowed with defiance.

Cleopatra choked back harsher words. This was not the time for a fight. She blew out the heat accumulating in her mouth. “What’s the matter with you, Jess?” She took in the drab dress and hideous crepe-soled shoes the woman wore. “And why aren’t you dressed? Our guests will arrive shortly.”

“You mean your guests.” Jessica walked around the end of the gigantic desk, letting her fingers slide along the carvings on the front edge. “I saw that box before Scott brought it in. What’s in it?”

Cleopatra groaned. “Let’s not do this now, okay?”

Jessica stared at the box. “You... you promised we’d talk about... this.”

The soft swish of silk marked Cleopatra’s movement as she came around the desk. “We will. Look, go back to your office. I had a gorgeous gown, shoes, and jewelry delivered for you; and Nadine will be here to do your hair in about fifteen minutes.” Cleopatra placed a hand on Jessica’s shoulder, but she shrugged away. “I don’t want you in sackcloth tonight, Jess. This is too important. I need my blond amazon, okay?”

“Whatever.”

Cleopatra glared at the pouting woman. They had no time for tantrums tonight. “Did everyone confirm?”

Her assistant continued to stare at the box.

“Jessica?”

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There was a quick shake of her head, but Jessica didn't take her eyes away from the container. "No."

Cleopatra closed her eyes so tight, tiny fireworks exploded behind her lids. Jessica was pushing the limits of their friendship. She silently counted to ten before opening her eyes. "OK, how many aren't coming?"

"Only two." Jessica sighed as she tore her gaze from the box. She rummaged in the large pockets of the olive-green shift she wore.

To Cleopatra, the dress's pockets were like grocery bags that seemed to reach from waist to knees. Ugly and disfiguring. Hard red nails tapped the surface of the desk.

A search of both pockets proved necessary. Jessica finally pulled out a sheet of notepaper, leaving both pockets bulging with who knew what. She read from the paper, "The senator isn't sure he and the Mrs. will get back from the Hamptons in time."

"Damn!" Cleopatra drummed her fingers harder on the desktop.

"What's the matter?" Jessica asked. "You're biting your lip and you only do that when you're stressing."

"It's nothing." Cleopatra gathered up her gown's train as she returned to the other side of the desk.

"You got another one of those calls, didn't you? Cleo, call the police. This guy might be serious."

Cleopatra shook her head. "I've gotten more than a hundred crank calls, Jess. And yes, some of them were death threats. Disgruntled artists, contractors, earth nuts, useless fools—you name it. But I won't start shouting wolf now, just as the gallery is about to open." She dropped into her high-backed chair. "So, you said two people didn't confirm. Who's the other?"

Jessica consulted her notes again. "The author, Tabitha Spencer."

Cleopatra threw her head back and laughed, the stress, for the moment, forgotten. "I didn't expect her to come, but it

would have been fun if she had. I can't imagine the Geek in a gown."

"You know her? Why didn't you tell me?"

Cleopatra cringed. This was all she needed, something to wind Jessica up again. Her assistant's pale blue eyes returned to the container. "It's late, Jess. Go, get dressed, and forget about that damned box."

Jessica glared at her, but she didn't move.

Cleopatra clenched her fists and her jaw for good measure. Jessica could be a real asset if she'd get over herself. She was two inches taller than Cleopatra's six feet, with striking features—when she allowed people to see them. Those potato sack dresses, birth control glasses, and boulder-busting shoes read "creepy old maid" instead of a young, vital businesswoman.

"The books..." Jessica began.

Irritation lit the fuse on Cleopatra's temper. "There's no time for this crap. Get dressed, Jess. Now!"

A tiny vein pulsed in Jessica's jaw as she returned her employer's glare. Abruptly, she snorted and gave the box a hard kick before turning to leave.

"You're such a spoiled brat!" Cleopatra shouted.

Her assistant strode away, shoes squeaking, her distorted shadow lumbering across the office's marble columns. Only a few of the overhead lights were on tonight, and Jessica was a wraith, fading in and out of the shadows. At the entrance, she turned back, not to Cleopatra, but to the man-sized statue of the Egyptian god, Anubis, its ebony form looming in a dark corner. "You'll make all this right, won't you?"

And with that, she turned and left the office, slamming the door behind her.



CHAPTER 4

IT WASN'T ALWAYS EASY being Tabitha Spencer. Or maybe it was the Pruitt part that made life difficult.

I stood on the front porch and considered the old storm door. Its sole job was to let the world know I was sneaking back into the house. *Sneaking... Stupid word.* It was early evening, not even dark yet. And worse yet, I was a grown-ass woman. Why was I sneaking anywhere?

Yet, I gave the door handle a gentle pat and a promise of a warm WD-40 bath if it just didn't disturb my dad. There was no telling where he was lurking, but I was sure he could hear this door from anywhere on the property. That's why he wouldn't replace it.

The button on the handle depressed with only the tiniest squeak. Good. Now, a gentle tug... slowly... slowly...

Why, you horrible... The old spring or whatever screamed like I was killing it.

I raced through the entry, across the rug, up the stairs...

"Tabitha?"

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I stopped in mid-step, half-way up the stairs. My father came out from the den and peered up at me.

“Why are you home so early?” He glanced at the clock hanging in the short hallway between the den and the stairs. “Hell, you just left.”

The ten-ton weight of resignation made my neck crack as I turned back to him. “I don’t have time for foolishness today, Dad. I’ve got a deadline. And that guy—”

“That guy?” His eyes narrowed. “You’ve forgotten his name already?”

“Trying to. He... irritated me.” I sighed. “Why spend my time being irritated when I had writing to do?”

Dad gave me that patented cop stare. “What did he say that pissed you off?”

“Who said...?”

“What did he say?” He had moved to the foot of the stairs, giving me that squint that told me he was analyzing every word out of my mouth.

“He made fun of my name.” I set my jaw, prepared for his counter. That’s childish, sweetheart.

“That’s childish, sweetheart.”

“Dad...” I had to exhale the heat before I could continue. “Dad, he insulted Mom. He said anyone who would name a kid Tabitha had to be stupid.”

The response was instantaneous. His eyes all but blazed. “Why that—”

“Seems like what’s-his-name irritates you, too.” I came down a few steps and gave him my version of the squint. “So, how would you have handled the situation?”

Dad rubbed his hand down his face. He was cornered, and he knew it. I wasn’t in the mood to let him off the hook. “How is it you’re always trying to saddle me with the biggest assholes in August Grove?”

He shook his head. “It’s not that, baby. I only want—”

“No, Dad. This can’t be about what you want. Don’t you get that?” I came down another step so that we were almost eye-to-eye. Almost. I still wanted the higher ground. “You. Can. Not. Find. My. Husband. Not your job. And I have never, ever told you I needed help getting one.”

Dad put on his best “Hurt Daddy” face. “Tabby Cat, I just want you to be happy.”

“Then stop making me miserable.” I turned and stalked up the stairs; but by the time I reached the landing, he’d launched a sneak attack.

“Why was this in the garbage?” He waved a large envelope.

A custom envelope—white, heavy textured stock, embossed, green ink, handwritten. Beautiful work. “It shouldn’t have been in the garbage.” Before Dad could get a word out, I shot him down. “I put it in the recycle bin, where all useless documents go.”

I made the turn on the landing, heading to my room. Game, set, match to me.

But Dad wasn’t done. Not yet. “Tabitha, this is an invitation to the gallery opening. A real gala event. Everybody who is anybody will be there. You’re a famous author now. You should be there, too.” He glanced at the clock again. “There’s still time.”

I stopped and stared over the railing. “Dad, you do know what that is, right?”

There was the squint, version 2.0, the not-quite-a-frown frown and glare. “I don’t understand how you can still have this feud with Cleopatra after all these years. That’s—”

“Dad, if you say childish...” I held my tongue for the next ten or fifteen heated words. “You’re my father and I love you, but when you tell me to forget all that woman did to me...”

Profane words slammed into the backs of my front teeth. “I prefer not to attend parties thrown by my enemies, even when newsworthy.” I leaned over the railing and glared at him. “I’m childish like that.” I spun away, biting my poor tongue, and

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stormed to my room. With one final burst of steam, I yelled over my shoulder. “Your child is going to take a nap.”

The door bore the brunt of my frustration, shivering in its frame from the force of my slam.



CHAPTER 5

CLEOPATRA STARED AT THE DOOR long after Jessica had slammed it close. A dull ache had begun thrumming at the base of her neck. Did she really need one more headache? She had hired a friend. *A friend with benefits.* Painful benefits.

Maybe it wasn't possible to be both friend and employer. In any case, it was well past time to sort out the issues between them. "But not tonight." She straightened her back and adjusted the cascading curls draped over her shoulders. Time enough tomorrow to deal with Jessica's complaints. For now, her dreams were coming true, and she wouldn't let anyone interfere with that.

She turned to the wall-spanning windows behind her desk. This view never failed to relax her mind. In the clear black of evening, lights sparkled across the city, giant fireflies, and the river glistened like slate. From beyond the bordering woods came the earnest inquiry of a passing train. She had grown up across those tracks, sandwiched between the Haves in the

burbs and the Have-Nots in the Bottoms. Not bad, perhaps, but never again. No more Middle Class. Never again mediocre.

Cleopatra returned to her desk and bent to the sealed box. She smiled as she ripped at the tape, careful not to ruin her manicure. A small creak from somewhere in the room caused her to straighten. She watched, startled, as someone crept out of the dark.

Oh, for Pete's sake. It was one of the security guards, his face draped in shadow.

"Sorry, I didn't hear the door. What is it?" Cleopatra didn't wait for a response. Instead, she turned her back as she bent to the box's cardboard flaps.

Shoes whispered against the marble floor, drawing closer. The guard...

Her mind caught up to what her eyes had seen, fear transforming her spine into ice. She rose with the deliberate slowness of someone in pain, turned, and gasped as the last person she expected to see stepped into the light.



CLEOPATRA AWOKE TO THE PUNGENT SCENT of smoke and gunpowder.

Fireworks.

She kept her mind there for a moment, allowing shattered memories to come together. Thoughts scattered like bits of debris strewn across a highway littered with potholes. She picked her way through the rubble until she found matching pieces, pieces that helped her understand what happened. A brief glimpse of... fire... a brilliant flash of light in darkness, but no sound. Not fireworks.

A gun.

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The fragments fused with another. The gun... a shot... crumpling to the floor.

Strange, I thought a shot to the head would have hurt much worse.

Cleopatra's right eye fluttered open. Only the right. Something held the left one shut. She couldn't feel anything on the left side except the area from her eye to along the bridge of her nose. Something warm trickled along the cartilage before running off the back of her nostril. It was anyone's guess where it went from there.

She lay on the marble floor of her office, only the bases of two of the room's towering columns visible from her position. Somewhere beyond the room's door, people gathered to celebrate her art gallery's opening. The main vestibule would be bright with light and laughter, everyone admiring her Egyptian-themed masterpiece.

If I scream for help... But no words came, just a gurgle in her throat and the taste of metal in her mouth.

Footsteps, quick and sticky, squished against the marble. Someone must have heard her. Cleopatra blinked away tears to clear her vision.

A monster, its face contorted and blurred, bent and stared at her. "Why aren't you dead?"

She knew her left arm moved only because blinding white agony erupted on her right side. She clenched her good eye closed and gasped, a burbling noise slipping between her lips. The moan that followed might have escaped, but she caught it by the tail and kept it prisoner behind her teeth. Slow, hot, adrenalin-pumping rage eased the searing pain. *You'll get no satisfaction from my suffering.*

When she commanded her eye open, a hand dangled before her face. Her hand. It left her narrow circle of vision, followed by something shiny... metal. Cleopatra couldn't find the word. Her hand returned. Sound... harsh... reverberating with a thin accented whine...

It hurt Cleopatra's ears.

"You won't be digging these into anyone else."

Marred chips of ruby-red fingernail, some a full inch long, popped off and away. One strong nail defied cutting. Snatched backward, it ripped, intact, from its nail bed, blood dripping from her fingertip.

Cleopatra's still-born screams nonetheless echoed in her mind as the assault continued.

Finger. After. Finger.

Her hand dropped, naked of its beautiful nails, to lie in a dark red stain on the chalky-white floor. Heavy black shoes stepped across the shallow pool. "Where's the trunk? It's always in your bedroom. What did you do with it?"

The monster shook her, and for what seemed an eternity, every nerve exploded. Sweat dripped in rivulets from her bronze skin as Cleopatra seeped, molecule by molecule, into the floor, becoming one with the cold marble.

The killer hissed from somewhere nearby. "You would never let anything separate you from that trunk. Where is it?"

Vestiges of a dream prowled Cleopatra's mind, scratching at the walls, demanding she experience it again. What happens when death and dreams collide?

Her eye... so tired... drooped, but she forced it to stay open. To see.

Maybe her life had been the dream. Beautiful from birth, everyone had jumped to please her, to give her everything she wanted.

No. Not everyone. Tabitha Pruitt had never fallen under her spell. The geek had fought her, denied her at every turn. Tabitha—her nemesis. Now Cleopatra prayed Tabitha would avenge her.

Prayed. Her mother would be pleased that she prayed. In the end.

I'm so tired. Cleopatra's eye drooped... closed.

Just one... more... bre...