

Chapter 1

I was convinced that God created the sultry summers in Georgia to help us understand that hell was no place to spend eternity. On this sweltering Saturday in Atlanta, I squatted behind a hedge wide enough to conceal my five-foot-four, one-hundred-twenty-five-pound frame, while bees and flies buzzed all around me.

The heat from the July sun had rudely settled onto my wet neck when I checked my cell phone. Just past ten, and this was the correct address. The one where my client swore that her husband spends his mornings with the lovely Jennifer Maine, a talented stripper with an apparent penchant for politicians.

I'm Valerie Curry, and everyone but my teenage daughter calls me Jinx. I work as a private investigator for Capricorn Hayes & Associates, a small firm that runs the gamut in security and private investigations. In my two years with the firm, I've only worked surveillance where I spy on cheating husbands or cheating wives and girlfriends. It sucks because I truly want more challenging work. I want to *investigate*, not just take compromising photos for husbands and wives on their cheating spouses. Although easy money, I want more. At thirty-three, I feel my time has come for a more rewarding career.

Now intent on snapping the money shot for my client, I stole this position minutes earlier after the homeowner left for the day. I was fiddling with my Nikon camera, when the familiar black Mercedes SUV pulled into the driveway across the street. The license plate with the Georgia peach logo read *GA SENATR*. Yes, that was the cheating husband I intended to get the goods on because his suspicious and unhappy wife intends to leave him.

The garage of the white, barn-styled, trilevel home rumbled up, and State Senator and gubernatorial candidate Frank Porter nosed his vehicle inside. A man I recognized as the senator's campaign manager was curling barbells. He suddenly dropped the barbells and approached the car. The tall, muscle-bound Stephen Gilmore sported a crew cut of blond hair that framed his tanned face. He wore biker shorts and no shirt. Sweat glistened from his perfectly chiseled torso. Gilmore broke into a slow grin as the senator, all five feet six inches of him, emerged from the vehicle.

Without knowing or understanding why, I focused my camera on the pair and began snapping photos. Gilmore ruffled the senator's dark curly hair before they embraced. Then, ever so slightly, the senator tilted his head up, and Gilmore's own head swooped down, and the two's lips met.

Oh shit! The money shot!

This was good stuff. I fell to my knees. With blades of grass tickling my knees and shins, I grinned then squealed with delight. "Wow. This is amazing," I told myself as I felt drumming in my chest. The camera whirred with each click. After all this time, the wife had been looking at

the wrong angle. Stripper my ass. With these photos, the wife would command a hefty divorce settlement and sole custody of the three kids to boot.

I kept my index finger pressed on the shutter as Gilmore grabbed the senator's hips. Because of the quiet, the continuous whir of the camera almost mimicked gunshots. I shook my head, disbelieving the brazenness of the public display of affection. With these shots, I would finally be able to pay off the loan to my childhood friend. *Click-click. Click.* Damn, this was good.

“Who the hell are you?” an angry voice beside me demanded.

My breath caught, and I whirled around just as cold water splashed my face. “Dammit!” While the water cooled me off, I knew it also fucked up my hairdo that I’d flat-ironed earlier. After squinting at the Chinese senior holding the water hose, she sprayed me again.

“Get off my neighbor’s property!” She bared her teeth and glared before showering me once again.

I danced from behind the hedge and caught a glimpse of the senator. He covered his pale face with his hands, while his campaign manager stepped out of the garage. A scowling Gilmore advanced toward me.

Suddenly, my body shrank in on itself. My mouth went dry, and my heart rate increased. Clumsily, I started toward my Toyota RAV4 but backpedaled after realizing I’d have to get past the menacing campaign manager.

So, I spun around. My feet took wing, and I sprinted in the opposite direction. I glanced over my shoulder only to see Gilmore charging toward me. As my breath burst in and out, I raced past a knot of teens on bikes. They jeered and shouted obscenities.

One of them shouted, “He’s gonna catch you!”

As I rounded the corner, I looked over my shoulder again and caught Gilmore thundering toward me. His beet-red face focused on catching me. I nearly tripped at the sight of his legs devouring the sidewalk. He really gained on me.

Goose flesh pebbled my arms, and I nearly tripped again but righted myself despite my heart ping-ponging inside my chest. Fire coursed through my legs, and I torpedoed past modest single-family homes while resisting the urge to glance over my shoulder again.

Suddenly, I darted into traffic.

Horns blared.

Brakes squealed.

F-bombs roared.

I dodged cars, SUVs, and cabs. A driver flipped me the bird. Up ahead, the city bus turned the corner and hissed to a stop at the bus sign. While waving my hands, I shot down toward the bus.

Just as I plunged myself inside, a strong hand jerked the back of my spaghetti strap. My momentum halted and reversed, then my feet slipped out from under me. The ground rushed up to meet me, and I spilled onto the sidewalk.

My ass stung. After rubbing one of those cheeks briefly, I nearly choked on the stinking exhaust fumes belching from the bus. I turned my head toward the inside of the bus. The female driver's mouth gaped. She shook her head then hastily closed the door. The bus hissed again, moved away from the curb, and merged into traffic.

For a short while, I lied there, my breath stuttering. Then I turned over and faced my captor.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, lady?” Gilmore loomed over me pointing his index finger. His cold blue eyes glowered. As he continued entering my personal space, I scrambled backwards then lumbered to my feet. Stephen Gilmore reached for my camera. I flinched and shoved his hand away.

“Get away from me!”

His eyes bulged now. He wagged his index finger at me. “Bitch, give me that camera!”

“No! Get the hell out of my face, asshole!” I spread my legs slightly. I thrust my shoulders back and my chest out. “You’re a bitch for attacking a woman!” He smirked but said nothing.

“Should’ve known that would serve as a compliment to you.”

Gilmore’s face contorted and flushed red. He reached for the camera again, but I drew back. There was no way he was getting it. After closing and opening my fist, I lifted my chin and blew out a deep breath. Then I took him in.

Taller than I’d first thought, I surmised he had to be at least six foot two. I didn’t know if my fists could reach that high. “You don’t want to fuck with me.”

“Oh? Why’s that?” He lunged.

I swung the camera up. It smashed against his nose, and he went down, crashing against the pavement. His eyes rolled to the back of his head then closed. He was out cold!

While his nose pulsed blood, I looked around me. Gawkers appeared apoplectic. Drivers honked. Some exited their vehicles. Now was the time for me to take off. As I jogged across the packed intersection, someone stuck a foot out. I tripped, and my Nikon scuttled away from me. I went to retrieve it. But traffic started moving again.

I jammed my hands inside my armpits to stop the cold sweat oozing from my pores. My eyes widened, and I could not blink. Instead, I cringed and flinched as the cars zipped by me. I

teetered on my tip-toes trying to snag my camera, which was resting on the solid white line a few feet away from me. Shit! A horn blared, and I stepped back. While I feared I'd be splattered into tomato soup, I needed that camera.

My bank account was already hemorrhaging money, and springing for another Nikon was not in my budget. I'd broken three in four months. My boss would be pissed if the agency had to spring for another camera.

But I snapped the money shot. That was most important. I took a deep breath and lurched forward. The careening of a white car and the squeal of its brakes made my stomach drop. I screamed then turned away from the oncoming car barreling down on me. My muscles tensed, and my posture went rigid. The car halted a few inches from me. I gasped.

The driver leaned on his horn. "You stupid ass! What're you doin' in the middle of the street?"

I ignored him and the catcalls from the construction workers across the street. After retrieving my camera, I willed my wobbly legs to move. Although my walk was unsteady, I managed walk in a straight path. I made eye contact with no one. By the time I returned to my RAV4, the senator's Mercedes SUV had vanished from the open garage.

Damn! In spite of everything that'd just happened, I'd hoped to get a reaction shot from the state senator. Would the very married senator still run for governor while banging his campaign manager?

After my tangle with Gilmore, I returned to the office, located in Decatur inside The Greater Atlanta People's Bank, a twelve-story rectangular structure with an underground parking garage. The glass and steel building occupied two city blocks. Only a handful of small businesses took up space in the bank. One of those small businesses was Capricorn Hayes & Associates.

I waved my lanyard across the camera, and the gate swung open; I descended to the lowest level, which housed luxury cars as well as inconspicuous ones for jobs like mine. I stepped out of my vehicle. The stagnant air enhanced the smell of exhaust. Just as I turned to walk away, someone spun me around and pinned me to my RAV4's back door.

"Don't move," warned a masculine voice.

I froze. The musk assaulting my nostrils told me the male was a runner—or had been running. Strong hands patted me down then massaged my shoulders before fondling my breasts. "You know, my boss may kill you for this," I warned.

A deep voice asked, "Who's he?"

"He's a bad mutha—"

“Shut your mouth!” He turned me over, and I stared into familiar baby-seal eyes that hinted of danger and pleasure. His bald head bent down, and his tongue traced the corners of my lips before he patted my ass and said, “I received a call from our client who apparently received a call from our targeted gubernatorial candidate. You think you did something special today, Jinx?”

I reached up and caressed his goatee. “Sure did, Boss.”

Capricorn Hayes scoffed. “Sho’ you right. But what have I told you about being aware of your surroundings at all times?”

I grabbed my boss’s arm. “But I’m in our secure building.”

He tilted his head and stabbed me with his gaze. He placed a finger to my lips. “At all times, be aware of your surroundings. I shouldn’t have been able to sneak up on you like that. Understand?”

I lowered my head and nodded. Cap and I used to kick it. I’d seduced him after two weeks on the job. Sometimes we couldn’t get enough of each other. But I determined to make him take me seriously, so we paused our sexual relations.

Capricorn’s eyebrows drew together. “One last thing. Why didn’t you go for my throat like I taught you?”

I raised my eyebrows then shoved him away. “You really wanted me to chop at your throat? I could’ve killed you.”

My boss shook his head and scoffed. “Hardly. I would’ve blocked you because I’d expect that. But a different perp might not. Understand?”

After glancing around uneasily, I wet my lips and nodded.

“Come on, Jinx. Let’s go upstairs.”

We rode the private elevator to the top floor, where Capricorn Hayes & Associates’ offices were located. Instead of hanging a left toward the office, we veered right toward his two-bedroom apartment. We stepped inside. Sunlight from the floor-to-ceiling windows kissed our skin. Cool temperatures from the air conditioning tingled my nipples.

He strode past his sleek caramel-colored living room furniture and headed for the bedroom. When he noticed I hadn’t followed, he stopped and beckoned me. I shook my head. “No way. This is business, Boss.”

Cap’s eyes squinted then twinkled with mischief. “I just think you should change your top.” He gestured at my tank top. “You’re overflowing.”

I glanced down. One of my spaghetti straps dangled. And my right boob jutted out. My mouth dropped. All those gawkers back there with Gilmore must’ve got a real sight. A flush crept across

my cheeks. The strap must've torn in my struggle with Gilmore. I pulled up my top, trying to cover.

"Don't bother. I've seen 'em all before. They're still beautiful. You still have some . . . clothes here. Get a clean T-shirt or something before you head back out."

I covered myself with my arms and did a slow burn then grimaced. What if I'd been met in the parking garage by one of my coworkers? Talk about mortified! I followed Cap into the bedroom; he headed for the shower. I pulled open one of the two drawers he'd assigned to me when we were still kicking it. After fishing out a blood-red cutoff T-shirt, I sat on the king-size platform bed, and made the exchange. Then I got on my cell phone and pulled up my email. Nothing pressing. I checked my voicemail messages. Same.

Soon, the water shut off, and Capricorn called out, "You still there?"

"Yeah. Where else would I be?"

"So, you got the money shot. Our client said the senator begged her not to go public. So it must be quite the bombshell."

I snorted and said, "Got that right." I still couldn't believe my luck. Catching the senator and his campaign manager nearly doing the nasty represented pure luck on my part and dumb luck on theirs.

Moments later, Capricorn emerged from the bathroom, his buff body glistening and smelling of the most masculine shower gel scent. Even soft, his penis hung long and wide. My lips parted half-expectantly. As if he'd affected the reaction he wanted from me, he smiled and finally tied a white bath towel around his tapered waist. I eyed him up and down then shrugged. "Why bother? I've seen it all before."

"Woman, don't start nothin' you can't finish. I'm already ready to blow your back out right now."

I shook my head and turned my body away from him. I had to get serious for what I was going to propose. Going to bed with Capricorn now would only elicit a negative reaction from him later. Plus, I was not ready for him to break my heart. "I refuse to be part of your three-woman rotation. Either I come first, or I don't come at all, Cap."

He wiggled his eyebrows and chuckled. "At least you'd cum." Capricorn quickly crossed over to me and pulled me into an embrace. "Anyway, who says you don't come first?" His penis stiffened then throbbed against my belly. My own hands moistened as we stared at each other. After trembling with desire for him, I pulled away, but he held me firm.

He froze me with his firm gaze. "Defense technique one-on-one, Jinx. How're you gonna get out of this hold?" I smiled and brought my knee up, but he sidestepped it. "Uh-uh. Uh. That's the first thing a man expects." He flattened one of his hands and gently placed it against my throat. "Always go for the throat. Be quick about it. And don't stop until he's immobilized." Then

Capricorn lightly gripped both sides of my neck. “If it’s a woman, or a small man, do this as hard as you can. I won’t do it to you because it’ll put you to sleep. Got it?”

I nodded, trying to shake off the intoxicating effects of his shower gel and his touch. It didn’t work. Warmth still flowed through me. I felt the hair on the nape of my neck and on my arms rise. And I shivered with desire for him. I wanted him bad. Moisture formed inside my panties, and I bit my lip. Suddenly, he released me, and I scampered to the living room. A few minutes later, he joined me. He wore khakis, a fitted black T-shirt, and matching Jordan’s.

He stopped in front of the sofa. “Remember what to do if you ever suspect someone is following you?”

I nodded because he’d drilled that tactic into my head first. “Use a series of turns. Four rights or four lefts. People may share the same patterns. But they don’t often make the same turns as you do if they’re not following you. But a stalker will pursue you with that pattern.”

Capricorn nodded. “Good.” He slid on the sofa next to me. “Show me what you got.”

While he viewed the photos, I watched his face. At first it was impassive. Then he turned to me. “So, he bats for the other team? Our client will probably be devastated. What woman wouldn’t? But I don’t think he’ll contest the divorce.”

“So, I did good?”

He scoffed. “You did fantastic. Great job. The bonus I promised will be in your account by the end of the day.”

I exhaled and closed my eyes. Now I can pay off the most important bill that’s been looming. Already a day late, I wondered why the creditor failed to contact me. “Cap, I’m glad you think I did good. Now . . .”

He rolled his eyes and threw his head back. “Oh, here we go. I guess you’re gonna ask for a raise now?”

I sighed. “Yes and no. I want an 8 percent raise.”

“Done.”

“And I want better cases. Specifically, I want to investigate—not spy on cheating husbands and wives all the time.”

Capricorn moved away from me then crossed his arms over his chest. “A lot of those cases are dangerous, Jinx. I give those to the men.”

I crossed my own arms and stared him down.

He shifted but held his ground. “You know nothing about detective work, Jinx. Look, I hired you strictly for matrimonial work. Now you tell me you hate it?”

I lifted my chin and curled my lip. “Not saying I hate it. I just want more challenging work. Cross train me. Even policewomen have to be trained in investigations.”

He shook his head and pulled on his goatee. “Too much money’s involved. If you make a mistake, tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars are on the line.”

“So . . .” I moved closer to him and caressed his inner thigh. “Teach me. Or I’ll teach you.”

His mouth went slack, and his eyes widened. “You’re blackmailing me?” His neck bent forward then suddenly stiffened back up. He scratched his jaw. “I’m betting you’re gonna scream sexual harassment.”

My hand traced the inside of his inner thigh. His breath caught, and his hand clenched the sofa cushion. I leaned into him and whispered, “Baby, I only scream in bed.”

Chapter 2

After leaving Capricorn’s apartment, I rushed home, showered, and changed into an orange linen business suit. But my hair that lady across the street from where the senator and Gilmore made out ruined my hair by spraying me with the water hose earlier. So, instead of blow-drying and flat-ironing my hair, I donned a two-toned curly wig and entered the Marlboro Club at one o’clock to meet my client for my first big case—a missing persons. Finally, Capricorn relented.

The establishment was located in Buckhead. When I walked inside, the Marlboro Club was packed with patrons wearing business attire. Males flirted with females. Females at crowded high-top tables laughed and joked with each other. Cloying perfume mixed with salt, sweat, nachos, and hot wings. I sauntered over to the bar, where strangers were either staring into their drinks or watching televisions affixed to the walls. As I approached the bar counter, I spotted the client standing tall, probably waiting for me. He nodded as I closed in on him.

Suddenly, the white guy sitting in the bar stool to the left of my client stood awkwardly and turned, facing me. He’d gone completely pale. He clawed at his throat.

Oh, gosh! He was choking!

He suddenly turned blue then collapsed.

Screams and gasps punctured the bar. Then all went quiet.

Swiftly the congressman stood the now unconscious man up. The congressman positioned himself behind the man. I watched as the congressman performed the Heimlich maneuver until a food particle ejected from the man's mouth.

I gasped, realizing I had stopped my own breathing as I waited for the man to start breathing again. He coughed violently and leaned against the bar. The establishment erupted into thunderous applause, then everyone returned to whatever they were doing before the near-death experience interrupted their pleasure.

Color returned to the white man's face. With his eyes brimming with tears, the man thanked the congressman profusely then staggered away while never looking back. The congressman trained his eyes on me.

I walked forward and extended a hand; he took it. At first his hand swallowed mine before the congressman caressed it. I cringed, smiled, then introduced myself. "I'm Valerie Curry."

His mouth formed an *O*, then he released my hand. "Really? I was told I was meeting a Jinx Curry."

I smiled. "That's me. That's what my friends and coworkers call me."

"I'm Congressman Calloway, of course." He gestured to the bar stool, and I climbed atop it and nestled my body against the black leather. He took the seat next to mine and looked me up and down.

A flush crept across my cheeks. I felt like he had X-ray vision, and he just undressed me. A blender whirred in the distance.

He licked his lips. "Jinx, I have some powerful advice for you."

I swallowed., almost dreading what the old man was about to impart. "What's the advice?"

His eyes dropped to my lap, and I became keenly aware of my exposed thigh, so I leaned away from him and turned the stool straight so my legs were directly under the counter. He leaned into me anyway. I smelled the Scotch on his breath. "Never stop showing your legs, Jinx. They look finger-licking good."

I coughed suddenly then cleared my throat. "My boss tells me your granddaughter is missing."

He signaled the bartender. "That's right. What kind of wine do you drink?"

"I don't drink any alcohol, Mr. Calloway."

The bartender appeared. Calloway said, "Scotch on the rocks. And bring this little lady a glass of your best wine, and put it on my tab."

"Right away, Mr. Calloway." Like a roach, the bartender scurried away.

I started to object to the congressman about the ordered wine, but then I thought better of it, so I checked my cell for messages.

When I glanced at the congressman, his lips pressed together, then he rubbed the back of his neck. “Am I keeping you from something important, Jinx?”

I dropped my phone into my purse. “No. No.” I drew my mouth into a straight line, bit my lip, and just stared at him. He appeared about a seventy-something light-skinned Black man with an abundance of freckles and moles adorning his clean-shaven face. He was wore a tan suit that showed a trim physique. I plucked out a notepad and pen from my purse and cleared my throat. “Tell me about Elena . . . is it?”

He ran his hand over a crown of faded white hair. “Yes, she’s my only granddaughter. My daughter, Liz’s girl. She’s nineteen. A sophomore at Emory, majoring in computer science and creative writing. No one’s heard from her in more than six months.”

I stopped writing a moment to massage my neck. Then I peered at him. “What about the police? What’d they have to say?”

He crossed his arms over his chest, and he shrugged. “They found no foul play. Plus, she was last seen on camera in Los Angeles two weeks after she disappeared. She used her credit card there for a hotel. Bought some food at a high-end restaurant. There was video footage of her dining alone.”

I stopped jotting again and hesitated before saying, “Mr. Calloway, perhaps she doesn’t want to be found.”

“You sound like the damn police,” he spat. He made sweeping arm gestures and glared at me. “Something must’ve happened to her. I know it.”

I tilted my head and eyed him suspiciously. “What makes you so sure? I mean . . . she dined alone. She checked into a hotel. She wasn’t seen with anyone. Why do you suspect foul play?”

A pinched expression crossed his face. “She would never put her mother through this. Never. Not after they’d just reconciled.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Reconciled?”

The drinks arrived. “Yes.” Calloway took a swig of his drink, but I didn’t touch mine. “Growing up, Elena and her mom butted heads.”

“Why?”

He dipped his finger inside his tumbler and swirled the Scotch around. For a long moment, he remained silent. He cleared his throat and said, “Liz was cracked out for a while.”

Instinctively, I reached out and touched his arm. “Oh, I see. I had a relative who went through that with his son. Drug abuse tears a family apart. What about Elena’s father?”

Calloway snorted. “That bum?”

I offered a small smile. “I’m just saying . . . Perhaps Elena’d reach out to him? I’ll reach out.

Where does he live?”

“Forest Lawn,” he sneered.

I sucked in a quick breath then slowly released it. “The cemetery? So, he’s dead?”

“As a doorknob,” the congressman deadpanned. He sipped his drink and stated, “OD’d ten years ago.”

I closed my eyes briefly. “Sorry to hear that.”

“I’m not.”

My eyes flashed on his. Brown daggers shot from them, and I rubbed the back of my neck then changed the subject. “Mr. Calloway, who are Elena’s friends?”

“That’s a dead end,” he said quickly. A pained expression crossed his features. “They don’t know anything.” The congressman flicked imaginary lint from his suit.

I frowned because he seemed to be hiding something. I shrugged. “Perhaps they know *something*. And perhaps not. But we should try talking to them. There has to be at least one friend she’s close to.”

The corners of his lips turned up. “Yeah. Her name’s Kristen. Kristen Hall. She didn’t tell me or the cops anything.”

“Sometimes friends won’t talk to cops or parents. Perhaps she’ll talk to me. Where can I find this Kristen?”

“She works at the One Trust Bank in Decatur. Look, Jinx. If you find my granddaughter, I’ll make it worth your while. I’ll personally give you a fifty-thousand-dollar bonus.”

My jaw dropped. I tipped my head back and closed my eyes. Possibilities swirled inside my head. I calculated all of the bills I could pay off—like my car note. Get ahead on my mortgage. Hell, I could buy me and my daughter a few outfits.

“Have I got your attention, Jinx?”

I opened my eyes. “Yes, sir.” I ripped a page from my notepad and scribbled onto it. “That’s the information you’ll need for my bank account.”

Calloway snatched up the note paper, smirked, then leaned in close to me. "I like a woman who understands business. Not many do." He pulled back and took a swig of liquor while regarding me through leering brown eyes. "Now, I have theory. Wanna hear it?"

Not really. My shoulders curled forward, and my chest caved in. "Certainly."

"Elena had a boyfriend." I perked up. Now we were getting somewhere. "He probably had something to do with her disappearance." I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. "Don't give me that look, Jinx. I want you to check into the boyfriend. His name's Deebo."

My eyes popped open. "The rapper?"

He sneered. "Yeah. That ghetto bastard. Told all my kids not to ever date niggas. I forbade them to do so. But that message never got through to my granddaughter. What did she do? She dated a lousy, thieving, gang banger. A thug of a nigga at that."

I flinched. If Old Man Calloway wasn't on a half-million-dollar retainer, and if my bonus was not fifty grand, I would have tossed my drink in his face and watched the red wine stain and ruin his perfectly pressed tan suit. Instead of tossing the glass, I asked, "If she's holed up with him, what do you want me to do? Drag her out of his home and back to you? Then what? She runs away again? Mind you, she's nineteen and a grown-ass woman, Mr. Calloway. What do you expect to happen?"

He leaned in close to me. The scent of Scotch wafted in my face. "Don't bark at me like some junkyard dog, Missy. Let this be my only warning for you: always watch your tone with me." The temperature in the bar suddenly dipped to freezing, and I shivered.

"You and your firm have exactly one week to find my granddaughter, or I will ruin that boutique of a firm of your boss's."

I stared at him. My initial impression was I might not be able to find Elena. Rich people knew how to easily disappear. Money could get you lost in the United States. But what if she'd left the country? What if she didn't want to be found? I keyed into what he said next.

"Yes, Hayes and I go way back. I gave him his first, second, and tenth case. If it weren't for me, he would never have expanded this agency 'cause I brought him clients. High-paying clients. How much would his firm be worth if I let it spill that all of his clients' secrets were compromised?"

"You wouldn't dare."

Calloway picked up the tumbler of Scotch and drained it. "Try me."

The Carlyle in Midtown housed some of Atlanta's most wealthy and famous citizens. The skyscraper displayed magnificent views of the city's landscape. And I eagerly wanted to take them in. At three fifteen, I stood in the lobby of this building waiting to be granted access to the penthouse. As I shifted my feet, I dreamed of my pantyhose and losing my pumps as well as my business suit.

But first, I had to interview Elena's boyfriend. Old Man Calloway made it clear that Deebo either knew something about Elena's disappearance, or he was responsible for it. Personally, I was skeptical. But for fifty grand, I wanted to take a peek and find the teen alive and well.

I mean, Elena earned herself a spot the dean's list every semester of college. So why had the popular student fallen off the face of the earth? Why would she ditch her family? I checked her X, Instagram and TikTok accounts. All of them went dark. I had to admit that it seemed strange. Young rich girl like that disappearing without a trace. It made me wonder if she'd had help. Perhaps Deebo helped her. After all, the multimillionaire maybe helped the teen ditch the family.

The concierge wearing a gold jacket spoke into a black telephone while he described me to someone on the other end. "Hold on," the concierge said. He put down the phone, whipped out his own cell phone, and snapped a picture of me.

I frowned.

But he held up a hand then fiddled with his phone before scooping up the black landline again. "Did you get it?" He nodded a few times. "So, send her up? Okay." He smiled and winked at me. "Take the first elevator. Deebo's expecting you."

I boarded the elevator and listened to one of Deebo's tunes all the way to the penthouse floor. When the doors opened, a pair of burly Latinos greeted me. One of them attempted to pat me down, and I stepped back. "Not a chance. You can tell by looking at me that I have nothing to hide on my person."

He snatched my purse, opened it, and plucked out my Glock. He removed the clip. "Nothing to hide, huh?"

I shrugged. "I forgot."

He placed my Glock inside his waistband. "You'll get this back when you leave."

The other bodyguard escorted me inside the palatial unit, which was a mess. Pillow cushions lied haplessly strewn about, and plates of spoiled, uneaten food stunk up the joint and littered the coffee and end tables and tiled floor. The contents of overturned beer bottles and the scent of marijuana wafted throughout the penthouse.

The bodyguard led me through the living room, out onto the terrace where a pool party jumped off. Gorgeous, scantily clad and nude women bounced and gyrated to a Deebo tune thumping outside in the stagnant summer air punctuated with weed and sweat.

I followed the bodyguard to a chaise lounge chair on which Deebo stretched out smoking a bong. I took in his nose ring and hoop earrings. His bony body left a lot to be desired. He was nude save for a black washcloth covering his manhood. Thank goodness. I wondered what the women were going crazy about. Why throw their panties at a man with no real form to his body? I guess celebrity and fame turned them on. Personally, I needed something to hold on to.

Deebo indicated the chaise lounge next to his. "Bitch, get up. Let her sit." The nude teen vacated the seat and scurried away. Deebo pointed his bong at the chaise. "Have a seat. They said this 'bout Elena."

"Yes, Deebo, I was hoping you could help me." I perched myself at the edge of the chaise and took out my recorder. "You mind?"

"Sure as fuck do."

I dropped the recorder in my purse and produced a notepad and pen. "This okay?"

He took a draw on the bong and blew a curl of smoke. "Proceed."

I wrinkled my nose at the skunky, musky smell wafting from the bong then fanned myself. "When was the last time you saw Elena?"

He squinted at me and shrugged. "Shit, I don't really know. I mean, we were all right." He shrugged. "Then we wasn't." He took another pull from the bong.

I waited, but he said nothing. "Did you quarrel?"

He frowned. "What?"

I shrugged and asked, "Did you guys have an argument? Did you fight?"

He squinted then shrugged. "What couple don't?"

I stopped scribbling and gazed at him. "So, you *were* a couple?"

A hard smile crossed his lips before he answered: "She one of my bitches, yeah."

I scratched my head. "So, you're *still* a couple?"

He smirked. "Soon as she comes to her senses. She'll be back."

A fake smile crossed my lips. "What makes you so sure?"

He scowled and said, "She'll be back. She got somethin' of mine, and I ain' lettin' her get away with it." He took another pull from the bong and blew curls of smoke into the sky.

What could Elena possibly have of his? Or was Deebo lying? He could have been lying. Nevertheless, it was worth asking him about it. I cleared my throat. “What does Elena have of yours?”

He rolled his eyes then squinted again before breaking into another hard smile. “Something that lasts forever. We’re long-lasting. She know that. I know that. And that son-of-a-bitch of a grandfather know that.”

My body posture perked up, and I tilted my head to the side. I softened my voice and asked, “What about the congressman?”

“He foul as all get out. Elena left *him*, not me,” he sneered.

I wrinkled my nose and wondered what to make of what he’d just said. Had Elena left the her family? Or, just her grandfather? “What do you mean by that?”

He blew smoke in my direction, and I turned away. He chuckled and said, “She had problems at home. She can’t stand that motherfucker. I don’t exactly know why. I just know she hates his scandalous ass.”

“How’s he scandalous?”

Ugly laughter overcame Deebo. His body quaked, and I feared the washcloth would slip from its place. Now that would be a sight.

“If Elena want nothin’ to do with him, then he scandalous ’cause she worshiped the ground he walked on before she left.”

I looked around. I nodded at some of the nude women bobbing in the kidney-shaped swimming pool. “Was Elena close to any of these women?”

“Huh?”

“Were any of these women her friends?”

He took a long pull from the bong. I waited while he blew another curl of smoke. “Naw. She hated these bitches. I told her that this was part of the show. My entourage. But she possessive and shit. Thought maybe she’d go all Glenn Close on me or something.”

I frowned.

“Yeah. I saw that movie, *Fatal Attraction*. Bitch was crazy. But, naw. Elena’ll be back.” He gave a strong, decisive nod.

I regarded him closely. He seemed sure of himself.

He eyed me. “What, lady? You want some of this?” He removed the washcloth, revealing his hardness. Even hard, his penis maybe grew a few inches.

I smirked then burst into full throated laughter.

Deebo eyed his hovering bodyguard and snapped his fingers. “Get this bitch outta here.”

The bodyguard jumped into action. He scooped me up with one hand and carried me into the penthouse through the living room and deposited me at the elevator. His partner handed me back my Glock then its clip. When the elevator door opened, the more burly one who carried me through the penthouse shoved me inside. I turned and stared at him.

He smirked then grabbed his crotch. The elevator doors closed.

I expected to get a clue as to Elena’s location. Deebo provided no help. Finding Elena was going to be more difficult than I’d initially thought.

Chapter 3

Just before the One Trust Bank closed, I sailed through the glass-entryway doors and nearly tripped on one of the black mats. The white-haired security guard quickly provided an assist by righting me.

“You okay, Miss?”

“Yes, sir.” I strode over to the roped area leading to a line of cashier wickets along a wall, and easily spotted Kristen, the youngest female among one male and two middle-age females. Kristen’s shrill voice rattled off amounts of cash while counting bills into the hands of a woman.

The smell of pine, coffee and perfume mingled in the air. Minutes later I walked up to Kristen and announced myself. Her smile slowly faded, and her eyebrows squished together. “I’m sorry. Who’re you again?”

“Jinx Curry. I’m here about Elena. Shall we talk here or outside?”

“Please step out of my line. I’m on my job. Speaking about Elena’s personal.”

“Then I’ll wait until you’re off in a few minutes.” I stepped out of Kristen’s line and parked myself in a comfortable chair in the lobby. While she waited on her last customer, she kept eyeing me. She pushed her brown hair out of her face and waited patiently on an elderly woman. Then she grabbed her belongings, spoke to some man who seemed to be her boss, then joined me in the lobby.

“Shall we talk here or outside?” I asked.

She gestured outside, and I followed the petite teen out into the parking lot. She stopped at a bench and placed some sunglasses on her face. She punched in some numbers on her phone. “Look, I only got a few minutes before my ride share arrives.” She sat down. “What do you wanna know?”

I pulled out sunglasses and protected my own eyes. Then I sat down beside her and fished out my notepad and pen. “When’s the last time you spoke with Elena?”

She looked away and said, “Same day she disappeared, I guess.”

“What did you talk about?”

She shrugged. “A class project.”

I tilted my body toward hers. “Oh? What was that?”

She shrugged and said, “We’re in the same creative writing class. We *were* in the same creative writing class. She wanted help nailing down a setting for her romance novel.”

“Romance? What’s the plot?”

She shrugged. “I-I don’t know.”

I patted Kristen’s hand, and she snatched it away. “Listen, Kristen. Sometimes friends can’t talk to parents or the police about what’s happening with their friends. But friends may feel most comfortable talking to someone who has Elena’s best interests at heart.”

She scoffed. “And that’d be you? A woman hired by Congressman Motherfucker, himself?”

“Whoa!” I glanced down at my notepad then back at Kristen. “Look, I don’t mean Elena any harm. And if for any reason you feel that Mr. Calloway does, then you should tell me what’s going on.”

Kristen shook her head. “Not my story to tell.” Then she chewed on her bottom lip.

“But . . . there is a story to tell then?”

Kristen looked away again, this time at her white sandals. When she gazed at me again, she asked, “And what could you do?”

“Why, get the police involved, of course.”

Kristen scoffed again. “Congressman Motherfucker has the police in his back pocket.”

For a moment, I stared at her.

With trembling hands, Kristen opened her purse and took out a vape, pressed a button and started vaping. The smell of bubble gum filled the air.

I touched her shoulder. This time she didn't flinch. "Kristen, I'm here to help Elena. Not hurt her. I talked with her boyfriend. Deebo?"

Her features tightened, and she shot back, "Why would you talk to that asshole?"

"I thought he could help me locate Elena."

"That sum-bitch is the last asshole she'd turn to." Her voice dripped with irritation.

"So, who would Elena turn to?"

"Look, if a person don't want to be found, they won't be found." She checked her phone then stood. "My ride share's here."

I dug out my wallet, plucked out one of my business cards, and handed it to her. "If you think of anything else, contact me at that number."

She nodded and turned away.

"One last question, Kristen." She turned to me expectantly. "Do you know where your friend's hiding out?"

She grimaced. "Who said she's hiding out?" She turned and strode away from me. I watched her get inside a black sedan before I headed for my own car. Talking to Kristen proved to be a waste of time.

As I drove to my Duluth home, I contemplated what would make a teenager—a well-to-do teenage girl—flee her friends and family. What would make her leave college without a trace and disappear? An unwanted pregnancy came to mind, but I shook my head. If Elena didn't want the baby, she could've just aborted it or put it up for adoption. I was getting the feeling something more sinister happened when suddenly the SUV lurched forward. Son of a bitch! Someone just rear-ended me.

I gazed through my rearview mirror. Unable to identify the sex of the driver through the tinted windows of the imposing black Suburban, I pulled onto the quiet, tree-lined street to inspect the damage. I removed my Glock from my glove compartment and placed it inside my purse, leaving the weapon in my grip, though. These days, one could never be too careful because of the carjackings. I stepped from the comfort of the air-conditioned RAV4 into the still and gauzy air.

Damn, it was way too hot. After eyeing the Suburban, I sauntered to the back of my vehicle. The bumper hung. My jaw hardened, and I waited for the driver to step out. When the door finally opened, my imposing and portly childhood friend stepped out.

Fuck.

Bam McGrady waddled over to me in what could only be considered black silk pajama bottoms and no shirt. He ran his sausage fingers along the bumper before gripping it and ripping it off. He tossed the bumper to the side, and it clattered against the curb. A sinister smile played across his fat, soup-cooling lips. “Got my package, Jinx?”

I hunched over while my head drooped slightly. With my most pressing bill one day overdue, I hoped there wasn’t much interest attached to the principal. “Got your money, Bam.” I released my grip on my Glock and dug out my cell phone. I checked my bank account, and sure enough, the bonus was there. It was just enough money to pay Bam but not enough to cover my mortgage also. Shit. “You do Zelle, Bam?”

His dead-brown eyes zoomed in on me. He curled his lip and asked, “Home girl, is that how I gave it to you?”

With dread, I shook my head.

He narrowed his eyes. “Naw. I gave it to you in cash. Expect you to do the same.”

I sighed. “Then I can’t get it to you until tomorrow.”

He erupted into a sinister chuckle before he added, “That’ll be more interest.”

My chin dipped to my collarbone. “How much more?”

“For you? Ten percent on the principal.”

My head snapped up. “Th-that’s crazy! I can’t come up with that by tomorrow and still pay my mortgage. Have a heart, Bam.”

He sighed heavily. “I’ll give you four days, Jinx.”

I breathed shallowly. “Come on, Bam.”

He threw up his hands, and I smelled body odor. His man-boobs swayed, and I tried not to laugh. “Look, Jinx, if you were anybody else, a finger or a toe would be missing right now. Or a leg would be broken. I mean, I usually send one of my boys to collect for me. But I wanted to do you a solid because I know they can get carried away at times. Feel me?”

I nodded.

“But you my home girl. We go way back.”

I snarled at him. “We go so way back that you jack up your home girls. Home girls like me, right? We’ve known each other since grade school, and now what? You want to break my legs?”

Bam shook a finger at me. “Look, you came to me. Remember? ’Cause your credit was so fucked up you couldn’t get a traditional loan. Tell your moms to stop gamblin’, and you won’t have to bail her out anymore.”

Bam angered me by demanding such a ridiculous amount of money, and my mom pissed me off for not only getting herself in this jam, but for me having to bail her out of it! To hell with Bam. I lifted my chin just as my heart rate quickened. “Well, I’m giving you the principal in four days. Nothing more, nothing less. I’ll pay the interest later.”

Bam stared at me momentarily then shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

“What time can we meet?” I sucked in my breath.

“Noon. Right here.” He waddled back to his Suburban and heaved himself inside. It wasn’t until he sped off that I realized I was still holding my breath. I exhaled then gasped a few times. I decided that I had to find Elena by this time next week, or Bam might render me dog meat.

When I finally arrived at my bi-level home at the end of the cul de sac on Macon Drive, I decided I needed a relaxing bubble bath before maybe taking Arielle out to dinner—if my daughter hadn’t already eaten. Inside my garage, I inserted my key, pushed open the door and stepped inside the family room. Rustling sounds made me look up, and I inhaled sharply at the sight in my family room.

My daughter and her boyfriend uncoupled themselves on the black leather sofa and fell onto the light-brown carpet. Like a rocket, Conner shot to his feet, but Arielle took her sweet time getting to hers. Although they were totally clothed, my voice roared, “What the hell’s going on here?”

Conner’s face and ears reddened. He straightened his shorts and T-shirt while Arielle calmly fluffed her locks. “Hey, Mom. We weren’t expecting you home so soon. You texted and said you’d be working late.”

I grimaced then shook my head. “I’ll ask y’all again. What the hell’s going on here?”

Arielle scoffed. “What does it look like?”

Conner’s blue eyes widened in surprise before they fixated on the carpet. He cleared his throat, then his gaze met mine. “Sorry, Mrs. Curry.”

“You bet your sweet ass you are,” I snapped. I pointed at the door. “Out!”

Conner blanched, then he skirted me and scrambled up the steps to leave through the front door. After I heard it slam, I turned to Arielle and regarded her five-foot-nine-inch-tall, athletically built frame.

She defiantly placed her hands on her hips and lifted her chin. “You scared him.”

“But not you?” I blinked rapidly then stared at her.

She shrugged.

I wanted to slap my fifteen-year-old daughter into next week, but I resisted that urge and jabbed my index finger in the air at her. “What did I tell you about not having company—especially boys—while I’m not at home?”

She scoffed, “Well, I’d never have company if I waited for you to get home because you’re never here.”

I glared at her and exclaimed, “You’re grounded.”

Arielle tossed her head back and giggled before returning her gaze to mine. “And how’re you gonna enforce it?” she taunted. “Look around, Mom. You’re never here. Haven’t been for a long time. I’ve been making my own dinners for two years now. When you *finally*—and I mean finally come home, you’re dog tired. You might take a bubble bath and ask me about my day. Then you fall into bed. All so you can play Charlie’s Angels the next day!”

“I gotta put food on the table,” I snapped.

“Bullshit!”

“No, that’s serious shit, Arielle! Cuss at me again, and I’ll slap the taste out of your mouth!” I glared at her. Undaunted, she glared back. I dropped my purse on the carpet and circled her. Arielle stood firm and defiant with her arms crossed over her heaving chest and her long legs in a wide stance.

Arielle shrugged. “What’s up, Mom? So, you come home. And you’d probably say I still couldn’t have company because you gotta go to sleep. So, when can I have company?”

She had me there with her smart ass. A horrifying thought entered my mind. I don’t know if I really wanted to know the answer, but I asked the question anyway. “Are you and Conner sexually active?”

Arielle’s bee-stung lips curled. “Wouldn’t you like to know?” Then she turned away from me, lifted her high booty higher, and stomped up the stairs.