

Frame and Fortune

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Frame and Fortune

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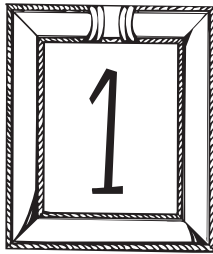
Dedication

As always to Daniel and Noelle, who make this all possible.

And to Rida for giving me the chance.

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To all my writer friends who make writing fun, thanks for being on this journey with me.



“Ivy, I need your help. Right now.”

“Well, sure, Bella,” I said, flipping through the newest lingerie catalog I’d received in the mail. There were several things I would definitely be ordering for the back room of my store, The Masked Shoppe.

“Ivy! Are you paying attention?” Bella’s voice rose with every word until I wanted to pull the phone away from my ear.

I threw the magazine onto the coffee table and sat up straighter instead. Bella Landry sounded desperate and desperate was not something she *ever* did. What on earth could be the matter?

No sense hanging out in the dark when the answer was but a question away. “What do you need? Don’t tell me you forgot another old biddy makeover party.” I snickered. “When are you going to stop doing those? They drive you crazy and make you crazier if your tone of voice right now is any indication.”

“Um, it’s nothing like that,” Bella said, her voice quavering. Immediately, I was even more concerned. Bella was a confident, self-assured woman. I’d only seen her once without full makeup and hair perfectly done, and I had never heard her unsure of

herself, not like this, anyway.

“What’s going on?” And why did I have this quivery feeling in my stomach? Bella was normally the one with the freaky premonitions.

“The thing is, I’m, uh, in jail and—”

“Jail? Jail! What are you doing in jail?” My mind rushed through the possibilities. I’d never known Bella to be a violent person. Well, there was that one time that she kept hitting me in the arm after I faced down a woman who was set on killing me several months ago. I’d inherited the costume shop from my Great Aunt Gertie which the woman had thought was going to be hers. She got violent at what she deemed the unfairness of it all. But that’s another story.

Anyway, my poor little mind could not come up with any reason why the police would have arrested Bella. Especially now that she and Officer Jared were so cozy.

“If you’d listen for a second instead of screaming in my ear, I’ll tell you what happened.” Now there was the Bella I knew and loved. Did I mention she had a bit of an attitude?

“I’m listening.”

“Well, finally!” She took a deep breath and then launched into this fantastic tale of a dead body in her beauty shop’s walk-in refrigerator (one I had no idea she’d had) and how the only reason she was allowed to call was because the police didn’t have enough evidence to hold her but they sure were trying.

“Wait, wait, wait,” I said, baffled. Bella arrested for suspicion of murder? This was too much to take in without some clarification. “So you found a dead guy in a big meat locker in the back of your beauty shop, which you don’t use but never had removed after you bought the store from a caterer. This dead guy happens to be the same guy who invited himself to your table the other night when you were eating alone. You rebuffed him and now he’s dead.”

“That about covers it.”

“Why didn’t you call me about this dead guy before you ran off to the police?”

“Oh puh-lease, Ivy. Like that was going to do me any good. I wanted him out of the locker, pronto. You certainly weren’t going to come over to haul him off.”

“True, but I could have at least been there with you.” We’d been friends through almost three seasons now and I considered her my *best* friend. No, I wouldn’t have tried to move the body—I’d like to think I’d learned my lesson—but at least I could have been moral support.

“Besides, Jared was there,” she continued. “It didn’t even occur to me that I would be a suspect. I kept asking them to leave with the body, but no one was paying attention to me. Then all of the sudden I was in this interrogation room that stinks like sweat, with coffee that doesn’t taste much better.” The tremors in her voice sounded more like rage now. Had Jared been in that stinky room with her, too? Or had he finished his duty at her shop, leaving her alone to deal at the police station by herself?

But I didn’t think that would be an appropriate question at the moment. It would probably set her off more. “So are they going to keep you or what?”

“They can’t keep me because the idiots don’t have enough evidence.”

“I don’t know that I’d call them idiots while you’re still sitting at the jail. They could throw you back in the clinker.” And wouldn’t that just suck?

“But it’s true. Plus, they gave me a little booth to talk in, so it’s not like they can hear me.”

“Still maybe not too smart.”

“I don’t care at this point!” she yelled. “They’re making me stay in town. They also said they’d be watching me closely. I’ll have no real privacy until they find out who did this. And to top it all off, Jared was the one who pushed me into the fricking cell! Can you please come and pick me up? *Now!*”

“Of course.” I hustled to grab my keys and purse off the kitchen table. “I’ll be right there.” Running out of the kitchen, I was forcibly reminded I was still on the wall phone when it yanked me back into a chair, pushing all the breath out of my lungs.

“What happened?” Bella yelled. “Is someone in your house again? Tell them you do not have time to be robbed because I need you here.”

I got enough breath back to actually laugh at that. Yes, I frequently had people running in and out of my house with my

belongings, but not this time. “No, it was only me being an idiot. I’ll be there in a couple of minutes.”

I hung up the phone this time before I ran out to my freestanding garage and started my brown Santa Fe. It was one of two brown things I had left. My kamikaze attacks on my wardrobe along with my person were renowned once I acknowledged I had sunk into a monochromatic color scheme of brown. It’s very scary when you realize even all your underwear is some shade or another of brown—all because someone once gave me a compliment on a brown blouse. But not anymore.

The building housing the police station was only a short distance from my house, but I decided to use the car. Maybe I could swing over to hang out a bit later with Ben Fallon, the lover of my life. He was constantly at my house lately (I wasn’t complaining. Yet), but with a new murderer possibly on the loose those good times might quickly go by the wayside during my snooping. And if it wasn’t murder, it was family interfering. It was a toss up which one was worse sometimes. But we hadn’t had a murder in almost four months at this point, so I had been hopeful for more of the same. Not so much now. Oy!

Despite the seriousness of Bella’s situation, I found myself humming along with the stereo at the thought of Ben. He was six feet of yummy, delicious male. I’d had him at my disposal for almost six months at this point and had no intention of letting him go. My mouth watered at the very thought of all that flesh in my hands, but I calmed myself down because it wouldn’t do to go into the police station all hot and bothered over the prospect of spending time with him.

Parking in front of a two-story, renovated house, I jumped out of the car and made my way to the police station. A metal desk sat in what was once a formal dining room, with a stick of an old woman behind it filing her nails. Not much crime going on in town, I guessed. I’d been in here several times, normally because I was in a spot of trouble or another, but I’d never seen this lady before.

“Hi,” I said, trying on a smile for size. “I’m here for Bella Landry.” My voice lilted up at the end, frustrating me, like I was asking a question. This frequently happened when I was near

authority figures, but I was on a mission so I didn't have time to berate myself for not being more forceful.

"She's in the back. Who are you?"

I squinted my eyes so I could read her nametag. I better not need glasses or the roof was going to blow. This here local Martha's Pointer (that's what they called themselves, I swear) was typical of most of the other citizens. If they didn't know you since you were knee-high to a grasshopper, you were immediately branded a troublemaker and an outsider. I was working on changing that, but after being here for months I still had won only over a few of the three thousand souls here in town. I had Ben, Bella, Martha, and my Dad who had moved here in December. I also had Mr. Winnet and Mr. Hanks, but that was about all of them. Even in a town this small, that was not much.

But back to the drama in the police station. I squared off against Marge, giving her my best evil eye, which isn't very impressive but I did try. Putting my hands on my full hips, I sucked in a breath—which pushed out my chest—and tried to stare her down. Now this might have been impressive in someone who was six feet tall with a flat belly, but I was on the other end of the spectrum. A little over five feet and very roundly built, I should have been able to snap Marge like a twig. But she had a can of mace on her belt. I deflated immediately when her hand strayed to the canister. She flipped the snap securing it with a smirky smile.

"Um, yes, well..." I stuttered. "May I please see Bella? My name, for your records, is Ivy Morris. I own The Masked Shoppe down on Main."

"Uh-huh." She gave me her own evil eye. I must say I was impressed. I might be able to hope for that level of potency when I reached her age, but for right now I was no match for her. "Well, you take yourself on down the hall." She pointed with one bright, shiny fingernail. "She should be waiting for you."

"Thank you, Marge. It was a pleasure meeting you. I hope someday you'll come into the Shoppe." No sense in wasting an opportunity to promote the store. I doubted she would ever come in though, because it appeared her underwear was permanently lodged in her ass so she wouldn't need any new ones.

I walked down the hallway, pausing to get a quick glimpse

into the two rooms before the hallway ended. One was completely empty, but the other had a fair-haired man sitting with his back to me. That's all I saw before the door was unceremoniously slammed in my face. Sheesh!

Bella was at the end of the hall waiting for me. Her eyes were red rimmed, yet no mascara ran down her cheeks or made her look like a raccoon. Note to self: ask how the hell she manages that. Her mahogany hair was pulled back into a ponytail with strands falling against her neck. She looked thoroughly disheveled for her. I raced into the room wanting only to help in any way I could. I gave her a quick hug before releasing her. "Are you all right?"

She raised her eyes to mine, the fear lurking behind the bold front she put on was evident to me. "Great, thanks. Can we get out of here while I still can?"

"Uh, yeah, sure. Was there anything we need to do before we can leave?"

"I need to pick up the few things I had in my pockets and then my purse, but the rest has been taken care of." She hung her head for a second while her shoulders heaved. "Thanks so much for picking me up, Ivy. I don't think I could have trusted anyone else to come get me."

"Hey, that's what I'm here for," I said, thinking she should have been able to call on her boyfriend. But since he was the one who put her in here, I guessed that was out of the question. "You can tell me all about it on the way home."

We trundled down the hallway. The door of the occupied room was still closed, but I could hear laughter through the wall. I put my arm around Bella's shoulders, walking between her and the room. Laughter was not exactly the best medicine for her right now.

As we made our way back up front, Marge stood at her desk with the black phone in her hand. "Yes, sir, I'll tell her," she said. "Yes, sir, you can count on me." She hung up with a decisive click, that smirk still on her face.

Do you think it might freeze there if I whacked her in the back like in *One Crazy Summer* with my heartthrob John Cusack? No time to contemplate that since she walked out from behind her desk to block the way to the door.

Bella tensed next to me, her whole body going stiff as a newly hair sprayed beehive hairdo. I patted her arm, trying to be as reassuring as possible. Surely they were not going to hold her now that I'd come to get her. "What can we do for you, Marge?" I asked, trying to keep my voice pleasant—no need to arouse her trigger finger on the mace.

"The chief wanted to make sure Ms. Landry here is warned not to leave town. He may have more questions for you and wants to keep an eye on you. So no quick out of town jaunts, or going to Jersey for the weekend."

"I'll make sure not to go out of town, Marge. Thanks a lot for the warning."

Normally that would have been said in this awesome snarky voice with a bite like a shark. Instead, this time Bella sounded resigned. I take that back, she actually sounded grateful for the restriction. *What?*

Bella continued to the front of the converted house. Dumbstruck, I followed. What was going on? Without a word, she climbed into the Santa Fe, then rested her head back on the headrest, a look of defeat on her face.

I climbed in after her. "Hey, what's going on?" I asked, really concerned that all of the strength seemed to have left my feisty friend.

"I don't know what I'm going to do, Ivy." A tear leaked out of the corner of her eye, although it didn't ruin her makeup. "The police say they have some very convincing evidence I did it, but they need more solid facts before they can hold me."

I let go of the wheel with one hand and held hers. I wasn't always one for touching, but this warranted some reassurance. When I was a suspect a couple months ago, I had been questioned down at the station. Let me tell you, it was no picnic.

"That last little warning was more of what I've been enduring all day," Bella continued, squeezing my hand. "The sly innuendos, the outright disrespect. The man found dead was Trev Brewster. Another favorite son in town, he was second only to my ex. Everyone is convinced I ran off the first favorite after we got divorced, and now they think I've killed the second one. This is a nightmare. They are going to do everything in their power to put

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this one on me. I can't help feeling someone is trying to take me down after all these years."

That did not sound good in any way, shape or form. Cripes!