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By Victoria Laurie

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The crew sets up surveillance cameras to watch for the possessive poltergeist while Luke is sleeping. But when he goes outside in the middle of the night and returns hours later covered in blood, they are all very concerned—especially when the news reports the murder of a young woman in the neighborhood.

Now M. J., Heath, and Gilley must remain self-possessed as they try to stop a wicked ghost whose behavior is anything but neighborly.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the *New York Times* Bestselling Ghost Hunter Mysteries

“Delightful....Laurie nicely balances goofiness and terror.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“A maestro of the paranormal whodunit.”—Genre Go Round Reviews

“A series that combines suspenseful tension with humor, romance, and mystery.”—*Kings River Life Magazine*

About the Author

Real-life professional psychic **Victoria Laurie** drew from her career as a gifted intuitive to create the characters of Abigail Cooper and M. J. Holliday. She is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the Ghost Hunter Mystery series, including *What a Ghoul Wants*, *Ghoul Interrupted*, and *Ghouls, Ghouls, Ghouls*, as well as the Psychic Eye Mystery series.

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Chapter 1

Being a psychic medium definitely has its downers. As a group, we're a pretty haunted lot. (Yes, I went there. . . .) Many, if not most, of us had troubled childhoods that caused us to develop a sixth sense in order to cope. And I'm no exception. My mother died on an autumn morning when I was eleven, and in his subsequent grief, my father turned to the bottle and his work. In many ways I lost both parents that day.

It took years, but Daddy finally let go of the grip he had on his daily half gallon of vodka and sought help. He's been sober for about sixteen years now, but the residual damage to our relationship remains. During my teenage years we fought constantly. In fact, I spent most of my junior and senior years of high school at my best friend Gilley Gillespie's house, being looked after by Gil's wonderful mother, who'd been treating me like one of her own from the moment my own mama passed away.

Things didn't improve even after high school when Gil and I moved from Valdosta, Georgia, to Boston.

Daddy and I just couldn't seem to make peace even with those twelve hundred miles separating us. And every visit back to Valdosta thereafter was torture for me—usually ending with an early flight home to Boston. Recently, however, that's changed, and I can safely say that these days we've never gotten along better. Although that could be because we haven't spoken to each other since I started showcasing my talents on TV.

Daddy was willing to tolerate my rather, as he put it, “disturbing” ability to talk to the dead as long as I didn't make a public spectacle of myself. Nearly two years ago I'd done a cable special on haunted objects, and since then I've landed a nice contract working on my own ghostbusting cable TV series, called *Ghoul Getters*. News of my success on the airwaves spread like wildfire in Valdosta, fueled no doubt by Mrs. Gillespie, who's crazy proud of both Gilley and me. The consequences, however, are that now the only acknowledgments I get from Daddy are a Christmas present (picked out by his secretary) and a birthday card (also picked out by his secretary) with a check inside (probably forged by his secretary).

And as I brought the mail inside my office in Boston, so happy to be home again after a grueling four-month filming schedule, my mood dampened the moment I saw the return address on a small package mixed in with the bills and ads.

“Well, I guess my birthday *is* next week,” I said with a sigh, passing through the inner lobby of the little office space I rent out on Mass Avenue, about three blocks away from my condo. After setting the other mail aside, I searched my desk for a pair of scissors.

“Come ’ere!” I heard a squeaky voice cry.

“In a sec, baby,” I replied.

“Come ’ere!” the voice insisted.

I ignored the command and fished around the drawer, finally coming up with the scissors, and began to carefully cut through the package.

“Come ’ere! Come ’ere! *Come ’ere!*”

I share my office (and my condo, and my life) with a feathered, red-tailed African gray parrot named Doc—?whom I’ve had since fifth grade. He’s adorably sweet, funny, and maybe a teensy bit demanding. “I’m busy, honey,” I told him.

Doc climbed along the bars to exit the little door of his cage and make it up to the roof—?which houses a nice play stand, and where he could perch and have a better view of what I was fiddling with. “What do you do?” he asked. Doc speaks better English than most toddlers.

“Opening a package.” At this point I got the thing opened and managed to pull out a square black box with gold lettering on top, which indicated it’d come from one of the finer jewelry stores in Valdosta—?my hometown. Lifting the lid, I sucked in a breath when I took notice of an absolutely beautiful gold charm bracelet with three charms—?a golden parrot, a small happy ghost, and a heart. For a moment I just stared at the gift, completely taken by surprise. “What’re you up to?” Doc called, trying to get my attention again.

I realized I had my back to him, so I turned and lifted the beautiful bracelet up for him to see. He cocked his head curiously.

“What do you think?” I asked him.

Doc blew me a really good raspberry.

“Everyone’s a critic,” I laughed. But I went back to staring at the charm with a mixture of bewilderment and delight, while Doc added to the raspberry a long litany of clucks, whistles, and happy chirps.

Doc’s been with me since right after Mama died. My

paternal grandmother had given him to me after my mother’s passing to help bring me out of the terrible grief I was silently suffering.

The baby parrot was like a beacon of light in a world filled only with heartbreak. My mother had been the kindest, most wonderful and loving person I’d ever known, and her loss devastated me right into muteness. I spoke not one word for many months after her funeral. Even when I fell and broke a finger, I cried silently, unable to free my vocal cords from the crushing weight of my grief. Doc changed all that. Like a phoenix he

pulled me from the ashes, and slowly, with his help and love of mimicry, I healed and started talking again. But the chatty, charming bird seemed to have no effect on Daddy. And I'll never understand why, but right from the start Daddy had seemed to resent my delightful pet. In fact, he'd tolerated Doc a lot like he'd tolerated my ability to talk to dead people . . . ?as in he'd barely tolerated him at all.

So, opening Daddy's gift to reveal something so lovely and thoughtful as a parrot charm and a ghost charm was a real surprise. And the heart was also an out-of-character choice from Daddy. He just wasn't sentimental or outwardly emotive. He was more like a closed door that I'd long since given up knocking on.

For a second I thought that it simply must have been his secretary's choice, but she'd never shown one shred of sensitivity for me. Previous gifts were simplistic items, like a pair of candlesticks, or a paperweight, or a picture frame. I'd long thought of Daddy's secretary of twenty years, Willamina, as a harsh, cold woman who preferred dressing all in black except for the bloodred lipstick she coated her thin lips with.

Her style made her look as if she were perpetually in mourning, and given how my mother's death had turned

Daddy into such a terribly cold and bitter person, I found some irony in that.

At last I tore my eyes away from the charm and fished around inside the envelope it'd come in, finding a card there too. I opened it to read a lovely handwritten note in beautiful cursive, wishing me the happiest of birthdays and hoping to catch up soon. The handwriting wasn't anyone's I recognized, but the signature was clearly Daddy's. And not the forged signature of his secretary, but Daddy's real scraggly scrawl, which added even more mystery to the gift.

I moved to my desk and sat down, because I needed to sit down. Slipping the bracelet on, I stared at it and wondered first what was going on with Daddy, and second, how should I respond to such a lovely, thoughtful gift?

The average normal person would've immediately picked up the phone to call and thank her father for the kindness, but as you may have guessed, I'm not exactly normal. There were too many years of missed opportunities, broken promises, harsh words, and judgmental attitudes to be swept aside by a bit of precious metal.

Still, after taking off the bracelet to set it gently back inside the box, I did reach for the phone. "Sweet baby Jesus, gurl! Why're you calling me so early?" Gilley answered by way of greeting.

"I got a birthday package from Daddy," I said, getting right to the point.

Gilley yawned, and I could imagine him bleary-eyed and mop-headed, tangled in his bedcovers. "Let me guess: This year's check is for two hundred, right?"

"No. It's not a check."

"His secretary just sent a card? Jeez, M.J., why does that man even bother anymore? I'll call Ma. She'll make sure you get a nice present on your birthday."

I smiled. Mrs. Gillespie had been making sure I received lovely gifts on my birthday for twenty-two years now, and she never needed prompting from her son, either. "No, Gil, you don't understand. Daddy sent me a really nice gift."

That won me another yawn. "Black leather gloves?"

“A solid gold charm bracelet with three charms: a parrot, a heart, and a little Casper ghost.”

Gilley was silent for about five seconds. “Is your dad sick?”

I leaned back in my chair and threw an arm over my eyes. “I have no idea. We haven’t spoken in almost a year and a half.”

“Leave it to me,” Gil said. “I’ll call Ma and get the scoop.” Mrs. Gillespie was tied to all the gossip in our hometown.

I hung up with Gilley but kept my arm over my eyes. What if Daddy *was* sick? What if he was *really* sick? I knew that with my abilities I could probably find out the answer, but I was too chicken. There was a part of me that didn’t want to know, because I’d already lived through one parent’s terminal illness, and it’d nearly been my undoing.

Doc began singing a Village People song and I knew he was trying to coax me out of the distressed state I was in, but my mind was going in circles and I couldn’t pay attention to him at the moment. Instead I turned my chair around, propped my feet up on the windowsill, and went back to laying my arm over my eyes. After working for much of the last year in the middle of the night, I find that I think better in the dark.

“M.J.? Are you all right?” a voice asked several minutes later.

With Doc’s singing and my whirling mind I hadn’t heard the front door open. What’s more, as I stiffened and sat up in the chair, I realized I recognized that voice. The day suddenly went from disconcerting to crazy weird. Turning slowly to the front, I took in the tall, dark, and incredibly handsome man standing in my doorway and had to work hard to appear calm and nonchalant. “Hello, Steven,” I said. “What brings you by?”

My ex-boyfriend smiled in that way that’d always made my heart quicken . . . ?okay . . . ?still makes my heart quicken. Also, the bastard had the gall to smell really good too. “How’ve you been?” he asked, his voice deep and rich, like a great cup of coffee.

I felt my head bobbing. “Good . . . ?good. You?”

“Good.”

“Good.”

There was a bit of an awkward pause and then the door opened again and in walked my current boyfriend, Heath—who also happens to be rather tall, dark, and seriously hunky.

Things went from awkward and weird to *Are you kidding me, universe?*

Heath said nothing; he simply came in wearing a smile, took one look at Steven, darted his eyes to me, back to Steven, then back to me as if to say, “*Seriously?*”

I pretended not to notice. Oh, and I also held in the urge to run out of there as fast as my feet could carry me. “Steven, you remember Heath. Heath—who? Steven. Steven—who? Heath.”

The two surveyed each other with narrowed eyes and forced smiles. I had a moment to compare the two of them side by side and it occurred to me that as similar as they are in the basics of black hair, dark eyes, and

tall stature, they're still strikingly different. Steven's shoulders are broad and his chest is very defined, while his legs are very long. His face is also distinctly European in structure with a wide brow and square features, while

Heath's face is very angled with high cheekbones and deep-set eyes. His frame is also more proportional and corded with lean muscle. In other words, neither was the kind of guy you'd kick out of bed for eating crackers . . . ?at least not until after you'd had your way with him.

While the men stared each other down, I cleared my throat and shuffled a few things around on my desk, and that's when Heath must've noticed the charm bracelet I'd set back in the box. "What's that?" he demanded, pointing to the box on my desk. "You giving her presents now, Sable?"

Steven's brow furrowed. "Pardon?"

Hastily I put the top of the box back on to cover the gift. "It's from my father, Heath," I explained quickly.

"For your birthday," Steven said with a knowing nod. "That was nice of him."

I noticed Heath paled a little. "Today's your birthday?" he blurted out; then his face flushed red. "I mean, yeah, totally. Happy birthday, honey! I came to take you to a birthday breakfast!" Glancing back at Steven, he said, "My gift's in the car."

Steven smiled (a bit evilly, I thought). "Her birthday is next week, Whitefeather. The eleventh. Might want to mark that down on your calendar."

"What brings you by, Steven?" I nearly screeched, desperate to change the topic before this came to blows, and judging by the furious expression on Heath's face—we weren't far from that.

Steven and Heath glared at each other for a few more seconds before my ex turned back to me and said, "I need your help."

"With what?"

"A haunting."

That took me by surprise . . . ?much like the entire morning. I waved at a chair and he came forward and took the

seat directly across from me. Heath grabbed the other chair and brought it around the desk to park it right next to mine. I held in a sigh, hoping there'd be no suggestion from either of them of lowered zippers and a measuring tape before the conversation was at an end. "Where?" I asked, pulling a pad forward to write on.

"It's not a where," Steven said, and for the first time I could see that his eyes were lined with worry. "It's a who."

I blinked. "Who what?" (I may have been a little off my game from all the testosterone fumes.)

Steven shifted in his seat, and I suddenly noticed how nervous he was. Coming to me hadn't been something he'd done on a whim. He'd had to talk himself into it. "It's not a place that's haunted. It's a person. My fiancée's brother. We think he's possessed."

"Your *fiancée*?" I gasped at the same time that Heath said, "He's possessed?"

Heath turned narrowed eyes on me while the corners of Steven's mouth quirked, and that rather big ego that'd been a part of the reason I'd left him came shining to life again. "Yes. To both of you," he said. (But I thought he looked a bit smugly at me.)

"Well . . . ?er . . . ," I sputtered, doodling large circles on the notepad while I tried to collect myself. (He was getting married? We'd only been broken up for a few months! What the hell?) "Congratulations!" I said. Perhaps a bit too enthusiastically.

"Why do you think this guy's possessed?" Heath asked.

Steven sighed and rubbed the stubble on his chin. "You have to see it to believe it," he said. "But I'm telling you, there is a ghost haunting this young man. My fiancée, Courtney, can tell you about it better than me. I'd like to introduce you if you're interested in taking on the case."

"Possession isn't exactly our area of expertise," I said. No *way* was I getting involved in this. (Okay, so really, no *way* was I meeting his fiancée!)

"It wouldn't hurt to meet her and talk about it," Heath said, never once turning his face away from Steven. "Is Courtney nearby?"

I felt my posture stiffen. Again the corners of Steven's mouth quirked. "She's at work at the hospital."

Now my smile was forced. "Oh? Is she a candy striper or something?" (Please, oh, please let her job be unimpressive!)

"Surgeon," Steven said.

(Dammit!)

"General surgeon?" I asked. Before a devastating injury to his hand, Steven had once been one of the best heart surgeons in the world. Maybe he'd met another heart surgeon he was attracted to but secretly competitive with. Maybe their competitive nature would eventually escalate to the point that they'd hate each other. . . .

"Neurosurgeon," he said.

(Double-dammit!)

"Ah," Heath said smugly. "A brain surgeon. That's cool."

I was sincerely regretting not having dashed out of the room ten minutes earlier. "Well, I'm sure she's lovely," I said. No one in the room believed me. "And while I'd *really* like to meet her, we're just coming off a crazy intense shooting schedule and I'm not sure we'll have time on this hiatus to take on any new cases."

Steven cocked his head. "That's not what your Facebook page says. Forgive me for keeping tabs on you," he said with a sheepish grin, "but I needed your help and looked online to see where in the world you were. I was surprised to find you back here in Boston, and your status this morning said that you couldn't wait to get back to work on some regular cases."

(A dammit three-peat!)

"We can at least meet her, Em," Heath said agreeably. I wanted to choke him. "How about dinner tonight?"

“That’d be great,” Steven said, already standing up. “Say around seven?”

“Seven thirty would be better,” Heath said (just to be a pain in the butt, I thought).

Steven smiled tightly. “Of course. Courtney will be coming off a twenty-four-hour shift, but if it’s better for you . . .”

Heath wavered and I was still looking for a way out of this. “We can probably make seven,” he said.

“Good,” Steven said, and with that, he turned and headed to the door. Before exiting, he paused and turned back to look at me. “We can meet at the place I took you to on our first date. Do you remember?”

I felt my posture stiffen again. At this rate I’d need the Jaws of Life to ever get myself to relax again. “I do.”

“Excellent,” Steven said. “See you.” And with that, he was gone.

It took me much of the next hour to get my head around the fact that my ex-boyfriend was engaged. I felt a mix of emotions, all of them small and petty.

I did my best to hide them from Heath, but he was on to me. “Wanna talk about it?” he asked after my eleventieth sigh.

I forced a smile. “Nope.”

“Wanna go for a run?” he asked next.

I sat up in my chair. A run was exactly what I needed. “Yes,” I said. “I think I would.”

Heath and I closed up the office and headed to my condo, which was practically next door, to change. I live in a city just outside of Boston called Arlington. I like it because it still has the feel of living in the city but carries a little more greenery. My condo sits in a fairly nonde

script building on Mass Avenue, with my unit tucked nicely in the back away from the sounds of traffic. Gilley owns the condo one floor below mine, and often cooks me breakfast. When Heath and I entered my condo, I didn’t hear any noises coming from downstairs—?no music or the loud clomping of footsteps—?-and I wondered if he’d gone out. Heath and I changed and hit the trail about a half mile from my home.

My boyfriend is an incredible athlete. He can run for days and barely look winded. He’s lean and strong and pushes me to run faster and farther. As we were training for a half marathon in the next few weeks, I appreciated his presence. I also appreciated that he doesn’t talk a lot on the trail.

The run was just what I needed. I was able to sort out a lot of my feelings about Steven during the hour run, and put many of those feelings that were hurtful into perspective. I wondered if Steven had felt all of what I was going through when he learned that I was falling for Heath. I hadn’t cheated on Steven with Heath—?-but I’d come close. Steven had been incredibly mature and understanding about it too. I remember seeing the surprise in his eyes when I told him that I didn’t think it was working out between us, but I could tell that he wasn’t as shocked by the fact that I was breaking up with him as much as he was surprised that my heart had already moved on to someone else.

It made me feel even worse about the way I’d handled the situation, and I knew I couldn’t fault Steven for moving on so quickly either.

Still, the truth was that it hurt a little to learn that he hadn't just moved on—he'd committed. A subtle difference maybe, but one that stung.

As Heath and I finished the seven-mile loop, he fiddled with his watch and held his hand high. "Eight-minute mile, girl! Way to go!"

I blinked. The fastest we'd ever done that loop was an eight-fifteen average pace. And although I was winded and sweaty, I hadn't felt the pain of pushing myself to a faster time. "Are you for real?" I asked him.

He showed me the watch. "You did good, babe. You'll be running times in the sevens before you know it." He added a hug and I realized right then that I'd been wasting a lot of time feeling upset about Steven when I'd already landed the best guy ever. Heath was always there for me, in every way. He understood me like Steven never had, and he watched over me without hovering, or being needy. He was also a fellow medium, and that was a whole other side of me that needed no explanation for Heath.

"Love you," I whispered and squeezed him tight.

Heath chuckled and kissed the top of my head. "That's a relief," he said. "I was beginning to worry you might have regrets about us ever since Sable walked through the door."

I sighed. "If I had any, it was only because of the way I handled the breakup." That was a teensy bit of a lie, but Heath didn't need to know that.

Heath let go of me and took my hand. "Come on, let's get some coffee."

Now, I know it sounds weird to go for coffee after a hot, sweaty run, but it was something that both Heath and I really enjoyed. Plus, even though it was late spring, the day was a little chilly. By the time we got to Mama Dell's Coffee Shop, we had both cooled down and were looking forward to the smooth, rich brew that she served.

Mama Dell is a dear friend of mine. Originally from South Carolina, Mama D. is a tiny woman with a bigger-

than-life personality. In years past her coffee shop had done quite well in spite of the fact that her coffee tasted only slightly better than tar, and that almost directly across the street from her was a Dunkin' Donuts—a New England staple if ever there was one.

Somewhere along the line when I'd been in Europe hunting down spooks, some brave person had finally posted a review of Mama's coffee on Yelp. It hadn't been kind, but it'd been the truth. That'd sort of sparked a wave of similar reviews, but the funny thing was, almost all the negative reviews had been coupled with four stars, because everyone *loved* Mama Dell. What she lacked in brew know-how she more than made up for in personality.

Still, Mama D. was determined not to let those reviewers have the last Yelp. She flew to South America and took a course in coffee brewing from the best coffee bean growers in the world. Then she flew to Hawaii and cultivated relationships with some Kona Coffee growers. Finally, she even headed to Ethiopia and toured a few coffee plantations there too. She came back with an amalgamation of three signature blends, and now she's got so much business you can almost never get in the door before ten a.m.

It's a little quieter in the afternoons, and Heath and I found the place only modestly packed when we walked through the doors of the cozy café. Mama D.'s shop is full of kitschy touches. There's a large rack to the side

of the front door where patrons who plan to have their coffee in can select a mug that matches their mood or personality. Against one wall is a huge bookcase stocked full of dog-eared paperback mysteries that Mama has collected over the years and chooses to share with her patrons. It works on the honor system, and it's a rare thing for a patron to borrow a book and not bring it back. It's

far more likely that her customers actually add to the collection. Near the register is a large pastry case chock-full of tasty delights fresh baked that morning, from Mama's famous banana nut bread to fruit tarts created by her husband, known only as "the Captain."

Deeper inside the coffee shop are cozy seating areas, where overstuffed chairs, perfect for taking a load off or sinking into a good book, beckon all who enter. Mama D.'s clientele rarely tap away on computers or phones—that's frowned upon by Mama—and those that continue to resist the unspoken rule soon learn they'd be better suited to hanging out at Starbucks for such activities. Mama Dell's place is for relaxing, chatting with friends, enjoying the ambience, smooth coffee, and delicious pastry. It isn't a substitute workplace, and she makes sure her patrons know the difference.

I think that's the real reason she has such a loyal following. At Mama's you can completely relax, not stress yourself out by reading an e-mail, or seeing that your friends on Facebook are having a better time. Here you can unplug, and it's wonderful.

"Well, there's a sight for sore eyes!" I heard her call as Heath and I picked through the rack of mugs, hunting for just the right ones for our coffee.

I turned and saw her wiping her hands on a towel while she quick-stepped it over to me. "Afternoon, darlin'!" she sang as she wrapped me in a hug before turning to Heath to hug him too. "How y'all doin' today?"

I felt my shoulders relax. Mama D. has the loveliest Southern charm about her. She reminds me of home, and my own mama. "We're good, Mama D. You?"

"Oh, Lord!" she exclaimed. "What a morning it's been! The Captain's been with the architect all morning and I think his head's about to explode. We're going a little over budget, but we need the space."

Mama D. has plans to expand into the office space next door, as the rug dealer that'd previously occupied that space had gone out of business. If they go through with their plans, Mama D.'s will double its square footage.

Our host continued to chat happily at us as she crooked her finger for us to follow her over to the counter, where she ducked behind the pastry case and came up with two slabs of banana nut bread and her delicious honey butter without even waiting for our order. She then filled our cups and waved her hand at Heath when he tried to pay. I saw him put a ten in her tip jar.

And then she said, "Oh, do you know who came into the shop this morning, M.J.? Dr. Sable! And guess what! He's engaged! He showed me a picture of his fiancée, oh! What a pretty girl!"

All that tension that'd fallen away walked right back up my spine. Mama D. had set up my first date with Steven, and even though she knew we'd split up, she still remained a big fan of his. As she chatted on about how well he looked and how good it was to see him, I pushed a big old smile onto my face and nodded like a bobblehead.

"We saw him this morning," Heath said, subtly placing a hand on my lower back. "And we're meeting Steven and his fiancée for dinner."

Mama D. clapped her hands together. "That's wonderful! Oh, I'm so happy y'all are getting along so well."

I was grinding my teeth together so hard that I couldn't really respond, but for Mama D.'s sake I kept that big smile firmly planted on my face, and thankfully, a group of students approached the counter with mugs and hungry expressions. Heath and I managed to move off without looking rude.

We found a love seat near the fireplace and I sat down with a sigh. "Maybe we should cancel," Heath said after a minute of silence.

I'd been staring into the fire and I pulled my eyes away and pushed the smile back up. "It's fine. *I'm* fine, Heath."

He nodded. "Oh, I know you're okay with it. But I'm not so sure about it."

My smile became real and I rolled my eyes a little. Heath was just saying that to make me feel better. I reached out and took his hand. "We'll go to dinner," I told him. "We'll meet the fiancée and see what's up with her brother. It's cool."

Heath arched a skeptical eyebrow.

"I pinkie-swear I'm cool," I insisted. If I said that a few times, maybe it would be true enough soon. "Let's go to dinner, and hear what they have to say."

Heath nodded. "It's just a job, right?" he said.

"Yep. Just a job. And if at any point during dinner you think I'll need reminding that it's just a job, feel free to say something."

"What's just a job?" I heard a voice ask.

Looking up, I saw Gilley standing there nibbling on a puff pastry. "Hey!" I said. "Where've you been?"

"Seeing Michel off," Gil said, adding a pout as he took a seat across from us. Michel was Gilley's new boyfriend, whose mother is French, but his father is a Scot and so is Michel. We'd met him a few months earlier as we were wrapping up our final shoots for our cable show, and he'd proved very good with a handheld camera in some rather dicey situations.

"Seeing him off?" I said, sitting forward. "You didn't break up with him, did you?" I liked Michel, not only because he was a lovely person, but also because he'd taken the annoying right out of Gilley. With Michel, Gil had lost fifteen pounds, smiled more, pouted and complained less, and was just a general delight to be around. Without Michel, Gilley's charming company could be used by the CIA to extract information from terrorists.

"No," Gil said with a sad little sigh. "He's got a job in New York. He won't be back till the weekend after next."

Fourteen days. I wondered if we could all last that long without Michel as a buffer.

"Anyway, I talked to Ma," Gil said next, eyeing his puff pastry with more than a hint of guilt in his eyes. He'd been doing so well on his diet.

Abruptly, I remembered the gold charm bracelet. "Yeah? What'd she say?"

“Well,” Gil said, picking away at the pastry, “it seems your dad has a girlfriend.”

I choked on my coffee. “*What?*”

He smiled wickedly at me. “It was only a matter of time, M.J.,” he said. “Or in your daddy’s case, twenty-three years.”

I coughed for a bit as Heath patted my back. Mama Dell even rushed over with a glass of water. At last I felt I could breathe without sputtering. “Who is she?”

Gil shrugged. “Ma doesn’t know much other than that her name is Christine Bigelow, originally from Jacksonville. She moved to town about three months ago and took up with your daddy soon after that. Ma says she bought the Porters’ old place and there’s nothing but construction crews up there day and night.”

My brow shot up. The Porters had been a prominent family in Valdosta since before the Civil War. Their home was one of those great big plantation estates with Greek columns, grand porches, and lush rolling lawns. Over the years the Porter family had left the area one by one, venturing to more bustling communities like Atlanta, Jacksonville, and the like. I’d heard that the Porter mansion had been all but vacant in recent years, but I was still surprised to learn now that the house had gone up for sale.

I imagined that although the place might be grand,

it’d likely need some major renovation to make it livable. “She bought the Porter place?” I repeated. I was still stunned that my father had taken up with someone. To my knowledge he hadn’t so much as looked at a woman since my mother died. I guess I’d taken it for granted that he never would.

Gil nodded. “She’s got some bucks apparently.”

“What does she do?” I asked next.

Gil smiled slyly. “Do? She doesn’t do anything, M.J. Her husband died and left her a boatload of money. Now she spends that and hangs out with your daddy.”

“How . . . ?how did they meet?” I didn’t know if I was happy or upset about Daddy dating again. I was bordering on upset because, even though it’d been well over twenty years since Mama died, it still felt a bit like he was cheating on her.

“She went to see him to help set up a trust fund for all the money her husband left her,” Gil said easily.

I wasn’t surprised Gilley knew all these intimate details. The gossip vines in Valdosta are like kudzu—they’re everywhere and cover everything.

“This is good news, right?” Heath asked, peering at me as if he couldn’t understand why my eyes might be watering.

I swallowed hard. “It is,” I said, already wondering if I could send back the charm bracelet.

“Hey,” Gilley said, sitting forward. “Your daddy has been alone for a really long time, honey. It’s okay to let him have some company, right?”

“Sure,” I said, but my voice sounded flat. “Yeah. It’s a good thing.”

Gil and Heath exchanged a look, and it irritated me. It said they thought I might be taking all this a little too hard. I cleared my throat and stood up. "It's going on three. I've gotta get showered and changed for tonight."

Gilley and Heath got up too. "What's going on tonight?" Gil asked.

I completely forgot that I hadn't told him yet. Heath beat me to it. "Sable stopped by the office this morning."

Gil's eyes bulged. "Oh. My. God!"

"He asked us to dinner," Heath went on. "With his fiancée . . . the neurosurgeon."

It was Gilley's turn to choke on his coffee. "Whoa," he said when he could speak clearly. Then his gaze shifted to me. "Awkward . . ."

"Steven has a job for us," I said quickly, trying to make light of the fact that my ex had gotten engaged mere months after we'd broken up. Also, I knew I'd have to try to rope Gilley into helping us if we decided to take the job. "The fiancée has a brother who's having some trouble."

Gil cocked his head. "Trouble? What kind of trouble?"

"The spooky kind," I said.

"Yikes. Well, thank God I'm free this evening. What time is dinner?"

"Who said you were coming?" The last thing I needed was a snarky, acerbic-tongued dinner guest when we met Steven's fiancée.

Gilley rolled his eyes. "Honey, I wouldn't miss this for the world."

I glared at him. "No."

Gil gave me an appraising look. "Sugar," he drawled, "you'll need me."

"Ha!" I scoffed. "Like a hole in the head."

Gilley shook his head and *tsked*. "So, you're going to rely on Heath to have your back when you meet this gorgeous neurosurgeon with a giant rock on her finger?" Glancing at Heath, Gilley added, "No offense, doll."

Heath narrowed his eyes at Gil. "None more than usual taken, Gil."

But I was more focused on what Gilley had just said. "Who said she was gorgeous?"

"Oh, please, M.J.," Gil said. "Have you ever known Steven to date anyone who wasn't gorgeous?"

"I've only known him to date *me*," I said levelly.

Gil inspected his nails. "I rest my case."

"Em," Heath said, wrapping an arm around my waist. "It's just dinner. You'll be fine no matter who shows up because I'll be there to make sure Sable knows I got the better end of the deal."

I looked up at my sweet, sincere, sensitive boyfriend and caressed his cheek. Then I turned to Gil and said, "Dinner's at seven. At Tango's. Be there on time for once." And then I headed out of the coffee shop to sprint home and get ready.

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