

JANE BOND

AND THE MISSING ROMANCE WRITER

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Ruth Gabour, a classy dame and my grandmother, who could give Jane a run for her money.

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CHAPTER ONE

It was hot as Brad Pitt in “Fight Club,” and twice as sweaty.

Louisiana summers are hell.

I pulled into the parking lot of a dilapidated brick building. A length of broken concrete dipped and twisted my car in grotesque imitation of a whirly-world ride at the state fair. Some might have thought it was fun. For me, however, each crunch, lift, free fall, and crash stirred visions of the horrors happening to the underpinnings of my car.

The third peeling blue metal door was my target. A quick jerk of the wrist and the emerald green Mini Cooper was parked in a tiny upfront spot. A spot no tank could squeeze into.

I turned the key. The sudden void of blasting AC and Dean Martin’s “Mambo Italiano” swept over me. The Mini likes the music I like and works tirelessly to keep me cool. The vivid green matches my eyes. A sexy car. It gets me places. Sometimes places I don’t want to go.

I looked hard at the door in front of me. It was indifferent. The paint shrugged off tiredly. “So don’t come in then,” it seemed to say.

Stepping out, I smoothed my knee length pencil skirt and white button down, gave a toss to my long brown hair, and patted the Mini’s white top, whispering “So long.”

Old cigarette butts and pollen permeated the thick air, intensified by the morning dew and gathering humidity. The smell of a new day.

A moist line formed around my hairline within seconds. A teasing bead of sweat tickled down my back as I clicked up the few steps to the door in three-inch black pumps.

The source of the fresh morning scent was right outside the door – one of those four foot high cement atrocities filled with sand and butts.

I opened the door. My teeth ground as a bell jangled my arrival. I hated that bell. The room with its fourth rate office furniture presented itself to me through blinding fluorescent light from a bare tube. The fixture was missing its cover. A gray, once-overstuffed couch, its stuffing duct taped back in, was flanked on either side by gaudy oversized Chinese style lamps sitting on Queen Anne style cherry wood end tables.

The Chinese and Queen Anne would likely object to that association.

A large secretary's desk, faux wood veneer popping off in random places, huddled beneath mounds of paper, pastel sticky notes, pictures of animals and women on drunken nights, and colorful paperclips.

No secretary sat behind it.

"Jane, that you?" a gravelly voice called out from the doorway to the left.

"Good morning, Charlie," I replied crisply. Who else would it be? I walked through the doorway to my right and into my office. On accepting this job three months ago, I had insisted on at least second rate office furniture. The veneer on my faux wood desk was still firmly attached. Charlie had advised me that if this ever changed, there was superglue in the supply closet. The ancient black phone was clean – I had personally sprayed it down with 409 to make sure. No display, just a rotary dial. Charlie wouldn't have paid for caller ID anyway.

I booted up the ancient PC, turned on my calculator, and pulled a neat stack of papers towards me, feeling a rush of anticipation.

I'm an accountant. I like it when things add up. Within minutes I was absorbed in my work.

The bell jangled, and I heard the stumbling gait of Ange in the morning. The scent of Obsession, overlaid with cigarettes and chicory coffee, wafted into my office. It waged war on the thoroughly conditioned office air.

"You're late!" Charlie bellowed.

"Fuck off," Ange muttered, her croak a study in angst-ridden agony.

Four months ago, I decided it was time to go into a different line of work. I had paid off my house within three years of buying it and bought the Mini with cash. It made the salesman nervous when I pulled out my suitcase at the final transaction. Working nights, I finished my degree in accounting about a year ago, again, paying cash for everything. I spent the next six months studying days and working nights, and managed to pass the CPA exam the first time around. Working nights sounds like I had a lot going on in the day. I did. But really, night is the only time you can make money when you're a bartender at a strip club.

Since I had no debt and all the essentials, including \$150,000 stashed away in high yield funds and \$10,000 in petty cash hidden away in the secret cubby Dave built for me, I could afford to be choosy about my new line of work.

Which might not seem obvious to a stranger looking at my current office.

The odor of Obsession and cigarettes grew stronger, preceding Ange into my office. My nose twitched as it teased into my nasal cavity, a demented tango of scent.

Ange grasped the sides of the doorframe and leaned in, eyes slits against the neon fluorescent light, her bleached femme-mullet teased high and surrounding a face thickly layered in makeup.

“Hon, you got any Tylenol?” Ange asked in a desperate morning voice.

Her scent rubbed at my olfactories, then seemed to try for a full assault, forcing into my sinuses with aggression.

“No,” I said dizzily. “You took the last of it yesterday morning.”

“Damn,” she sighed and staggered away from the door frame. “Charlie!” she shouted. “Our first aid kit is out of Tylenol. Give me some money so I can go get some more.”

“I’m not paying for your daily hangovers, Ange. Buy your own damn Tylenol.”

A muttered expletive as Ange crashed into her chair, which screeched in protest.

I’d had several job offers. One that even paid better and was in a nice shiny office building on Sherwood Forest Boulevard. This job, however, came with a door, and only two other people I would have to deal with on a daily basis.

I am not a people person.

My phone trilled shrilly. “Christ, can you get that?” Ange pleaded from her desk.

“Bond,” I said into the receiver.

“Jane, thank god!” my sister said in her breathy voice. “Can I come over tonight?”

“I’ve got kickboxing tonight.”

“I need you.”

This was not news. “Come over at 7.”

“You’re the best!”

I shook my head as I hung up the phone.

Technically my half-sister, Betty Warren. It’s the one technicality in my

life that seems unimportant. Mother intended for her to be Elizabeth, perhaps Beth, maybe even Liza. She was never supposed to be Betty. Elizabeth, however, would have fit her like a muumuu would have fit Marilyn Monroe. Betty fit her like spandex. The good kind.

Mother was somewhere in South Africa on husband number four, sending a single Christmas card once a year addressed to “Jane and Elizabeth.” Mother was an archaeologist – which made sense. She was much better at understanding dead people.

I dug back into my numbers, becoming absorbed in their patterns and inconsistencies, listing the latter out on a spreadsheet I presented to Charlie once a week. The cover sheet titled the report “Top Reasons You May Go to Jail.” He was not amused.

Neither was I.

“Jane!” he bellowed. An intercom system was not in the budget. I straightened the stack of paper I had been working on, locked my PC, and with one last longing glance at the piles of numbers waiting for me to make them right, walked towards Charlie’s office.

I glanced over at Ange, who had a compact out and was reapplying vamp red to her full lips. Perhaps too full, but that was her business and her five hundred bucks.

None of the mass of papers had moved, but her computer was up, showing a background of butterflies with an inspirational blurb about angels at the bottom.

I walked through the open door, on which hung a plaque he’d commissioned himself probably a dozen years ago naming him Charles Jackson, President of Jackson Enterprises. Charlie’s office was full of cheap black metal furniture, 70’s modern.

Charlie faced away from me in his oversized black pleather executive swivel chair. Not that I would have known by just walking in. He’s a short man. I played along and coughed, and he did the dramatic swivel to face me.

He was a squat man, who wore three piece suits even in the sauna of Louisiana summers. He gnawed on an unlit cigar, his chubby fingers crossed in front of him.

“Close the door,” he said around the cigar. “Have a seat.”

I did as I was told, crossing my legs, letting my skirt hike just a little higher than was necessary. He took a moment to appreciate the view. Interactions with Charlie typically went smoother after this sort of nonverbal exchange.

“I got a problem.”

This was not news.

He waited for a reaction.

“I need your help,” he finally continued. I watched the large brown cigar, a dark line where he had been sucking at it, work its way around his red mouth, almost escaping with every syllable, but never quite falling. Hypnotic, I thought, jerking my eyes away.

“Can this wait?” I snapped. “I’ll have a full report for you on Tuesday, as usual.”

He waved a hand. “It isn’t an accounting issue.” He sighed dramatically. “I might not have mentioned I got a deal with a few publishing agents.”

Charlie might not mention a lot of things until the numbers start getting fuzzy and government officials become interested.

“Actually, I’m an agent for an author who’s done pretty good for me. A legit deal, too.” Charlie talks about people like you might talk about stocks. He leaned forward, taking out the cigar and gesturing randomly with it. The wet, soggy end was gruesomely fascinating.

“She signed with me, put out four best sellers in three years, made us both a bunch of dough, and now I got a six figure deal waiting on her next one. She was supposed to get the manuscript to me a month ago, and now I’m feeling heat from the house.”

“The house?”

“Publishing house.”

“Right.”

I kept my expression expressionless.

An excruciatingly long moment followed.

Seconds ticked by, though you wouldn’t have known it from the battery deficient clock on the wall. The only sound in the room was a slight slurping noise as Charlie sucked in the saliva gathering around his cigar.

I gave in. “So what’s the problem?” I asked, knowing that whatever followed would become my problem.

“Don’t know. Can’t find her.”

My nose twitched slightly. “What do you mean, can’t find her?”

“She’s vanished. No one knows where she’s been for the last two weeks.”

“Abduction? Foul play?”

“I don’t think so. I think she’s hiding out for some reason.”

“Two weeks isn’t a long time.”

“It is when she’s two months behind her deadline.”

“Call the police. Fill out a missing person’s report.”

“It don’t work like that,” he snorted.

Of course I knew that.

“Of course, you know that,” he said, leering forward with a knowing smile.

My stomach dropped. “Benny talks too much.”

Charlie shrugged, which almost gave him the look of having a neck when he was done.

Benny was the owner of Jizzy’s Gentlemen’s Club, and I only used him as a job reference after seeing the level of sophistication of Jackson Enterprises firsthand. But Benny was under strict instructions only to mention the standard things – punctuality, dependability, the dull things that make me a desirable employee for a dull job.

Apparently I was going to have to have a talk with Benny.

“We play poker. Look, I know you used to do stuff like this on the side.”

I made good money as a bartender. But I paid off my house and bought a car in cash with “stuff like this on the side.” My nose gave another involuntary twitch. It had been a long time.

“Used to. I don’t anymore.”

“Why not?”

I considered the question, not the first time. Figuring things out, making them add up, that’s what I did. People at the club would come to me for advice, then for help in figuring out things, and then finally outright hire me to investigate. The excitement of piecing things together was like three shots of vodka back to back – heady, but then there was the fallout.

Like when Moe suspected his girlfriend was cheating on him. It took a few weeks, but I finally had evidence that he was right, and Jenna confessed. Then there were the tears, the hysterics, the melodramatic hints at suicide.

Men. They’re so freaking emotional.

“The benefits sucked.”

“Look, I need you on this.”

There was already more to this than Charlie was telling me, but that was normal when people came to me for help. She was probably taking a much needed vacation from the world, but what if there was something more serious afoot? Realizing I had just thought the word afoot, I gave up the battle. I was hooked.

“Okay. What’s her name? Address? Phone number?”

He grabbed a manila folder and slid it across the desk to me. About two inches of sliding, since his desk isn’t really big enough to warrant the sliding to begin with.

“Marianne Jones.”

“Marianne Jones?” I was startled.

“You’ve heard of her.”

I shrugged. “I’ve seen her name in the bookstore. Writes those romance novels about women who can’t get their lives together. What is it, the Virginia Fantasia series?”

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

“This is on company time, I assume,” I said crisply. “Or do I need to get you a fee schedule?”

He looked vaguely alarmed. “Fee schedule?”

“Naturally, a retainer, a nights and weekend surcharge, then any incurred expenses, of course, an hourly rate, and then once the case is solved, there will be a completion fee.”

“I think it would be best to handle this on the clock,” he assured me.

I nodded shortly, picked up the manila folder and stood. “If that’s all?”

He nodded and leaned back in the screeching chair, sticking the cigar back between his rosy lips and giving it a few vicious chews, satisfied.

CHAPTER TWO

Ange looked at me, only vaguely curious, as I walked back into my office and closed the door. Faith Hill gloated about love on Ange's staticky radio.

I placed the manila folder on the far right corner of my desk. There were more pressing matters. I unlocked my PC and started at the point of interruption.

Spreadsheets are a beautiful thing.

The manila folder sat, silent and promising.

I shot it an irritated, suspicious glance.

The numbers came together almost on their own, dancing in pleasing combinations without any tweaking or manipulation required from me. This should have been satisfying.

The manila folder snorted. Hey, doll, want a REAL challenge?

People are too much trouble, I reminded myself, saving and closing the workbook. Stick to the numbers. She'll show up before Charlie can ask you what gives.

I scooped up the papers I had finished working on and walked across the room to the file cabinet, dropping them in the appropriate hanging file in the third drawer, three quarters of the way to the back under L for Lockwood.

I picked up the next stack of papers and rifled through them, shaking my head. Charlie's nonprofit. Balancing that conglomeration of golf outings, alcohol, hotel rooms, and plane tickets to the Cayman Islands into appropriate tax exempt categories was always a challenge. No one ever wanted to give socials. I had blocked out the rest of the day for dealing with it.

I shook my head at the first receipt, a tiny, dirty scrap of paper crookedly taped to a piece of copy paper. \$478 from Kitty's Gentlemen's Club.

Not itemized.

The nonprofit could wait, I decided. I pushed the stack of papers to the front of my desk, then reached over to grab the manila folder.

I opened it with a feeling of dread excitement.

A 4-by-6 picture fell out. A woman sat on a brown and yellow floral patterned couch. The couch was old fashioned – I guessed she was at her parents' home. Long, curly red hair framed enormous gray eyes. A too-wide smile crossed her face as she grinned into the camera. Pretty enough, but the smile seemed forced.

Putting the picture aside, I pulled out several sheets of paper. The first listed the basics. Name, Marianne Jones. Residence, an apartment off of Millerville. Age, thirty-one. Married once at age nineteen, divorced the same year. Irreconcilable differences. No kids. Drives a 2003 Toyota Avalon, blue. Primary income from a yearly book deal and teaching a few writing classes at LSU.

The next page was a flyer for “Romancing the Red Stick.”

I read the headline twice. Correct.

“Romancing the Red Stick.”

I shuddered. It was a Baton Rouge romance writers' group that met every week at the library, and at the bottom under “Officers,” Marianne Jones was listed as the president.

The last page was an email printed from Charlie's inbox, dated two weeks ago.

Charlie,

I certainly am aware that my deadline was a month ago. As I am sure you are aware, true art takes time. Please stop pressuring me. My characters are haunted and strange, and I desperately seek to understand their desires and motivations. I know you only lust after material, worldly satisfactions, but I am an artist, a channel for the muse, and I must discover and birth this novel, not merely spew it forth for the consumption of the masses.

Yours always,

Marianne

My eye twitched.

I picked up the phone and called the number on the flyer, using a pencil to drag the numbers around the dial.

It was answered on the fourth ring. Rather, it was picked up on the fourth ring. Sounds of a baby screaming in the background, a muffled thump, a moment, and finally, a woman's voice.

"Hunter, I told you not to answer the phone. Do you remember that?" a sweet, harried, southern voice said in a pitiful attempt at firmness.

That was followed by a gleeful scream that mercifully receded into background noise.

"Hello?" she said weakly, I assumed now talking to me.

"Hi, my name is Jane. I'm calling about the Romancing the Red Stick group."

"Oh, wonderful!" she said with genuine enthusiasm. "What genre do you write?"

Genre. Something I vaguely remembered discussing in a gen ed fiction class. "I haven't decided yet."

"Oh, really?" she asked in a concerned voice. "Well, that's okay; we'll help you to figure it out. That's what we're all about, supporting and encouraging each other. Of course, we all write romance, but there are so many subgenres, you know? Especially since there are like, thirty-seven members! I'm the secretary of Double R S. My name is Daisy Lynn."

There was an awkward pause.

"What genre do you write, Daisy Lynn?" I asked politely.

"I write chick lit," she said proudly. "It's very marketable."

"That's great," I said, almost sure it had nothing to do with gum.

"Well, our next meeting is tomorrow evening – I know it's last minute, but do you think you'll be able to make it? That way, you can see what we're all about and decide if you want to join."

"Actually I was hoping to ask you about..."

A loud shriek, followed by a crash echoed in the background.

"Well, great, gotta run, so glad to hear from you, June," Daisy Lynn said cheerfully. "Six o' clock at the Jones Creek Library – see you then!" The phone clanked down, but didn't shut off immediately, because I heard Daisy Lynn screeching little Hunter's name.

I shook my head, deciding I needed a break from people. I put the three sheets of paper back in the manila folder, neatly printed "M. Jones" on the tab, and placed the manila folder on the farthest corner of my desk, lining it up next to other low priority stacks.

It was close enough to lunchtime. I locked my PC and drove down the road to Jackson's Deli, Dana Owens belting out "The Lady is a Tramp."

A bell rang as I walked into the deli. The scent of cold cuts blasted at me as I walked directly to the counter. There was a large dining area to my left, the tables covered in checkered red and white cloths and table tents advertising their newest fudge brownie. Not too many people – it was still early.

The counter girl looked about twenty, but I happened to know she was twenty-seven and the single mom of a twelve year old. I did not know her name. Her long, limp black hair was pulled back in an eye poppingly tight ponytail.

"Hey, babe," she said, popping her gum, always cheerful. "Out of black olives today. That okay?"

No. "Sure."

"How about I sub in green olives instead?" she suggested, trying to be helpful.

"No, thanks." Black olives belonged on a turkey and swiss on wheat. Green olives belonged in martinis.

She put in my order. After two months, she no longer asked what I wanted. I handed her a five, dumping the change in the tip jar as always. She went to work on the sandwich, methodically adding lettuce, tomatoes, light mayo, salt and pepper, then sticking it in the oven for exactly thirty seconds, according to the timer. She wrapped it up in brown paper, dropped it in a plastic bag, and handed it to me with a bottle of water and a smile.

I thanked her and left, grateful she hadn't been in a chatty mood.

I considered going to the grocery store to pick up a bottle of black olives. However, I was feeling anxious to get to the nonprofit that I was behind on by half an hour.

I slid in front of my computer and began eating the sandwich as I sorted the stack into smaller stacks. The sandwich was okay. For not having black olives.

The rest of the afternoon progressed enjoyably, though I covertly watched the manila file out of the corner of my eye all the while, waiting for it to make its move.

That afternoon, I left half an hour early to catch the 4:30 kickboxing session.

Like gyms the world over, KC's Gym smelled of old sweat, acrid cleaning sprays, and mindless, brutal determination. I changed quickly into black yoga pants and a tank top.

I walked through the weight room with eyes straight ahead of me, avoiding leering looks from the usual gym-pervs.

The whirring sound of weights being lifted by man and machine combined with a loud gasping breath. Towards the back of the room a screamer lifted a barbell off his chest. The kind of guy that must be terrible in bed.

I entered the studio room and sat on the black rubbery floor to begin stretching. Four others were there. This wasn't my normal schedule, so I didn't know any of them. Across the room, Lee Thomas, the instructor, was also stretching on the floor.

I watched him out of the corner of my eye, and he returned the favor.

Lee was 6'2 with a square face, close cropped brown hair, and hazel eyes that often looked angry and always looked intense.

When Lee stood up and stretched his arms overhead, I caught my breath. The loose black sweatshirt sleeves fell down his tanned forearms. Even his forearms were buff with muscles. He stretched his arms behind him, and a glimpse of his toned chest came into view. The man had a body harder than blindfolded Twister. He pulled off the sweater and tossed it to a corner of the room, revealing a black muscle shirt underneath.

Finished, he finally looked at me directly, raising one eyebrow in silent question.

I shook my head.

He frowned and turned his back to me to continue stretching.

The last time I turned him down, sensing that he might be reading more into our affair than was there, he asked me very seriously, "Is this because you want commitment or something? Because I can do that. Hell, I'm ready to settle down anyway." I had choked on my bottled water at that. I believe in the catch and release program. After that, Lee Thomas, the sexiest blackbelt who's ever made me sweat, was permanently out of my rotation.

But he still does amazing things to my body. Things that make me ache for days.

"Let's go!" Lee barked angrily. We immediately swept into two lines in front of him, and he began to lead us through the forty-five minute workout mercilessly.

I headed home after class to take a quick shower before dealing with whatever emergency Betty would be plopping down on my doorstep.

An eagerness seemed to overcome the Mini as we pulled into the neighborhood filled with small but individual houses and tiny yards. My house was number 700 on the circular street. I parked in the driveway of the small brickfront two story, patting my car again as I took in my home.

The lawn was immaculate, a flower bed to either side of the front door. The door had lovely fogged glass inserts, slightly tinged with pink. The glass was reinforced with tiny, invisible steel bars. I had the new door installed as soon as I moved in, and the beauty of the glass along with its impenetrability gave me pleasure every day.

As I unlocked the door, I noticed a straw wrapper that had somehow blown into the freshly mulched flower bed. Frowning, I picked up the litter and walked in. I wasn't particularly fond of yard work, but I was particular about my yard, so I did the work myself.

An immediate calm embraced me as I stepped into my home. The air had kicked on exactly two hours before and the house was cool but not frigid. Standing in the foyer, I keyed in the code to the security system to disarm and then rearm it. Only one other person has that code. I wouldn't see him until tomorrow night.

I bypassed the living room for wooden stairs that creaked with every step. The stairs were a comforting, human security system that didn't blink in patterns of colors at me.

My muscles protested tiredly as I climbed step by step. Lee had been vicious, and my legs seemed to tremble beneath me. In the bathroom I stripped and tossed the clothes in the hamper as the water heated up in the shower, casting a fog over the mirror.

Finishing my not long enough shower, I slipped on green silk lounge pants and matching robe and went back downstairs, stepping down into the sunken living room.

The deep browns on the wall were matched by a lighter brown suede living room suite. A small TV was nestled between books in a six by six shelf filled with classics and small pieces I'd found in unexpected places. The turquoise pillows and throws broke up the brown.

To one side of the room was a small bar, and I walked over to fix myself the usual evening martini. Grey Goose vodka. Extra dirty. And four olives. Every one with a perfect red pimiento in the middle.

The doorbell gonged as I was pouring. I took a sip before setting the glass down. I pulled a Bud Light from the fridge before walking to the door, disarming the alarm, and letting Betty in.

“Thank you so much,” Betty said in her breathy voice as she took the amber bottle and expertly twisted off the top without touching her perfectly manicured pink nails. She looked up at me with wide eyes as she took a sip.

We both have green eyes.

That’s it.

Betty is tiny, naturally blonde, and gorgeous in a curvy, lush way that makes men start running through their lists of bad pick up lines.

I’m tall, brunette, and gorgeous in an intense way that makes most men start running in the other direction.

Self knowledge can be useful. That’s what Fabio tells me, anyway.

I started to close the door, but Betty backed out one step and leaned over, her cute denim skirt reaching a little too high as she picked up a large pink plastic carrier and stepped back in.

“What is that?” I asked in a flat voice.

“You remember Princess?” Betty asked with a hopeful, somehow wobbly smile.

“Your cat?”

“Yeah. She’s a cat.”

“Why did you bring it here?” A horrible suspicion began congealing deep in my gut, feeling like a supersized order of chili cheese fries from a fast food joint.

“Oh, Jane!” Betty wailed, a downfall of tears streaming as suddenly as a summer rainstorm. She dropped the carrier in the foyer, the cat screeching in protest, and threw herself into my arms.

I am not a hugger.

This was my sister, however, so I awkwardly patted her on the back, ignoring for the moment an icy fizzing trickle of Bud Light finding its way down my back.

Finally, the wailing stopped, she pulled back with a sniff and I handed her a box of tissues from the foyer table and took the almost empty beer bottle from her.

“Go sit,” I ordered. She picked up the carrier and went into the living room as I grabbed a roll of paper towels from the kitchen and mopped up the puddle of beer. I retrieved my martini, along with a second beer, then folded up on the couch next to her. She took a deep swig.

“What happened?”

“Rod and I broke up,” she said with a hiccup. The cat hissed from its pink prison.

“What did he do?”

“He...” Hiccup. “He...” Hiccup. The animal yowled.

“Let’s get to the heart of this,” I said crisply. “Do I need to have this guy taken care of?”

Her hiccups seemed to be forgotten as she stared at me, wide eyed.

“He cheated on me,” she said, sounding astonished.

I picked up my cell phone from the side table and started to scroll.

“No!” she yelled, trying to take the phone from me.

“He won’t die,” I assured her, searching for the name “Moe” and hitting the call button. “Much.”

“Jane, stop!”

“Why?” I just don’t understand why people don’t take the simple solutions. Shaking my head, I reluctantly hit end call.

“He’s not worth it.”

I considered that. My sister was over-emotional and flighty, but she was also extremely loyal, sweet, and pleasant to look at. And she was my sister. Anyone who cheated on her deserved whatever Moe chose to dish out.

“Look,” she said, looking pitifully worn out, “it’s okay. Not really, but I don’t want to deal with all of that right now. I’m going to stay with Cathy for a while, until I figure out what I want to do. She has an extra bedroom, and she could use the cash, and she’s close to the office.”

I nodded. Cathy was Betty’s best friend since high school. She was okay. She talked too much. But she was okay.

“The only thing is,” Betty said, hesitation back in her voice, “her apartment doesn’t allow pets, and they’re real strict.”

“I am not keeping that animal.”

“It’s only temporary,” she promised. “And Princess is real low maintenance, I swear. And as soon as I find my own place...” Her voice broke a little.

“Temporary?”

“Absolutely,” she promised with a watery smile.

I took a long sip of icy vodka and olive juice, and thought I might break my one martini on weeknights personal rule. “All right.”

She squealed and reached over to hug me, spilling my martini in the process. Thank god for colorless alcohol. Definitely time for another drink. Or two.

Waving off her apologies, I went to the bar for napkins.

When I turned around, she was gone, and the front door, barely visible from this angle, was open.

“Betty?” I called.

“Right here!” she called back, toting in what looked like another large crate, a paper sack, and a bag of cat food.

“What is that?”

“Her toys,” she said, upending the paper bag to let random feathers and jingling apparatus fall out. “Food. And the litter box – where should I put it?”

“Litter box?”

“Well, she has to pee somewhere.” Betty set the box down in front of her, exasperated.

“I don’t know that I can live with an animal that doesn’t dispose of its own shit,” I said doubtfully.

“Well, then I don’t know how you’re ever going to keep a man,” she snapped. “Cause they have terrible aim.” Then her lower lip wobbled again, and she burst into tears. “I’m sorry!” she sobbed. “Like I can keep a man! I’m a terrible person!”

My eye twitched. “No, Betty, you’re not, but if you keep this up, I will be calling Moe and having him take care of Rod.”

Betty controlled her sobbing, rubbing a hand across her eyes. The blood-shot green eyes were beautifully tragic on her. “You should scoop it once a day.”

“Scoop?” I asked weakly.

“Well, I think that’s about it!” Betty said in a falsely bright voice. “I’m going back to Cathy’s. You know I think you’re the best, right?”

“Um.”

“Well, I do.” She turned serious, which didn’t suit her sweet, pixie face at all. “I know you’re funny about your space, Jane, and I really do appreciate this. I swear, it won’t be for long.”

“Don’t worry about it. Are you really sure you don’t want me to call Moe?” I asked hopefully.

“Yeah, I’m sure. But thanks.” She reached down to the pink carrier and opened the front cage part. A scrawny gray calico jumped out, its ears flattened back, and let out an angry yowl.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, my Princess baby,” Betty cooed to her, reaching to pet her. “Who doesn’t like the bad old crate? Who doesn’t like that bad old crate?”

The animal hissed and swiped at her.

“She’s just upset,” Betty explained to me apologetically.

“Naturally,” I said doubtfully.

“Well, I need to go, I guess. We’ve both got work tomorrow, and I haven’t been sleeping well, so I thought I’d turn in early.”

I looked at Betty, her voice tired and heartbroken. Maybe I would call Moe when she left. “Call me if you need anything.”

“I always do.”

I smiled as she let herself out.

The cat jumped on the side table and looked at me, its green eyes suspicious.

“I am not calling you Princess,” I said flatly.

The thing cocked its head at me, seeming a little more relaxed at that.

I looked at the litter box, carrier, and box of cat toys and shuddered.

My home, my inner sanctum, had been invaded.