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Hampton Roads, Virginia

Kelly Landon sat at her desk in her home office and groaned. The main character in her latest crime fiction novel wasn't cooperating today. And neither was her word count.

Her phone rang twice before she succumbed to her literary agent's ringtone. After mulling over the same scene for the last hour, an interruption from *this* caller was a welcome one.

"Hello, Declan. This better be good." She pressed her black-rimmed glasses back onto the bridge of her nose, while balancing the phone between her cheek and shoulder. "I told you, no calls until I finish this rough draft." She covered her mouth, attempting not to laugh at her forged displeasure.

"I know. I know. I'm glad you're focused, Writer Girl."

Declan McNeary's lyrical voice ignited a flame in her veins. She imagined him leaning back in his chair with his long legs propped up on his polished oak desk while the sun from the bay office window bathed him in a golden light.

Daydreaming about his unassuming Irish charm, she sighed. "That's me. Focused."

"Good to hear it. How's the story going today?"

“Adam’s being interrogated.”

Declan snickered.

Unlike her story’s main character, Declan didn’t model brawny masculinity. He was fit without the bulging muscles, and he looked more at ease in expensive suits than changing a tire. Her agent was tall, handsome, and loved reading the classics. She blew out a breath, putting to flight the wispy bangs on her forehead. Didn’t hurt to dream. Did it?

“I have a favor to ask.”

“Hmm?” She spun a pencil between her fingers, then plopped it into the jar on her desk.

“I’ve received a request for your writing services.”

“What does that mean? I have no interest in ghostwriting.”

“Hear me out. I know how you feel about interviews and fans, but this is different.” He paused, giving her anxious thoughts ample time to multiply. “Mr. Abram Zucker’s looking for someone to collaborate with on a historical memoir about his parents’ life.”

“But ... I write fiction.”

“So?”

She slumped back in her chair. “It’s a memoir. I have no experience writing something like that.”

“It’ll be something to stretch that inquisitive mind of yours.”

Declan’s amusement floated over the phone, and she envisioned his mouth curving into a seductive smile.

“Mr. Zucker’s a wealthy man. Very involved in the local arts council. He has what he’s described as a group of historical love letters he’d like you to review.”

“The idea of writing about a couple’s life doesn’t sound the least bit intriguing.” She blew out a long breath. “It sounds more like a ... a love story.”

He guffawed at her answer. “Love stories aren’t so bad. Are they? Besides, the Zucker’s story unfolds in the middle of World War II. There’s bound to be some intrigue there.”

Adjusting her grip on the phone, she took off her glasses and

pinched the bridge of her nose. "I'm just not sure ... You said he wants to meet me?" Her messy bun bobbed on her head as she shifted in her chair. "Can't he just send the letters over, and I can see if I want to take the job?"

"This will be like an interview, not really a meet-and-greet with a fan. He wants to see if you're someone he can work with."

"That doesn't sound intimidating at all." Her tone dripped with sarcasm.

"You're a fantastic writer. This should be easy. Besides, you'll beguile him with your witty intelligence, I'm sure."

Butterfly wings blossomed in her chest. "I don't know about that. I've only written two books. Five, if you count the three YA disasters." Her previous young adult books were science fiction, but after feeling alienated in the world of aliens, she'd left that cosmos behind and attempted to write something new.

"Kelly." Declan's mood turned serious. "Abram's a fascinating man. He has some old journals and documents from the war he wants you to look over."

She rubbed her sweaty palms on her sweatpants then switched the phone to her other ear. He knew right where to hook her.

"From what I've gathered, Abram has a world of information locked away in his brain—stories from his childhood. Maybe you can unearth any skeletons hiding in his closet."

His melodic voice dipped into a villainous tone, and her toes curled in her slippers.

"Are you sure he asked for me?" She wandered into her living room, where she sank into the sofa and pulled a soft angora blanket over her lap. "I mean, there are so many other capable writers out there. Carmen Sanchez and Julia Winters have written memoirs for retired senators and athletes—"

"Kelly Rea Holt Landon."

Her lungs constricted.

"You're Treasure House Publishing's leading author. Your two novels are climbing the lists, and there are readers out there

clamoring for a third. I've shopped your series at a few production companies. Do you hear what I'm saying? You could have any one of the *New York* publishing houses eating out of the palm of your hand *if* you played your cards right."

The fervor in Declan's voice carried over the line as a tremble of nervous energy shot through her. She imagined he no longer sat at his desk but instead paced in front of his large office window. Most likely, he'd taken off his reading glasses while he ran his fingers through the soft waves of his dark, honey-blond hair.

"Kelly? Are you still there?"

"Yes."

"What do you think?"

I was thinking about your sun-kissed hair. She fidgeted with the drawstring on her sweatpants.

"I don't think you understand how good of a writer you are and what you mean to Treasure House."

But what do I mean to you? "Okay, I'll do it."

"Really?"

"Yes. If you think this is a good opportunity, then I'll do it."

Declan continued to explain more about the interview and the eccentric—and very wealthy—Mr. Abram Zucker. "I want you to know I'll work closely with you on this. You'll probably get sick of having me around."

I doubt it. "That would be nice. Thank you." She frowned and glanced down at her clothes. Her favored sweatpants and university T-shirts didn't hold a candle to the sophisticated clothes of the women Declan kept company with. She'd need to change her wardrobe.

"By the way, what crime is Adam solving this time?" Declan asked.

"Actually, I'm thinking about crafting it into a romantic thriller." She swallowed hard. Flirting didn't come easy for her, and neither did lying. *Could I ever tell him how I feel about him?* Her heart galloped like a herd of mustangs. *Probably not.*

“Ah, I didn’t think you were the romance type.”

“Well, there’s a lot about me you don’t know, Mr. McNeary.” She smacked her palm on her forehead. The slapping sound echoed, and she hoped it didn’t carry through the phone.

“I’ll bet there is, Writer Girl. When you get a few chapters done, send them my way. I’ll let you know what I think about your *romantic thriller*.”

His words washed over her like ribbons of silk as she walked back to her office and stammered out a goodbye.

Laying the phone down, she settled into her desk chair. Instead of placing her fingers back on the keys, Kelly picked up a fashion magazine and sifted through the pictures, trying to ascertain what style fit her.

Punk rocker? “Nah, too bizarre.” Make-up model? “Too plastic.” The First Lady? “Too matronly.” Surveying her outfit once more, she grimaced. “Anything would look better than this.”

Declan’s words of admiration rushed at her while her fingers landed on the keys, and tapped, tapped, tapped, in a marching cadence across the keyboard. She imagined her tall, Irish literary agent cast as the hero who saved her from her ho-hum life of sweatpants and dusty journals.

The Winter the Flower Bloomed ...

Scratch that. Too adolescent.

The Summer I Woke Up ...

Nope. Sleeping Beauty.

She typed on the keys late into the night and compelled her mind to find the perfect mix between romance and crime.