



Her Problem with Stairs

What a strange man. Marla laughed once, but it hurt too much to laugh again. Her hand went up protectively to her painful eye. It was her own fault for not giving herself more time to do this task, but she sure couldn't wait around while he chatted on the phone. She had to make that one-thirty hosiery ad call. Mr Riley would have to wait. He could get the paperwork together and get back to her.

Her time with him had been productive in one way – she'd definitely have to put Mr Riley in her next book. The poor man looked like he was living out some crazy fantasy of being a private detective.

She recalled the scene. His door had those black letters painted on it: THOMAS RILEY – GRANITE INSURANCE. The office must have been decorated once, in the 1940s: black phone, old wooden desk, the metal desk lamp, a curvy sofa with wood and metal claw-foot legs. Those claws had a glass ball in each of them. Too

bad the moths had won the war with the upholstery.

She *did* like the poster of Hawaii, all dog-eared and dusty. He didn't reek of whiskey or anything, but the place smelled like baloney. Maybe he was living in his office. There was a six-month stack of *New York Times* issues in the corner. No socks drying on the radiator, though.

Then there was the plant. An angel-wing begonia, if she wasn't mistaken. She'd killed a few in her time, and his was huge and well cared for. It just didn't match up with the rest of the picture, that Mr Riley would baby his begonia. Very odd. The rest of him was so . . . not cared for.

Actually, he had an incredible physique under his bad clothes. She was used to seeing great bodies, and his biceps filled up his short-sleeved shirt just as well as those on her personal trainer, Lars. Not to mention his big strong shoulders.

And the dark wavy hair, not bad, but she'd have to shoot his barber. Her mind whirled with book ideas. Maybe that would be the crime for her next story.

The moon-phase calendar, though. Now, what was that about? Maybe Tommy boy was superstitious.

Marla punched the down button, but nothing lit up. The elevator must be out of order. Geez, it had worked on the way up. She shuddered to think of that: the plunging elevator. That could be the method of death. Her next novel was taking shape, all right.

Great. She and her face had to make it down fourteen flights of stairs. Oh well, Rita was always bugging her about getting some definition in her calves.

She'd better get her Tom Riley details down on paper before they vanished. Marla dug for her notebook and pen in the black leather Chanel tote she had slung on her shoulder as she balanced down the stairs. In the middle of that, her heel caught in the loose stair runner and snapped right off – and down she went.

How predictable, she thought as the last dozen years of her life flashed before her. The floor loomed up quickly. She did a yoga miracle move to keep herself upright and grabbed the rail for all she was worth, bending painfully into the rough stair top.

Her bag flew down the stairs to the landing, scattered six gold tubes of lipstick, three compacts of various types, a brush, a comb, her wallet, her writing notebook, the five black Uniball pens she kept in the bottom, a pair of tennis shoes, and various unmentionable feminine products.

Slumped on the stair, she rubbed her twisted, skinned knee. Maybe Rita was right about her being accident-prone. She'd been a bit of a klutz ever since her body shot up to nearly six feet. She didn't mind being tall, but she'd expected to outgrow gawky.

'Oh God. Miss Meyers! Are you all right?' She turned to watch the insurance guy take two stairs at a time behind her. He got to her, sat down on the same stair, and 'steadied' her, holding her upper arm, almost tipping her over again.

'I'm fine. Fine. Your *building* should have insurance.'

'That's a liability issue. There's probably some kind of coverage if you want to file a claim.'

‘I’m kidding. I’m not the suing kind. A girl like me can’t go around blaming people for her inability to stay upright.’

‘Now, I think you’re being too hard on yourself, there. Here, let me help you up.’ He stood up beside her.

She gratefully accepted his offer. He extended a big hard-muscled arm to hang on to. My, my, my. Rising, she grabbed on to him and balanced herself with the banister.

She mustered a smile as he stared in her face for a moment, then switched to look at all her strewn things.

‘You stay right here, I’ll get your stuff. Hang on.’ Mr Riley seemed to make some kind of decision based on her supposed stability, and it wasn’t the one she wanted.

She cringed as he started down the stairs. ‘No. No, please don’t!’ She gestured toward him, not wanting her feminine pads in his grasp, but underestimated her twisted knee. A pain shot up her leg, and it collapsed underneath her. Before she could utter a gasp, she felt herself falling.

In slow motion, Marla saw Tom Riley turn just in time, take one leap up, and catch her full in his arms. He managed to stay on his feet too. She looked up into his shocked face and saw the most intense chocolate-brown eyes she’d ever seen staring back at her from behind quarter-inch-thick glasses. That dark, sexy kind of chocolate. Yum.

‘Thanks.’

‘How about you just stay put, and we’ll get back to my office? We can take a look at that knee.’

She looked down to see her stocking torn and blood seeping from a scrape. Her leg still hurt like hell too. Damn, there went the one-thirty hosiery commercial. She'd have to call them. Considering her options, she might as well accept a ride from Riley.

She took a deep breath. 'Normally I'd decline, but I think I twisted something. So, it sounds like a plan, Mr Riley. Bend me down, and I'll grab my wallet. I saw a Coke machine in the hall. This calls for some caramel-colored, sugar-shot caffeine. Can I buy you one?'

'I was just on my way to the soda machine anyhow, it's on me. I'll do the grabbing, you hold on tight.' Tom bent his knees, and she sensed him feel, then snag something, and scoop up what turned out to be her wallet.

'Can you get that black notebook too? Everything else is expendable.' Tom got the notebook without dumping her over. Marla hung on to his neck for dear life and was impressed with his moves. Very impressed.

She leaned against his chest as he climbed up the stairs, the various items clutched in his hands pressed smack up against her rear. It felt nice to have a man be her hero for a change, even one with a poly-blend shirt and a bad haircut.

Most of the men she knew had boyfriends, or were so vain they only wanted her as a trophy – or worse, for her money.

Tom Riley reminded her of the country boys from her hometown in Indiana. He had that solid feel: strong arms, strong jawline, but that natural bronze complexion of the Mediterranean instead of pale and Dutch.

He shifted her weight and his warm arm across her backside created a minor heat wave, a feeling so buried in her it was like creaking an old rusty gate open. She leaned into him. Her head swam dizzy for a minute as she attempted to recover herself. He looked at her funny and kept climbing stairs. The heat between their bodies was enough to melt the snow off winter wheat.

His glasses slid down his nose and she automatically reached up with her index finger to push them back. Their eyes met briefly. She noticed he smelled like Ivory soap, and some other scent. Like a . . . man. She breathed him in. It had been a long time since she'd encountered that essence.

'Thanks,' he said. They turned into the doorway, causing her legs to whack into the wall.

'Sorry, sorry.'

'I'm okay,' she lied. Ouch. Damn, what was she, the bruise magnet of Manhattan? She breathed in through her teeth, then let out a big sigh.

She really was awfully prone to bumps. It wasn't just in the city either. Back home there had been the chicken-coop slip on a broken egg, the ice incident when she tried to skate on the duck pond, and too many others to count. Thinking about all of it made her start missing the open spaces in Indiana.

Of course, she didn't miss her stepmother's ranting refrain: *You'll never amount to anything, Marla. Go on ahead, that city will eat you alive.* Funny how Marla wasn't burning in hell as the woman had predicted, hadn't become a prostitute, and wasn't dead in a gutter.

Though any of those would have been better than staying home with Ivy.

It was some consolation that all of Ivy's venom was reserved for her, not for her dad. She'd never seen Ivy take on her dad. It was like she had a split personality. Daytime with Marla, Ivy was evil. Nighttime with Walt, she got all domesticated. Reverse vampire.

It must have come as something of a shock when two years ago Dad asked Ivy for a divorce. It did Marla's heart good to know her dad finally woke up. It also did her heart good that she finally told him the truth about Ivy when she went to visit that Christmas. It surely must have facilitated the divorce, but somehow that fact wasn't weighing on her at all.

What she couldn't fathom was the institution of marriage. It seemed to be all screwed up in Marla's head. She kept trying to remember her counselor's advice – just because her dad had made a bad choice didn't mean all choices were bad.

Now that Ivy was gone, she should really go back and visit more. Her dad had sounded funny on the phone last time they spoke. He had some hired help on the farm, but he must be lonely in the empty house at the end of the day.

However, in the ten years she'd been in New York and the eight years she'd been modeling, she'd only managed one serious relationship. Derek Stiles. Talk about bad choices. Just bad. What a bad taste a man can leave on your lips. She could still feel her insides cave in and ache at the thought of it; funny, after two years you'd think it wouldn't hurt anymore.

She just hated being taken for a ride like that, then dumped for this year's nineteen-year-old supermodel as soon as the fateful words *prenuptial agreement* came out of her mouth. Fast as falling down a flight of stairs, she was out on her can. Bastard.

Why were some men such good actors? Derek had said all the things a woman wants to hear, first to get her into bed, and then even to the point of getting engaged. She'd been so wrapped up in the fictional life he'd woven in her head she didn't see who he really was. Smooth as twenty-year-old Scotch going down. But the hangover was hell.

She'd take reality over fantasy anytime. It was lucky her current work left little time for a social life. Girls who stayed up to party until three looked like the undead at their nine a.m. photo shoot. She knew it was her clean life and consistency that had helped to finally launch her into the big league, and now that she was there . . . well, no fancy-talking New York man – especially a strange insurance man, for heaven's sake – was going to get her all upset again and distract her.

Mr Riley opened his office door with a reach for the doorknob underneath her that shifted her weight back against him. Her skirt was doing a very fine shimmy up her legs. His hand slid a little on her stockinged thigh.

She felt a flush roll over her, starting from his touch, proceeding up the rest of her body, then straight up to her cheeks and on to her scalp. What in the heck brought all this . . . this *feeling* on in her? Boy, she must have twisted more than her knee, to be lusting after the

insurance man. Sometimes hashing over her Derek pain gave her a great way to refocus. Current goal: Get out of Thomas Riley's clutches.

Tom deposited her gently on his couch and dropped the wallet and notebook on the coffee table. Her skirt had done a crawl up her thighs that had him in a hot sweat. He wasn't sure whether to grab it and pull it down while he carried her, or just let it ride . . . so to speak.

Lucky boy. Here he was with one of the city's top models in his arms. She really did feel like an ordinary woman after all, a very sexy, curvaceous ordinary woman. Holding her against him was the most pleasure he could remember in . . . well, a long time.

Tom tried to think about something else. Although she wasn't the thinnest model he'd seen, Marla Meyers still needed a meal. She weighed about as much as his neurotic boyhood Irish setter. He'd have to take her to his sister Rosalee's for a good old Irish-Italian dinner. Tom tried to picture Marla at the Riley family table with all the nieces and nephews and meddling aunts and sisters. What a laugh. She was probably used to the fancy china and good silverware crowd.

Grabbing a clean but graying handkerchief out of his back pocket, he wet it with the last drops out of the water cooler. 'I'll be right back with those sodas and the rest of your stuff. Here, put this on your knee and elevate it.'

He handed her the cloth and strode out of the room toward the soda machine. A cold soda would have to replace the cold shower he needed.

What made her fly down the stairs anyhow? Man, this dame was an accident waiting to happen. If he was half the insurance man he should be, he'd call her a pre-existing disaster and refuse to write it up. But his commission off a three-million-dollar policy was going to be sweeter than honey on a hound dog, as his Irish grandma used to say. His Italian grandma used to say something else more fitting to the Bronx, with hand gestures for emphasis.

He went back to the stairs and stuffed all her things in the black tote bag. For a model, she traveled light. But he could tell expensive leather when he saw it. Mighty smooth. Like a three-million-dollar policy.

After all, rich girls didn't have to set up monthly premiums, Tom mused as he climbed back up the stairs and headed toward the soda dispenser. She'd probably pay the annual up front.

He shot two quarters in the machine, punched the button, and pulled a Coke out of the bin. Then two more quarters and hit the button one more time for himself. Amazingly, the machine worked for the first time in eight months. Congratulations, Tom, you old dog, he thought. This is your lucky day.

Man alive, if he got that money he could quit sweating the first of every month, use his commission as a nest egg, and draw off it when he needed to.

He'd love to give Doris more money. He'd give her twice as much as the divorce agreement if he had it. He was glad she was using it to keep Max's life decent. He could eat dry baloney and buy his clothes at the Goodwill, but his kid should have a good life. Soccer

camp, trumpet lessons, new shoes – that all cost money. He walked back to his office door.

She was still on the couch, her long, shapely legs stretched out over two whole cushions, her bare stockinged feet resting on the edge of the end. Man alive, what a dame. She was just finishing a call on her cell phone. When she put it back in her jacket pocket, he popped open one soda can and handed it to her. The other one he pressed against his temple. Cool down, boy.

‘Got a glass?’

‘Nope.’ She may be beautiful, but she was high maintenance for sure. He could spot that one a mile away. Just like Doris. He took a long, cool draw on the soda. It was *real* good.

She took a sip and smiled: a real toothpaste commercial smile. It was the first time she had flashed it full at him that day. Kind of made his stomach twist up funny, like when Sheila Warner used to smile at him in sixth-grade math. Even with her braces, Sheila was the hottest girl he’d ever never kissed. Until now.

‘Let’s look at that knee.’ He sat on the coffee table and waited for her to take the cloth off. She removed it; the bleeding had stopped. It was just a minor scrape.

‘Can you walk on it?’

She slipped off the couch and tested her legs. Great legs they were too.

‘Pretty good. I’ll make it. Thanks, Riley. I’ve been a little clumsy in my life, but I’m not usually *this* accident-prone.’

‘That’s not what your agency thinks, is it?’

'I've just had a run of bad luck. They're being paranoid.' She pulled out her black leather Keds, tied them on, then put the rest of her things back in her bag.

He seriously doubted that, but hey, the worst that could happen was the old Granite boulder would lose a few chips, pay up . . . and fire him. What the heck.

'I believe you, sweetheart . . . uh, Miss Meyers,' Tom corrected his Bogartism and made his move. 'Let's get the thing written up right now.' He got to the desk, swept a handful of trash into his right top drawer, and rolled her form in his IBM Selectric typewriter.

'Wow, I didn't know they still made those things.' She plopped back down in his client chair.

'The home office hasn't sent me any equipment yet,' he lied. 'Amazingly enough, I remember how to type.' He glanced up as she rolled her eyes. Ignoring her, Tom went full focus on his task, pushing his glasses back in place. He pecked at the keys and shot off questions to her like rubber bullets.

'Age?'

'Twenty-eight.'

'That's on the upside for a model, isn't it?'

'Is that on the form?' she said coolly, and removed a long strand of hair from her cheek.

Tom smiled and refocused. 'Married?'

'No.'

'Boyfriend?' he said quickly.

She stared at him with a wry look.

'Girlfriend?'

'None of the above. Keep yourself on track, Riley.'

‘How long have you lived in Manhattan?’

‘Ten years. I don’t see the relevance in that.’

‘Any diseases?’ Tom continued.

‘Has anyone ever told you your bedside manner tends to slip now and then?’ Marla said.

‘Yep.’ Tom gave her his best smile and kept the questions flying. In twenty minutes the form was signed, sealed, and delivered in his stack. Her check for the first year’s premium went directly into his wallet, close and personal-like where he could keep an eye on it.

‘That ought to do it. Thank you, Miss Meyers. It’s been a pleasure.’ He picked up the soda can on his left and swigged some down. Later he would buy himself a nice corned beef and an ice-cold beer at Jay’s Grill to celebrate. ‘Can I get you a cab?’ he offered.

A sudden wave of panic washed over him. Doris. He jerked his left wrist up to check the time, flipping a splash of soda clear across the coffee table and straight onto her well-endowed, Wonder Bra bosom. She let out a loud gasp and stood stock-still.

Shit! It was three o’clock. Were those real? Holy shit. Tom grabbed his handkerchief off the coffee table and attempted to blot her . . . cleavage.

‘See what I mean? Stuff just happens to me.’ Marla snatched the cloth out of his hand and mopped at the soda spot. ‘The cab would be great.’

‘I’ll share it with you. I’m late for an appointment. Sorry about that stain.’ Tom grabbed his gray suit jacket and her black tote and all but dragged her out the door. Hell had no wrath like Doris kept waiting.

He was too focused on the thought of Doris wringing his neck to worry about the fact that he'd just flung soda all over a supermodel.

Then again, she must think him a complete idiot. And here he was kind of liking her now that she turned out to have a few brains. He probably should have gotten a separate cab for her, just to avoid the inevitable part where she might turn on him for ruining her designer clothes and sue him for the cleaning bill.

On the other hand, he could keep an eye on her awhile longer. She was pretty easy on the eyes.

After he got through taking Doris's crap and playing some catch with Max, he'd return to the office and get the paperwork sent to Granite. Too bad he'd had to hock his fax machine to pay his phone bill. It was scrape up a buck and hit the all-night Kinko's to send it through to the home office. Just the fax, ma'am. Bob Hayes was going to kill him when he got this policy.

The midmorning light stung his eyes as he lifted his throbbing head off the desk. He reached over and pulled down the blind. Man, he'd made it to Doris's yesterday with one minute to spare. Doris really had a bark, and it was just as bad as her bite.

You'd think since the divorce was *her* idea she'd be a little easier to get along with. Tom could never quite figure what got Doris's panties in a bunch. Guess she was just cranky. Despite her inability to get along with Tom, she seemed to be doing all right with Max, and that was all that mattered.

At any rate, it was all worth it to hang out with his boy and tuck him in for the night.

Memories of the rest of the evening came back to him through a fog. Faxing forms, making deposits. He did remember he managed to stuff a great corned beef sandwich down his face, washed down with four beers. It would have been only two beers if his buddy Pete hadn't shown up. Tom wasn't much of a drinker, so four beers were enough to rattle his body into a mini-hangover.

At least he'd gotten Marla Meyers's check to First Federal last night. Once that was cashed, the home office couldn't say jack. Well, they could, but a deal was a deal. Tom folded his arms and put his head back down on the desk. Someday he was going to quit selling insurance. A little hole in the universe would open up and allow him to slip between financial obligations and leap into some other line of work. Preferably something *out* of the city.

He'd taken over the Fulton Street office with hopes his commission quota would rise. Instead he found himself locked in an overterritored district with his father's old clients back in Queens dying off. In the old days new members of the clients' families would stay with the same agent and firm. These days people were surfing the Internet for insurance – plus Granite Insurance was a dinosaur. Faxing was their newest skill. Tom pulled on his earlobe and yawned.

The phone rang like a gunshot next to his head. He grabbed it quick before it went off again. God, he hated mornings, and no coffee yet.

'Tom Riley here.'

‘Bob Hayes here. What the hell is this De-Per policy? Three million on some woman’s face? Riley, you’ve really stuck your neck out here, and I’m gonna chop it off. Rip this thing up. No face is worth that, and you’ve violated about ten procedural directives on top of it.’

‘Bob, Bob. Relax. If you read the report I sent you, you’ll see this is just an assurance to her agency. She’s a very successful model. Our exposure is minimal here. She has an investment in keeping her face intact too. Besides, I deposited her check in the transfer account yesterday, so it’s too late.’

Tom picked a pencil out of the orange juice can Max had covered with paper and drawn stars and rockets on. He sharpened it as he talked, in a tiny blue sharpener.

‘Which means you’ll be getting me my portion in twenty-four hours, right, Bob? That’s a helluva premium there, pal. The big boys will buy you a martini for lunch on this one.’

‘It’ll be the first premium we’ve seen here in a while, Riley. How the hell did we let you take the downtown territory anyway? Don’t answer that; I did it because you used to be one of the best when you worked with your dad, who must be rolling in his grave. Now, *there* was an insurance man. Now that you’re on your own, you’re a loose cannon. We don’t like loose cannons here, Riley. And Riley, we don’t drink martinis in Minnesota. We stay sober.’

Tom cringed and the blood rose up to his eyebrows. Damn them. Sure, his dad was one of those natural-born salesmen. If Tom had had his way he’d be making police

detective in some 'burb. Not trying to fill his dad's shoes. God love his dad, but this job was about as boring as they came.

He kept his voice as level as possible. 'Well, buy your wife a new hat on your bonus, Bob. You didn't do me any favors giving me the old Fulton office. Maybe you should have told me you had two other offices opening in the city this year.'

'The client base is out there. Just turn on some of that Riley charm like your dad used to.' Bob waxed nostalgic.

'That was 1965, Bob. It's a new world out here now.' He gave up with a teeth-grinding sigh of exasperation. 'I have a client coming at eleven-thirty. Gotta run,' Tom lied, flipping a pencil between his fingers as he worked to keep his voice calm.

'Not so fast, Riley. We had a morning meeting on this, and the board has a job for you. We want you to devote some special attention to this client. So get rid of your eleven-thirty, because you are going to be spending all your time looking after the insured face of Miss Meyers.'

'What? What the hell are you talking about? I have an office to run here.'

'You wrote it, you deal with it. We want you with this girl every waking hour. That's her hours, not yours. Did you just get up, man? You sound like hell.'

He felt like hell too. He'd had one hour with his head on the desk and had that stale beer and sweat smell on him. They must be kidding about this.

'You gotta be kidding. This lady runs in the big

leagues. I own one suit, and I don't think she likes me or it. She isn't going to let me near her.'

'According to her agency, she can't work without this policy. According to us, we won't issue it unless she agrees to have you as a watchdog. You could hire her a bodyguard, but it'll be coming out of your own expenses if you do. Bottom line, Riley: We're gonna hold your commission check until you agree to this. And get your fax machine on-line. These calls cost money. We don't like spending money here in Minnesota.'

His check! His beloved check that would get his office equipment out of hock, pay his child support for the next three months, and some rent on his cockroach-ridden apartment. Not the check, anything but that. Those cheap bastards. Trying to run a New York office on Minnesota's idea of capital was bad enough. His nerves jumped like a bird taking a ride in the cat's mouth. The pencil he was flipping snapped in half.

'Okay, Bob, you've got my nuts. Quit twisten' 'em. I'll be her shadow. I'll keep her face unscratched. Consider it a deal. Now transfer my check, Bob. I'm gonna need it.'

'Good. Now, the company is willing to toss in an extra bonus after three months. Two grand.'

'Three months? Thirty days.'

A long silence followed that had Tom's stomach twisting.

'All right, thirty days. I'm a reasonable man. I'll expect a report every week. However, Riley, if she does get hurt during this interim period, we're going to expect your commission to be returned.'

Tom smacked his hand to his forehead, giving himself a worse headache. They'd have to find him in an obscure village of Barbados if it came to that. 'So long, Bob.' Tom slammed the heavy black phone down on its rocker and bolted out of his chair. Coffee. He needed coffee.

'Hi, you've reached the voice-mail service for Marla Meyers. Please leave a message, and Ms Meyers will return your call as soon as possible.'

Tom figured it couldn't be her home number scribbled on the back of her card; that would make him . . . lucky.

'Tom Riley here, Granite Insurance. We need to talk about your policy. And you left your shoes in my office.' Tom left his message and hung up.

Her high heels were sitting on his desk, next to his brand-new beloved cup of extra-large take-out java. Tall, black Helmut Lang's, he read the inside label. He toyed with them, picked the broken one up, and bent the shoe back and forth. So rich girls wore out their shoes, too. How did this thing even hold together anyway? There was an obvious separation between the heel and the base. Tom got lost in the aerodynamic properties of her high heels. Fifteen minutes later his phone rang.

'Tom Riley.'

'Mr Riley. Marla Myers.'

He got nervous. How was he going to tell her about this unusual turn of events exactly? Better just jump right in there.

'Miss Meyers, my company has assigned me to . . . in

essence, guard their policy interests. I'm going to have to . . . uh . . . be your shadow. Yes, that's it, be your shadow and make sure you don't hurt your face for thirty days. Then they will consider you an acceptable risk and we can . . . uh . . . relax.'

There was a long silence on the other end.

'So, basically you're telling me they won't insure me without this?'

'That's right.' Tom slumped over his desk and held the black receiver away from his ear, waiting for the scream.

'Mr Riley, what do you think my chances are with another company?'

'Zero. I'm probably the only agent on the planet that would have written this up, Miss Meyers. I don't know what that makes me, but that's my opinion. You asked for it.'

'Well, then, there's nothing to be done about it because I can't work without it, and I have to work. We'll set up a schedule. I'm assuming when I'm home you'll be off duty? Or are you planning on moving in here?' Her voice was a little caustic, but even-toned.

Tom was surprised. She was no Doris. Actually, her voice was very low and sexy, even when she was mad. He brought the velvety suede high heel he'd been holding up to his face and scratched his day-old beard against the softness. A really bad and wicked fantasy rolled through his entire body. Mmmmm.

'Riley, you aren't planning on moving in with me, are you?' the sexy velvet voice said.

‘Yes, fine. I mean, no . . . I’ll try laying off when you’re home, if you promise not to slip in the bathtub or anything.’ He heard a snort-laugh from her end of the phone. So the dish had a sense of humor after all.

‘I’ll do my very best if it will give me a few hours of privacy.’

‘Great. Then I’ll meet you tomorrow and just get the kinks worked out. I’m sorry about this, Miss Meyers.’

‘Not as sorry as I am, Riley. Just try and keep out of my way. I run at a fast pace. I’ll see you at eight in the morning at Rita Ray’s downtown agency. I’ve got a major runway show tomorrow and two photo shoots this week.’

‘Eight?’

‘Yes, we get to sleep in tomorrow. Be there on time so I can smooth this over with Rita. Are we clear?’

‘Eight. Downtown. Clear. Thanks.’ He had been reduced to talking in single syllables by the end of the conversation.

‘Good. Thirty days isn’t forever. I’ll see you tomorrow then. Good-bye, now, Mr Riley.’

‘G’bye.’

She hung up. He put the heavy black receiver back on the cradle. This was a pain in the ass. *She* was a pain in the ass. Probably had a Day-Timer that told her when to pee. She was going to drive him completely crazy. On the other hand, tailing a gorgeous babe like Marla Meyers wasn’t all bad. Then there was the money. The lovely money. Damn, he forgot to tell her about the shoes. Oh well, he’d bring them along.

While he’d been talking to her, he had absent-mindedly

bent back the loose heel. Several small nails had popped out of position. It looked funny, like she must have had the heel fixed once before. Boy, they did a crappy job. He'd have to talk to her about her shoe repairs. The Shoe Doctor was his man. Miracle Joe had saved him buying shoes for three years now.

Tom set down the shoe and took a long drag of his coffee. Eight. Eight in the ever-lovin', snotnosed morning. He could just shoot himself instead: It would be just as painful, but a quicker death.

Marla punched the off button on her portable phone and laid it back down on the marble kitchen countertop. She ran her fingers up her temples and into her long blond tresses in a combined gesture of headache and annoying hair. Her life was like a well-oiled machine, and Tom Riley was a piece of gravel in the gears. This was going to be thirty days of hell. Thank God Fashion Week was over and the bulk of the runway shows down to a trickle.

Now, this had to have a positive side. Marla tried hard to turn things around in her head, but the only possible benefit besides the obvious one of getting the insurance company off her case was that she would have time to study this guy and use him in a book. Better than nothing.

She went to work in the kitchen, creating herself a salad with teriyaki chicken strips, sesame seeds, and six different veggies. *Murder Takes a Cruise*. She ran title ideas around in her head as she tossed her special raspberry-flavored oil and balsamic vinegar dressing into

the salad. Maybe she could cast him as a news reporter: *Murder on the News*. Her mind kept going back to Riley.

Murder Takes a Snooze was more like it. Considering his boring profession, his lack of ambition, his style oblivion, and his obvious lack of manners, Tom Riley was going to bore her to death. A slow, painful, thirty-day death.

And when would she find time to finish her next Mike Mason mystery, for pity's sake? She poured a tall glass of iced tea out of the pitcher she'd made up that morning and dropped two ice cubes in. She'd only sketched out a basic plot outline at this point.

On that thought, she plunked herself on a chair in front of the dining-room table and booted up the laptop. She'd better start stealing minutes where she could.

Balancing her salad on one side and the keyboard on the other, she hunted up her work-in-progress and fingered in a few phrases between bites.

I peered down the black, silent elevator shaft. What a way to go. It wasn't so much the bottom as the moments in between the twelfth floor and the darkness at the end of the ride. Sure, it would only be about five seconds if you used that old acceleration free-fall thirty-two-feet-per-second formula. Still, I'd hate to know it was coming. Quick, with no warning. That was what I wanted in a death.

I straightened up and took a hard look around. I got that feeling like I wasn't alone. That

shiver-down-the-back-of-your-neck feeling. I checked the reflection in the hotel hall mirror and caught sight of a black-haired woman in a red coat. There was something oddly familiar about her.

I moved fast, but she had a head start. The stairwell door handle was cold, so she must be in one of the suites. I'd have to do a room-to-room search, and the St Regis Hotel wouldn't be too pleased. It'd take an hour just to shake down the right suits to ask.

I turned back toward the elevators to think on that and spotted a single long-stem red rose on the carpet. It had a thin black ribbon around it, tied in a bow. So the lady left a calling card. Something about that setup was nagging me. Like I'd read it or seen it before. I decided to hunt up the hotel manager after all.

Marla rolled her head from side to side and noticed her neck was getting stiff. Laptops weren't the best choice for ergonomics, but once she started in, she'd learned not to move to the big computer and break her train of thought. Where you start is where you be. She took a few bites of her salad. Now, Mike Mason, back to the lady in red.