

MILES MACY REHEARSED HIS PITCH all morning. Since his return from Miami back in January, he had left countless messages—all unreturned. As much as he appreciated the ability to hear Alicia Alvarez's hard-edged Cuban accent any time he wanted, by way of his semiserious relationship with her answering machine, it seemed she did not spend much time at home or her office. Either that, or she had intentionally avoided him.

*Nah.*

Maybe she had started seeing someone else. Or had been involved before they hooked up. She did not strike him as the cheating type, but perhaps she had stepped out on someone and now felt guilty. He hoped not.

His desk phone rang before he summoned the courage to make his call. Noting the internal extension, he thrust-out his chin and stretched the corners of his lips.

Frank Harper barked into the line without greeting. "I'm missing next week's column. It was due on my desk yesterday!"

Miles leaned back and propped his feet up on his desk. "I ran it downstairs myself Friday morning. Saved you a trip."

Frank's tone intensified. "You know I have to approve everything you put out, so cut the shit and bring it to me."

"C'mon, Frank. Lighten up. What's the big deal? It's just a piece on that explosion over in Southern California."

Harper's voice rose to the point Miles imagined the walls of his office shaking two floors above him. He fought the urge to laugh out loud.

It probably should have offended a seasoned reporter such as himself that, after two and a half years of dedicated service, his boss had decided to babysit him. Under normal circumstances, it would have. It sure did offend his assistant, who now spent much of her downtime scouting prospective employment opportunities "just in case." However, Miles took it in stride.

In his tenure with the *Chronicle*, he had won more awards than he could name—a nationally syndicated journalist with a stellar reputation and an impressive readership base. But as of last week, everything he wrote, every column he created, required Frank Harper's personal approval. He had considered asking why, but he knew the answer.

"What's the matter, Frank? Afraid I'm gonna tick someone off?"

"I'm warning you, Macy. If you don't wise up—and soon—there's gonna be trouble. You're supposed to report on entertainment news, not on the dangers of faulty wiring!"

"Jordan Grant was entertainment until his as-of-yet unsolved murder. Then last week, his house gets blown to bits? How dead does this guy need to be?"

"You got one thing right, Macy. Jordan Grant *is* dead. *Dead!* Dead singers' homes don't sell papers! Just like dead singers' ghosts don't contact you through computer screens!"

"Ya liked that one, didn't ya?" Miles beamed, nodding rapidly as he crossed his ankles.

"Why the hell aren't you covering the O.J. Simpson trial like every other journalist in America?"

"You've got three other divisions covering that story, including sports! The last thing our readers need is another op-ed on the Juice."

"Then find something else—quick. And get me a rewrite *this afternoon!*" Frank slammed down the telephone.

"Always a pleasure." Miles uncrossed his ankles, then sat forward and stabbed the button for his second line. He punched in Alicia's number from memory. To his astonishment, she answered on the first ring.

“Homicide, Alvarez.”

“Well, well, well. If it isn’t Detective Alvarez,” he charmed, masking his concern that she might sever the connection upon recognizing his voice. “How are you? I was beginning to wonder whether or not you were still alive.”

An exaggerated sigh filled the line. “What do you want, Macy?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe a returned call once in a while. Is this the way you treat all your boyfriends?”

She whisper-shouted into the line, “You are *not* my boyfriend! Did it ever occur to you I didn’t call you back because I didn’t wanna talk to you? Give it up, cowboy. Find yourself some Windy City woman and forget me.”

“I see. It’s a distance thing, then?”

“I’m hanging up this phone now. And don’t call back, understand? If you call me again, I’ll slap a restraining order on your—”

“Now, c’mon.” He dropped the playful banter and deflated in his chair. “What did I do to deserve that?”

Another irritated breath filled the line. “I’m flattered, okay? Is that what you wanna hear? Fine. But it was one night...*one night*. I can’t have you stalking my house and office just because we got drunk and lost our heads.”

“I wanted to see you more than just ‘one night.’ I’ve been trying for months. Ask your machine. Your machine loves me!”

“Great! Why don’t I just hang up and let you continue talking to it?”

“Don’t be that way. It’ll understand. Why won’t you see me again?”

“You want a reason?”

“Don’t I deserve one?”

Her Cuban accent clipped with frustration. “Okay, let’s see. Where should I start? How about the fact we don’t know each other?”

“That didn’t seem to matter when you took me home with you. Besides, we could get to know each other.”

“I don’t have time to get to know each other. I work all the time. That’s reason two.”

Miles chewed on the inside of his cheek, wondering how much time she had spent practicing her excuses. “You’re still human, Alicia. Why do you have to make this so hard?”

“And here’s a third reason. Where do you live?”

“You know I’m in Chicago.”

“And where do I live?”

“Want the street address?”

“Hanging up now!”

“All right, all right.” He found himself unable to counter her logic. “So, it is a distance thing.”

“Partly, yes.”

Miles considered his next words. He could not blame her. Few long-distance relationships succeeded. Still, something spurred him to pursue the fiery Cuban detective. After thirty-one years of bachelorhood, maybe the time had come to consider a long-range plan. Before he realized the impact of his next words, he heard himself say, “What if I lived in Miami?”

The line fell silent. He worried she had made good on her threat to hang up.

“You’re crazy.” But the subtle change in her voice betrayed her. She sounded softer, almost feminine.

“I could see about getting my old job back at the *Post*.” He waited for an objection. None came. “Look. Anything it takes, okay?”

“I’m busy right now. I can’t talk.”

“Think about it. I’ll call you back later. And Detective...I *will* call back. If you don’t answer, I’ll call again. You can’t hide forever.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Macy. I’m not running from you. I don’t think about you at all.”

The obvious lie evoked a smile. “Well, then, let’s change the subject. Anything new on the Grant case?”

“Hang on a sec.” Hold music filled the line. Moments later, she picked up again. “I switched phones. Billy and I’re still flyin’ solo on this.”

“Did you get the results back from the Michigan trip?”

“Yep. Definitely an incendiary device. Simple and sophisticated.”

“Can you prove it?”

“Billy thinks so, but we need more than what we have to go to the captain.”

“What about Stark’s phone records?”

“All that proves is that Stark called Lockhardt a few days before he died.”

“And faxed him. Doesn’t that tie him to the case?”

“Not necessarily. So what if Stark called Lockhardt? That doesn’t make Lockhardt a murderer. It could prove the opposite—portray the man as a concerned party who lost his meal ticket.”

Miles bit his lip.

“We need motive, means, method. You know the drill. We need proof Lockhardt was responsible for the car bomb that killed Farin Grant—if he was. Until then, we can’t move forward. So basically, we got nothing.”

“Did you hear the most recent news?”

“What?”

“Five days ago, Jordan Grant’s Malibu beach house exploded.”

“And?”

“And I don’t believe for one minute it’s a coincidence.”

“Anybody injured?”

“An old man walking along the beach got hurt. His dog died. But no one was inside the house.”

“You’re getting paranoid, Macy.”

“It fits together. I know it does.”

“California’s out of our jurisdiction, cowboy.”

“I’ll get you more evidence.”

“The circumstantial stuff we have won’t cut it.”

Miles rocked in his chair, rubbing his chin with his free hand. The bizarre events raced through his mind like blurry headlines. Three years ago: “Singer Silenced at Record Label’s Residence.” Days later: “Farin Grant Felled by Flames.” Two years ago, mere days after Miles discussed the Grant cases with Stark: “Homicide Detective Eats Bullet.” And then last week: “Malibu Mansion Mysteriously Explodes.”

Two guns, two bombs. Coincidence? No way.

Someone had explained away each incident. Jordan? Botched burglary. Farin? Accident. Stark? Flubbed drug deal. Beach house? Faulty wiring.

“You done harassing me?” Alvarez asked, breaking into his thoughts.

“For now. Thanks for the update. And I meant what I said, Alicia. I’m not giving up. Not on this case and not on you. So, if I need to move to Miami to make a believer out of you, it’s already done.”

She softened again as they said goodbye. “Hey.”

“Yeah?”

“We’re still investigating. Something’s obviously going on. We just need to figure out what it is.”

“Lockhardt’s involved. I know it.”

“Well, unless we get proof...”

Proof. Miles could not for the life of him imagine how they would get proof. Whatever Lockhardt's reasons, he had tied up loose ends like a master knotter. They were about as likely to get proof as they were to find a witness.