

Grave Trouble

A Lexi Graves Mysteries short story, 2.5

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Chapter One

From under the hood of my VW came the garbled sound of my dad talking to me. It could have been something about oil or water or something incomprehensible about spark plugs. At least, that's what I hoped he was saying because it sounded unpleasantly like he wanted to hire me and I really wanted to be mistaken.

I squeezed my eyes together, held my breath for a moment, then wheezed, "Say what, Dad?"

"Humph," said Dad, simultaneously shifting backwards and upwards and smacking his head on the underside of the hood. He extricated himself, scratched the bald patch growing on his crown and tapped the spanner he held against the engine. I had absolutely no idea what he was planning on doing with the spanner. It seemed way too large and a bit over the top for a simple oil change. Mind you, I wasn't convinced my car needed an oil change either but my dad was fairly insistent when he appeared on my stoop at ten AM and rang the bell a full five minutes before I realized it wasn't part of the hot cop dream I'd been enjoying, the details of which were now disappointingly lost to me.

I decided to purposefully mishear. "Did you just say I should hire someone to do an oil change? I just got the car serviced."

"Your oil is fine. I want to hire you," said Dad, clear as day.

Damn.

"What for?" I pulled my best puzzled face, which was appropriate seeing as I was. The last time my dad paid me to do something I was a senior in high school and he had a broken leg and needed the grass cut. After a lifetime service in the Montgomery police department, I couldn't imagine what it could be that he needed a private investigator for. I was sure he was perfectly capable of doing anything I could, albeit with less fashion sense, but then we all have our crosses to bear.

"To follow someone." Dad's cheeks colored pink and he stuck his head back under the hood. A series of raps and hollow sounding bangs followed. I suspected it was purely for effect, though the clanging made me wince.

There was clearly only one way to stop him from busting my car. "Who do you want me to follow?" I blew air through my nose and balanced my hands on my hips. When my father didn't come up for air, despite the fact we both knew the offer to check over my car was a ruse, I poked his leg with my sneakered toe. He went very still and then banged something. There was nothing else for it. I stuck my head under the hood, stuck my hands in my back pockets so I didn't inadvertently touch something greasy and fixed him with a look. "*Who*, Dad?"

Dad blinked and gulped. For a retired PD officer, he sure looked guilty. Perhaps my dad had turned to a life of crime. Perhaps he wanted to lure me into the dark, seedy underbelly of Montgomery.

Brilliant!

It had been the most boring week.

“Your mother,” he said finally, in a low voice as his eyes dipped downwards.

It was my turn to blink. “You want me to follow Mom? As in ... *my mother?*”

“Shhh!” He waved the spanner a couple inches too close to my nose for comfort. I backed away, my father and the spanner following. “Don’t tell the whole neighborhood!”

“How can I tell the neighborhood anything when you told me nothing! Why do you want me to follow my mother? Your *wife!*” I added in a low hiss, just in case he forgot. I looked around. Not a single one of my neighbors was out. The neighborhood clearly did not care about my family crisis. From the corner of my eye, I noted a curtain twitch at my neighbor’s house. Okay. So maybe Mrs. Crichton cared. She was probably on the phone to my mother, relying the details as my father and I faced off.

The air seemed to puff out of my father and he closed the hood with a bang, turning to rest his butt against it. His shoulders slumped. “I think she’s seeing someone.”

“Like ... a shrink?” I guessed, a little too hopefully.

“Another man.”

“Oh, come on, Dad! You and mom have been married for at least a million years. There’s no way she’d cheat on you.”

“There’s a first time for everything. Hank MacIntyre’s mother was found in bed with a care worker at her residential home while his father was playing cards.”

“You have got to be kidding me!” I contemplated that. Hank MacIntyre was easily in his sixties and he hosted the poker game my dad attended once a week. Hank’s parents had to be in their late eighties minimum. His mother was ancient even when I was a little girl. And she was making the humpy-hump with a care worker! I didn’t know whether to be appalled or break into applause.

“No word of a lie, Lexi. It’s quite the scandal. The care worker is half her age.”

“Is he cute?”

“Lexi!”

“What? It’s an important question!”

“There’s a little George Clooney about him,” Dad admitted with a shrug. “A little shorter maybe. Mrs. McIntyre looks ten years younger. She’s gotten quite the spring in her walk.”

I really didn’t want to think about that. Though it did sound like her new friend was giving her more oomph than the physiotherapy she had been getting for her fractured hip. Though, come to think of it, I now wondered how she got a fractured hip in the first place.

“Lexi, did you hear what I just said?”

“No, sorry,” I replied, mentally scrubbing the offensive image from my mind. “What did you say?”

“I said, will you follow your mother today?”

“What makes you think she’s seeing another guy anyway?” I asked, rather than answer his question. I just couldn’t see it. My mother stepping out with another man after decades of investment in housetraining my father, not to mention five kids... On the other hand, she had stopped bugging me about going to night classes with her and she always wanted me to join in with her latest fad. Maybe she did have a secret. A big one that she didn’t want me to know about.

“She’s either evasive or lies about where she’s going and when she comes home she’s all pink and out of breath,” Dad explained.

“Maybe she took up running?”

“In heels?”

Yeah. Maybe not, though I did make a mental note to try on the new sneaker wedges I spotted last week when shopping with Lily. They would be so cute with my jeans. “What else made you suspicious?”

“I happened to see her hugging a man as she got into her car.” Dad gulped and looked at the spanner in his hand. He stroked it gently like it was a blankie.

“You just *happened* to see that?”

“I just happened to be following her and happened to see it,” he admitted.

“So, maybe, he was an old friend, or one of her friends’ husbands,” I suggested.

“He looked thirty-five and Italian. He had tight pants.”

“Tight pants aren’t really a sign that he’s doing Mom.” Dad and I both winced.

“He patted her on the butt.”

“Europeans are very friendly, especially Italians. I dated one once.”

Dad sighed and his shoulders slumped a little lower. He gazed at the floor forlornly for a moment before looking up. A tear wet the crease of his eyes and my heart constricted. This was not good news. Dad never cried, though there had been a few dicey moments during the Super Bowl. “Please can you find out if your mother is leaving me for this guy? I need time to plan where to bury his body.”

“La la, didn’t hear that.” I rested my butt on the hood alongside my dad’s and gently removed the spanner from his hands before he damaged my paintwork. “I’ll find out what’s going on but I’m doing it to prove *nothing* is going on, not that something is,” I assured him. “And if Mom finds out I’m snooping on her, you’re taking the blame, ‘kay?”

“Okay.”

“You might not like what I find out,” I warned.

“But you’ll tell me anyway?”

“Only if you promise not to kill anyone.”

“I promise.”

“Could you uncross your fingers?”

Dad sighed and held up his hands. “I *promise*.”

“Your legs are crossed but I’m going to let you off because I’m not sure it counts and if you’re trying to cross your eyes, I think you need to pay a visit to the eye doctor because your left eye isn’t quite making it. Come inside and I’ll make us both a hot tea and you can tell me what you’ve already discovered about Mom’s mystery outings.” I decided not to mention the Italian in the tight pants.

By the time I had my father settled on my couch, a mug of steaming sweet tea in his hands, most of the story had spilled out. While my father had been busy arranging a surprise anniversary dinner and dancing for my mother, he’d noticed her behavior getting a little odd. Her make-up changed, she started wearing a new perfume, new dresses appeared in her closet and the night class she was supposed to be taking didn’t exist. Puzzled, he followed her and saw her with the ‘lothario’, a word he spat into the cool air of my living room, and, he said, the puzzle pieces clicked into place.

“She’s got that spark back,” he continued, after a noisy slurp. “I thought it was great! Your mother seemed really happy and full of energy. I know she enjoys night school but this new class seemed to really give her something else. She looks great, you know, Lexi. Really good. But it’s all for this other guy. I never thought she’d have an affair, or leave me for a man fifteen years younger than me!”

“You don’t know that for sure,” I reminded him. “Why don’t you just ask her if something is going on?”

“Because if I got it wrong, and I admit I might have, she’s going to be really mad at me. I just can’t work out why she changed so much if it isn’t because she’s having an... an...” Dad choked to a stop. “I need you to follow her today, Lexi, please. I need to know and I think she’s looking out for me. I think she knows I found out.”

“At least you know there’s a chance you got it wrong,” I said quickly, filling the sudden silence. As far as plus points went, it wasn’t a strong one but I clung to the idea that my father didn’t have the whole picture. Despite everything he just told me, I still couldn’t picture my mother as the type of woman to throw away decades of marriage for an affair. I also couldn’t picture her sneaking around behind my father’s back. There wasn’t a dishonest bone in her body. I knew this mostly through observation and occasionally through stern lectures. Plus, if my mother wasn’t honesty personified, then my faith in humanity was about to be destroyed. I might even take to the drink and send her the bill. My father would probably join me... and my brothers. It would be one hefty bill. She would probably have to take a

mortgage. But, I reminded myself, it wasn't going to come to that. Whatever my mother was up to, I was going to find out, clear her name and save my parents' marriage.

Right after I figured out how to do it.

Chapter Two

"I can't believe we're snooping on your mom. She's like a second mother to me." Lily craned her head to follow my mother's blue Ford as it pulled into a space outside a fancy boutique while we drove past, Lily slumping in her seat as my mother exited the vehicle. Less than half a block later I pulled into a space and turned off the engine, craning my head just in time to see my mother pace across the sidewalk and disappear into the boutique. We had parked at the end of my parents' street fifteen minutes before my father informed us she was due to leave for the mysterious non-existent class and followed cautiously when we spotted her car exiting the driveway.

"Didn't stop you from saying yes before I even finished asking you to spy on her," I protested, remembering Lily's undisguised glee when I told her what I agreed to do, five minutes after sending my father home. "I didn't even have to tell you why!"

"Not asking why is a sign of true friendship." Lily stuck out her tongue. "Besides, someone needs to keep an eye on you."

"You just want to know if my mom is cheating on my dad."

"It's called 'hope'," Lily replied, putting air quotes into the space between us.

"Hope for what? That my mother got herself a boyfriend?"

"No, hope that I can still pull a young stud when I'm her age."

I considered that. "That *is* hopeful. Did I tell you Hank MacIntyre's mom got herself a boyfriend?"

"Eww! No! Really?" Lily pulled a face as she turned towards my mother's car. "I don't see her."

"She just went into the store with the black and pink awning."

"Silk and Lace? The lingerie shop?"

"Is that what it is? Why's my mother in a lingerie shop?"

Lily frowned. "I'm pretty sure she still wears underpants. You don't just stop at a certain age."

To be honest, it wasn't a subject I'd really contemplated. It was too close to thinking about my parents doing the horizontal horror and I didn't want to think about that at all. "Yeah, but big cotton Bridget Jones underpants," I decided. "Not the type of underwear that features on the floor of a Jackie Collins' novel."

"Maybe she's buying someone a gift?"

I raised my eyebrows at Lily and she shrugged, smiling at my skepticism, which, if I might say, was well placed. "Let's go check out what your mother is buying. Do you think she's a balconette or basque woman?"

I shuddered.

Silk and Lace is a high-end lingerie boutique that probably has alarms on the door ready to set fire to any trespassing polyester undergarments. The frosted window featured artfully placed undies and bras in glam jewel shades and there wasn't a single price tag in sight. For a moment Lily and I stopped to stare at their loveliness and I mentally recalculated my pay check to include something super sexy.

"I think I want everything," said Lily. "In every color."

"Smart choice. I can't see my mother through this window. We'll have to go inside." My heart sank a little. What if my mother was trying something on and I saw her lady lumps? I would be scarred for life. On the other hand, my father was at home growing a scar or two of his own and I had to make sure they didn't turn into permanent wounds.

"Are we going to grill the sales lady?" Lily asked hopefully. "You want to be kind or menacing? I don't mind which but my hair looks great today so maybe I should do kind." She gave my hair a pointed look and I self-consciously smoothed it with my palm. Personally, I thought I looked fine. Not at all menacing.

"No to the grilling. Well ... maybe. I don't know. Let's just go inside." I stepped past Lily and pushed the door, stepping inside the plushly appointed emporium. It smelled sultry, like vanilla, and the lighting was soft. Scant pieces of lingerie hung on the walls, framed with wooden trim like pieces of art. Glossy black push-up bras with spaghetti straps; rich purple balconettes; deep velvet red demi-cups, each with matching shorts, briefs and thongs. Across the room a rail of silky nightgowns wafted in a gentle, artificial, breeze. Concealed speakers pumped sexy, soulful music.

I couldn't help it. I began to salivate.

"If I was getting frisky with a younger man, I'd come here too," Lily said, reaching up to grab a peacock blue bra with a diamante front clip. "Do you think Jord would be into stuff like this?"

"I don't think my brother is into lady's underwear. He's more of a boxers' man."

Lily's eyes dilated slightly. "Jersey or cotton?" she asked breathlessly.

"Eww! Like I care." I scanned the room looking for my mother but she was nowhere to be seen. Bearing down on us, however, was a waiflike sales assistant in a skintight pencil dress that clung to her like a second skin. A glossy ponytail hung from her naps. Her name tag read Perdita. Both her name and look reminded me of a show pony.

"May I help you, ladies? Are you looking for something special?" she asked.

"Just browsing," said Lily, her eyes reverting to the bra. I was glad at the moment to not be telepathic because I really didn't want to know what dirty thoughts were going through her head, especially not ones that involved my brother.

“That’s right,” I agreed, glancing over her shoulder towards the changing rooms. Seeing as I couldn’t see her on the shop floor, my mother had to be in there. That meant she was trying something on. Even worse, that meant she was contemplating buying something fancy. “Just browsing.”

“For a special occasion?” Perdita enquired, still hopeful.

“Lexi has a special night planned with her boyfriend,” chirped Lily, nudging me in the side with her elbow. “She needs something really fancy. The wow factor.”

“Everything we have has the wow factor.” I think the sales assistant beamed but I wasn’t sure. Her face looked frozen into a permanent expression of mild surprise but I think I saw the corners of her lips move and her eyes widened slightly. “Please feel free to try anything on. We have two changing rooms for your pleasure.”

“She wants to try these on.” Lily maneuvered some tiny pieces of material into my hand and gave me a push in the direction of the changing rooms. How she’d gathered so many items in the space of a few seconds I had no idea but I had to admire her skills. She would definitely win a lingerie game-show sweep.

“Let me know if you need any help.” The assistant ushered us through the velvet-draped archway into the changing rooms and indicated I was to take the door on the left. The right door, behind which I assumed my mother lurked, remained ominously shut. I fixed Lily with a look and then glanced towards the right door and nodded. Lily gave me a grave nod in return and settled on a velvet pouf to sit sentry. With a wave of her hand she reminded me that we were in the store under pretence of shopping for my big night with the boyfriend. As I stepped inside and pushed the door closed, I held up the garments Lily had stuck me with and wondered exactly what my boyfriend, Adam Maddox, would think to the racy gear. Trying on one bra after another, I was quickly convinced that they would not only be a very sensible purchase but also an investment in our relationship. It was thinking like that that would get me into a whole heap of very enjoyable trouble. I just hoped my mother wasn’t thinking the same thing.

As I rearranged the lingerie on their tiny hangers and adjusted my clothing and grocery budget to accommodate some crucial lingerie shopping, I heard Lily loudly exclaim, “Mrs. Graves! Hellooooo!”

Unlocking the door, I stepped out in time to see my mother turn a bright shade of pink and stuff her arm behind her back, concealing whatever she held.

“Mom!” I exclaimed, in not exactly faux-surprise.

“Lexi!” Hers was real.

“You know each other?” said the hovering assistant, her expression still edging towards surprise.

“Wonderful! Are you all shopping together?”

“No!” said my mother and gulped.

“Whatcha got there, Mrs. Graves?” Lily craned her head to try and see behind my mother’s back, who promptly did a little sidestep shuffle and half-turn, backing out of the changing area.

“A bold choice, Madam,” cooed the assistant. “Shall I wrap these for you?” She had my mother’s purchases whipped from her before my mom could hide them behind her back again. With wide eyes, and wider mouth, I counted a silk nightgown with a plunging neckline and a lacy black garter slip. It didn’t have a lot up top.

“Yes, thank you,” my mother stuttered as she stepped backwards into the boutique. “Must dash, girls. Er, lovely to see you both. Have fun shopping. Dinner soon? Yes? Great. Must dash ... Dashing.”

Lily and I exchanged glances and followed her, arriving at the glass checkout desk just as my mother handed her card over to the assistant who had wrapped her purchases in tissue paper in double quick time, adding them to a chic black and pink logo bag.

I tossed the garments I’d held haphazardly onto the desk. “I didn’t know you shopped here, Mom.”

“I didn’t know you did either!” Mom tucked the card into her purse and gathered up the bag. “Uh... don’t tell your father you saw me in here,” she murmured as she quickly kissed my cheek and pretty much raced from the store, the bag swinging in her hand.

“I see you get your taste from your mother,” said Perdita, following up her observation with a string of numbers. I absentmindedly handed over my Visa card and barely noticed as she rang up the garments, tissue papered them and handed me a bag. I was still in a daze as Lily paid for her set. Somehow, without noticing, we ended up on the sidewalk, the closing door leaving us with the faintest clinging scent of vanilla.

“Ohmigod,” I murmured as we watched my mother back the car out of the space and speed off. She didn’t even wave, just gripped the steering wheel like it might fall off.

“I know. Your mother is totally getting some on the side. Why else would she plunk down the big bucks on that slip?”

“She told me not to tell Dad.” My voice came out like a whisper.

“You totally have to tell your dad.”

“I know. But I was ohmigodding because I just realized I bought stuff.” I unfolded the receipt I’d crumpled into my hand. “Take it. I can’t look. How much did I spend?”

“You need to do overtime,” replied Lily, matter-of-fact.

“I’m not even sure what I just bought. I was staring at the slip my mom bought. Did you see the garter straps? My mother is a harlot.”

“With excellent taste. You brought two bras and matching undies. Maybe you do get your style from my mother.”

“Take that back!”

“She’s going to be a hottie in the bedroom in that get-up.”

“Noooo! It can’t happen!”

“What can’t happen?” sounded a familiar male voice from behind me. “Ooh! Did you buy stuff from that sexy lingerie store?”

Of all the people I could bump into! I turned around and fixed a pleased smile on my face as Montgomery’s sexiest cop leaned in to kiss my cheek. With his dark, unruly hair and smoky blue eyes, he was always a sight to behold. Today he was dressed casual in blue jeans and a chocolate-brown leather jacket. Even minus a ribbon and a bow, he was a perfect gift waiting to be unwrapped. “Hi, Maddox. What are you doing here?” I asked, trying not to dribble.

“Casing lingerie stores for hot PIs.”

“Oh, you’re good,” said Lily. “You found one on your first go.”

“Not a detective for nothing.” Maddox winked. “So…” He nodded at the bag. “Is that something I get to see?” He reached forward and with his index finger levered one side of the bag towards him and peered inside.

“Maybe.” I gave him a coy smile and fluttered my eyelashes. Though given my dazed state and shock at my mother’s wanton daring, I may well have pulled a clown face at him. It didn’t seem to faze him.

“Are you going to wear whatever it is with nothing but high heels and one of those short Macs and turn up at my door?” Maddox straightened up and fixed me with the most hopeful expression.

“You should totally do that,” said Lily. “I have a Mac you can borrow.”

I ignored her. “Uh, fantasy, much?”

He shrugged. “Maybe. Little bit. Pick you up at eight?”

“It’s a date.” I beamed. The lingerie would come in useful after all and sooner than I thought. See! Investment purchase! Overtime, be damned!

“Fantastic. We can go anywhere you like. Kitchen counter. Couch. Bedroom.” He planted a full kiss on my lips, winked again and was gone with a wave. Ten steps away, he turned mid-walk, blew a kiss and then strode away.

“I think I’ll go out tonight,” said Lily. “I don’t like it when the ceiling lights rattle.”

“Okay, whatever,” I replied, my enthusiasm departing and following Maddox along the street while my eyes remained fixed on his back. I licked my lips. I might have salivated a little too.

“I think you’re still dazed. Maybe you’re in shock? And I hate to break it to you but… we lost your mom.”

That snapped me to attention. "Damn!"

Chapter Three

It was only by stroke of luck that I spotted my mother's car parked on Century Street, so named because it took approximately one hundred years to drive it on a slow traffic day. Actually, that rumor probably wasn't true but it sure felt like it today as we crawled along, searching, after a round of phone calls confirmed my mother hadn't returned home or stopped by to visit any of my siblings.

"There she is," I squealed, lifting one hand from the steering wheel to point. "Jackpot!"

"Take the right turn!" Lily reached for the wheel and I batted her hand away, protesting, "I'm doing it" as I pulled a sharp turn into the narrow parking lot of the strip mall. I slid the VW into a space the opposite side of the lot from my mother's car and turned off the engine.

"She must be inside one of the stores," Lily decided after we observed the empty car for a moment. "Ooh! Do you think she's in there?"

I followed Lily's finger past the bakery and the Italian deli to what I can only describe as a "specialist" shop for adults. "No!"

"Why not? You didn't think your mother shopped at Silk and Lace. Why not a sex shop too?"

"Because my mother has never done *it*!"

Lily considered that thoughtfully. "Good point."

"We'll have to go look for her. Be inconspicuous."

"Okay." Lily slunk out of the car, crouched down and duckwalked to the sidewalk. I strolled after her and reached her just as she planted her back against the brick wall and started to shuffle sideways.

"Let's do normal instead," I suggested and she straightened up with a disappointed sigh. "I think we'll attract less attention."

With cursory glances, we discounted three stores before we both halted as my mother exited the furthest store, quickly looked to her right and left, ducked her head and scurried to her car.

"I don't think she saw us."

"Nope. I don't think she bought anything either," I said, noticing the absence of shopping bags. "That's good news."

"Not necessarily. She came out of Hot to Trot Travel. Is she taking a vacation?"

"Not that I know of. I don't recall them mentioning anything." My stomach dropped. "We should find out."

“Easy. Cindy Hathaway from high school is the manager.” Lily clapped her hands together in delight. I had to admit, asking someone familiar would make the task a whole bunch easier than making up a ruse.

“The swot from math class?” I asked, just to confirm it was the same frizzy-haired, plump girl I remembered. We’d never been close but I remembered Cindy as being sweet, bright, and without an ounce of fashion sense.

“That’s the one but she had her teeth and hair done. You wouldn’t recognize her.”

As it happened, I did recognize her because all though Cindy now had the body of a babe and a smooth blonde mane, she still had really bad taste in sweaters. Today’s was pale blue with lace around the shoulders and a neat ribbon bow in the middle. It looked like the eighties had vomited it into the current decade.

“Cindy, hiiiiiii!” Lily squealed. “Looking good!”

Cindy beamed a perfect white smile as she embraced Lily. I vaguely recalled Cindy and Lily had been friendly in school and obviously they’d kept in touch while I’d been busy doing nothing useful for the world. “Lily! Lexi, hey!” Cindy beamed a welcoming smile as if we’d only just seen each other last week, not years ago. “I just saw your mom. What a small world!”

“Oh?” I feigned surprise. There wasn’t a lot of feigning since it was a surprise. The more I thought about it, the more I was sure my mother had not mentioned taking a trip anywhere. Clearly I needed to come up with a plan fast to find out what brought her to the travel agency. The words spilled from my mouth before I had a chance to think about them. “Did she decide on her trip?”

“Paris for two. How romantic!” Cindy beamed again and gave a little shoulder shrug. “I always wanted to go to Paris.”

Lily and I exchanged glances. I popped a questioning eyebrow.

“When’s she flying out again?” I asked, hopeful that I seemed scatterbrained rather than suspicious. “It’s soon, right?”

“This Saturday. I even booked the cab from the hotel to take them to the airport.” The phone on the desk behind Cindy trilled and she gave it a quick glance before giving us an apologetic face. “I must get it. I’m the only one here today with my assistant off sick. Feel free to browse.”

“We just wanted to grab a couple of brochures,” Lily chipped in, reaching for a glossy stack on the open shelving. “Girls’ weekend.”

“Count me in!” Cindy giggled and reached for the phone.

We grabbed a couple more brochures as cover and waved to Cindy as we exited the travel agency. "You know, a girls' weekend isn't so bad an idea," said Lily as she leafed through the pages. "Massages, manicures, pool, mojitos..."

"Keep talking." I scanned the lot for my mother. Gone. But I had a fairly good idea where she might be.

"I wonder if Cindy could get us a discount if we invite her."

"Cool by me. I always thought she was nice. She's lost a lot of weight. We should go to the gym more."

"Speak for yourself. I go every day. So does Cindy."

I pulled a face and changed the subject. Not that I was against exercise but I wasn't religious about it, well, except the times I prayed I could still walk after spin class. "If we head to the Montgomery Hotel and Conference Center, I think we'll find my mother there," I told Lily. "Cindy says the cab is booked from a hotel." We climbed into the car and I had to take a couple of deep breaths. "Fancy lingerie, hotel, tickets for two to Paris. My mother is running away, isn't she?"

"Bright side... she's doing it in style."

"Ugh!"

Lily leafed through the brochures, occasionally exclaiming over various hotel or location attributes, as I pointed the VW in the direction of the hotel and we crawled our way along Century. Just in case, I kept my eyes peeled for my mother, finally spotting her taking a left at the intersection, away from the hotel.

"I should have stuck a tracking device on her car," I mused.

"Yep," agreed Lily. "We'll do that next time."

"There will be no next time. My mother is running away to Paris."

"In fancy lingerie," Lily unhelpfully reminded me.

I made a noise somewhere between a wail and a squeak. "We have to stop her. We need to talk to her and stop her from making a huge mistake." I slid through the traffic, into the turning lane, and headed west, the traffic thinning as we pressed on. My mother's car came back into sight and I followed it to a side street, idling momentarily at the corner as my mother drew up outside a nondescript building, parked, and hurried inside.

"Where are we?" asked Lily, looking around nervously at the deserted street. "Should we lock the doors?"

"I think we're okay. I'm not sure what this place is though." I drove past my mother's car and pulled up around the corner, tucking the VW just out of sight. We exited and walked back to the building, lingering for a moment outside while I placed a call to the hotel. "My mother booked a suite for two," I told Lily after sweet-talking the receptionist into thinking I was Hot to Trot travel's stupidest assistant. I hoped it

wouldn't get me into trouble with Cindy but it was important, I justified. "What is this place?" I asked as I turned towards the building. Plate glass doors with frosted letters announced Lorenzo's School of Dance.

Lily frowned. "Does your mother take dance classes?"

I thought of all the classes my mother had taken. "She did belly dancing once, I think."

"So maybe she's taking another class?"

"She has two left feet. The belly dancing wasn't a success."

"Only one way to find out," said Lily, charging forwards. She was through the doors before I had chance to protest and just as I was about to follow her, my cell phone rang. "Dad" flashed on the screen. I sighed and answered it.

"So?" he started, without preamble. "What's happening with your mother?"

"Not a lot," I replied. "She's been shopping."

"For what? She bought groceries yesterday."

"Um, lingerie."

There was a long pause. Then, in a low voice, "Lingerie?"

I cringed. "Yes and ..."

"And what ..."

"Airplane tickets."

"Where to?"

"Paris."

"Paris!" My father was quiet again a moment. "She always wanted to go to Paris. Where are you now?"

"Outside a dance school. Mom just went inside."

"What's she doing at a dance school? Belly dancing was a fiasco."

"I don't know! I just got here."

"Call me back when you find out. Lingerie and Paris," he muttered and hung up.

I pulled a face at the glass doors and walked inside. The reception desk was empty but I spotted Lily stood across the hall. She barely moved as I joined her and when I turned to see what had her captivated, my jaw dropped.

Joined hip to hip and slinking across the room was my mother and a man at least twenty years her junior. Black hair curled over his forehead and softly fell to his nape. His short-sleeved shirt revealed thick biceps and more tanned flesh. As his foot slid forward, my mother's foot slipped back, and across the room they floated.

"Holy Hell, is that a rose in his mouth?" breathed Lily. We waited as the man dipped my mother backwards and leaned forward. His lips parted slightly and the rose dropped ... only for my mother to catch the stem in her mouth and give her hair a victorious shake. The man grinned, his eyes fixed on her.

"Yep." We continued to watch as my mother whipped something from her pocket and flashed it at the lothario. He drew her to her feet, picked her up and swung her around. "And that will be the tickets. My mother is leaving my dad for *him*?"

"Damn!" I had the horrible feeling Lily was impressed.

I pulled my phone out, scrolled my address book for my dad and hit dial. Moments later he answered. "I think you should come down here," I told him, reeling off the address of the dance school. "Mom is with a guy and she just showed him the airline tickets. I think he's the Italian you saw."

"I'll be right there," said Dad, his tone thunderous as I confirmed his fears. "Don't let them leave."

Chapter Four

My dad arrived just in time to see my mother and the man dance the last few steps of a tango. I had to admit, my mother looked pretty good out there, though I wasn't too keen on all the extra hip action from her partner. Funnily enough, my mother didn't seem to mind. In fact, she was all about the hips. It was a little worrying and the more I thought about it, the odder it seemed. As far as I knew my mother had never looked at another man twice, well, maybe twice, but she definitely didn't do any more that. Yet here she was, sliding across the floor in a younger man's arms, smiling. And she most definitely had a right foot and a left foot. She had grace, too.

"That's your new daddy," said Lily, nudging me. "Funny, he doesn't look much older than us."

I pulled a face. "Ewww!" I was pretty certain he was younger than my two oldest brothers. My father's description of him was accurate but he looked more than fifteen years my mother's junior. I guessed twenty, which didn't quite put her in Mrs. McIntyre's league when it came to wrongdoing but pretty damn close.

"Yeah. You probably don't have to call him Dad. Speaking of which..." Lily pointed and I turned to see my father enter the building, searching for us as he paused in the lobby. Upon seeing us, he strode over, unbuttoning his jacket like he would throw it to the ground any moment, roll up his sleeves and lay into the younger man. He stopped a few paces away, gazing past us to the dance studio, his hands hanging limply at his sides.

"She's leaving me for that swivel-hipped son of a gun?" Dad's voice was pained.

"It might just be a dirty weekend," Lily pipped. As my father turned to look at her, she took a step back, edging behind me. "Sorry. That just popped out." She mimed zipping her mouth shut.

"Five children. Grandchildren," my father muttered as he stared through the window cut into the door. "I'm not letting my wife throw it all away!" Striding forwards, he slapped his hand against the door and slammed it open. It bounced against the wall as he strode through. Lily and I shuffled after him. I wondered if my father was armed and if this counted as pre-meditated. "Matilda!" he yelled. "Step away from that man!"

"Oh my gosh!" My mother's hands flew to her mouth as she whirled around. "What are you doing here?" She paused. Frowned. "Lexi? Lily?"

Lily and I gave a little wave and I tried a smile. Catching sight of myself in the floor-to-ceiling mirrors I wiped the grimace off of my face. Now was not a time for smiling.

My mother refocused on my father, her face perplexed. "What's going on?"

"I won't let you leave me!" Dad seemed to shake himself then he crossed the stretch of space between them and took my mother's hands in his. "I won't let you throw away everything we have for this... this..." He nodded at the man who stood still at my mother's side. The younger man looked as perplexed

as my mother though he smiled when he saw Lily and I. Lily gave him a wave and he waggled his fingers at her. "This..." Dad spluttered to stop.

"This dance instructor?" my mother filled in. "Lorenzo."

"You're leaving me for a dance instructor called Lorenzo. He's not even Irish." Dad shook his head.

"I'm not leaving you for anyone you silly fool. I'm taking dance lessons."

"What are you doing that for?"

"Because I can't dance!"

"You really can," I butted in. "You looked great."

"You really did," agreed Lily, nodding. "Very graceful."

My mother smiled.

"I don't get it." Dad shook his head. His forehead furrowed into a frown. "You've been so different lately. New dresses, perfume, sneaking out to a class that doesn't exist! The girls followed you into a lingerie store!"

My mother's jaw dropped open as she turned to us once more. I had the uncomfortable feeling that she was very, very disappointed. More so than the one time I graded 'F' in Math. "You girls were following me?" she asked in dismay.

"A little bit." I squeezed my thumb and forefinger close together.

Mom turned to my father and shook her head. "You asked *our daughter* to follow me?"

"It's a good job I did or you'd be on a plane to Paris with this lothario without even a note!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, Steve, you couldn't be more wrong if you tried." My mother bent forward, her hands on her knees. Her shoulders shook and she made a squeaking noise. For a moment I thought she had burst into tears then she straightened again and I saw she was laughing. Not just laughing but shaking and hooting until tears slipped down her cheeks. "This is the most ridiculous thing I ever heard!"

Lily turned to me and raised an eyebrow. I shrugged. I was as lost as she. Also: I was a little afraid of what my mother was going to say next or if she would ever invite me for dinner again. Not that I couldn't cook, but there was something pretty great about our enormous family dinners with everyone squashed around the table. It was amazing what was said when their lips loosened.

"Then you explain to me what's going on between you and him!" Dad folded his arms and waited as my mother wiped the tears away.

"I just did, if you'd listen! Lorenzo has been teaching me to dance so that our anniversary dinner isn't ruined."

"Anniversary?"

"Ours, Steve, ours!"

Dad pulled a face. "Why would it be ruined?"

"Because you like to dance and I know you arranged dinner and dancing and I always do something to embarrass myself like step on your toes or trip over my own feet. I just wanted to surprise you," my mother explained as she reached for my dad's hand. He didn't pull away. Instead, he cleared his throat and mumbled, "And the dresses?"

"With all the dancing I lost fourteen pounds! Nothing fit. I had to buy new clothes."

Dad shifted from one foot to the other as his cheeks pinked. "And the ... um ... lingerie?" he asked, dropping his voice like it was some kind of secret that my mother wore underclothes. I wish it was. Apparently the whole town now knew. "And Paris?"

"I booked us a trip. It was supposed to be a surprise anyway and I wanted to wear something special. I booked a room at the hotel for after dinner and thought we'd catch the plane in the morning." Mom gave a coy one-shoulder shrug.

I glanced across at my father to see how he was taking the news. Yep, a little chagrined. I mean, how could he think his wife was *cheating*? "Shame on you, Dad," I muttered under my breath, glancing over my shoulder to stare at the plain wall across the room as my father turned to look at me, his eyebrows raised.

"Yeah, shame on you," echoed Lily.

"Oh, shush, girls! You're not in trouble though I'm a little surprised, Lexi, you would even think I was leaving your father." She turned to my dad. "All I wanted to do was surprise you and now the surprise is ruined." She sighed.

"It's definitely been a surprise," Dad admitted. "A much better surprise than I imagined. You did all this for us?"

Mom nodded.

"You're a wonderful wife."

"And you're a wonderful husband."

"And I'm a great dance teacher," chipped in Lorenzo. "This is why you have no more two feet! Why doesn't your husband stay for this lesson? I will 'ave you dancing in perfect harmony. No more problems! Yes? I say yes!"

“Steve?”

My father looked from my mother to Lorenzo and back again. “Sure,” he agreed, his face brightening as they worry lifted the moment he took my mother in his arms. “Why not? Let’s dance.”

“And this weekend we can dance in Paris,” Mom added.

I reached for Lily’s elbow and gave it a little tug, nodding towards the door. She smiled for a moment as we watched my parents beam at each other, then we edged our way from the room, easing the door open and closed as softly as possible. As we traversed the lobby, I looked back for a moment to see my parents begin to dance, Lorenzo correcting their arm positions then standing back to watch.

Stepping outside, Lily asked. “So, are you going to bill your Dad for this?”

I shrugged. “Nah.” I had much a better idea.

“Good call. It’s worth more in blackmail.”

“Great minds think alike.” I hooked my arm through Lily’s and we made for my car. “My dad’s error is as priceless as the memories they’re going to create this anniversary weekend. I’m going to remind him of it as soon as I need a really big favor.” But even as I said it, I knew I wouldn’t. This day was best forgotten.

“Is this the time were I bring up your mom’s sexy lingerie again? Oh la lah!” Lily whistled.

“Please don’t.”

“Fine. Let’s check out yours for your hot date. Do you want to borrow my Mac?”

I thought of Maddox’s hopeful face and butterflies fluttered in my stomach. “Yes, please.”

Note from the author:

I hope you enjoyed this short story set in Lexi Graves' world. Want to read more? Try the full length novels in this series, available from Amazon, iTunes, B&N, Kobo, and Smashwords:

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