

GROWLER
To
GRAVE

Black *Oops* Detective Mystery Book 2

Marissa Allen

Copyright © 2024 Maria McKenzie

All rights reserved.

ISBN: 9798329567076

DEDICATION

For my friend Andrea Rotterman who left us too soon.
We miss you, Andy!

Also by Marissa Allen

Cad to Cadaver

Black OOps Detective Mystery Book 1

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to my husband Richard, who loved the first *Black OOps Mystery* and wanted me to write another one. And as always, thank you for your advice on the male perspective.

Again, many, many thanks to my wonderful writing friends who provide me with drive and inspiration! Lisa, my writing coach extraordinaire who puts her students under encouraging pressure to turn our words into diamonds, Jan whose exacting reading and quirky sense of humor adds so much to every scene, Maria F. who supplied fine tuning and exquisite aspects to the story, and Andy who provided so many details to make my writing more realistic.

Thank you to Humble Monk Brewery for all your time and patience in answering my questions of how things operate in a brewery.

Thank you to former fire fighter Gary Auffart for providing me with feedback on my writing, as well as an abundance of information regarding fires.

CHAPTER 1

Busted! Denise Geist, white female, age: thirty-five.

Johann Becker, white male, age: thirty-seven.

This is my first time doing surveillance from a tree. At least I'm not alone. My partner is on the ground below. We're in Red River Gorge of all places, a canyon system in east-central Kentucky. I'm perched about ten feet off the ground in the crook of a gargantuan ash with limbs extending like enormous tentacles, surrounded by a huge variety of towering trees and an assortment of rock formations that resemble anything from massive mushrooms to colossal croissants.

The morning summer sun shines brightly, yet I'm well hidden from the perpetrators I'm spying on. They're about fifty yards away, in a secluded area off the beaten path, standing beneath the shade of a giant oak talking, gazing deeply into each other's eyes, and innocently holding hands. I know they'll be planted there for a while because a large, boldly colored Navajo blanket lies on the ground next to them.

Did I say surveillance? Who am I kidding? I'm Tracy Black, private eye, gathering proof of a cheating spouse and her man candy. Okay, it's technically surveillance, just not

my preferred type. These tailing of suspected cheater gigs aren't exactly my favorite jobs. They're creepy, to say the least, and believe me, I'm not crazy about being a voyeur, peeping Tom, scopophilic, or whatever you want to call it. But on the other hand, I get a lot of calls from paranoid spouses. And when their hunch is correct, it makes me feel useful to help. Out of the top twenty reasons private detectives are hired, infidelity investigations come in at number eleven.

I busily click away, taking photos with my Konica telephoto lens. The innocent hand holding has morphed into erotic exploration; lots of touching, feeling and kissing. I glance down at my partner and soon-to-be husband, I hope, Adam Slade. Broad shouldered, six-foot-three inches and incredibly ripped. He's *my* man candy. I give him a thumbs up, then continue snapping away as the ardor of the cheating spouse and her lover increases.

Another passionate kiss. Click.

As things continue to heat up, Johann moves a few steps away from Denise and rips off his shirt. He's a personal trainer and it shows: perfectly ripped chest, back and deltoids. Click, click, click. He also served in the Jagdkommando or Hunting Commando, the Austrian Special Ops unit. And he currently runs his family's sausage business.

Oh gosh! Now he's about to unzip his shorts. I'm not going there, so I move the camera to Denise. Holy smokes! Click. I lower the camera quickly feeling icky. I must've been too distracted with Johann while Denise disrobed. She was in a complete state of nature. Unsee! By the way, she's his personal training client and I saw enough to say that, yeah, it shows.

I take a deep breath, tamping down any feelings of revulsion, and raise the camera for one last picture as they crumple in a heap on the blanket. Click.

I remove my telephoto lens and pack it and the Konica in

the camera bag that hangs around my neck. I've seen enough and I really don't want to see any more. I've captured plenty of evidence. Her husband Blake Geist, ex-Bengal and premier brewmeister, can use his imagination for the rest of their rendezvous.

I signal Adam that I'm done and carefully begin my descent. I keep my body as close to the trunk as possible while the rough surface of the bark chafes against my skin. Adam's at the ready in case I should fall, but I'll be fine. I took a tree climbing course back when I was in law enforcement.

Turns out, climbing up is always a lot easier. Adam even gave me a boost so I could reach the first limb. As I descend, I try to place my foot on the same branches I used going up, like I was taught. I know they're strong enough to hold me, but, of course, it's harder to see them. As I extend my foot toward the next branch, I realize it isn't one I used before. Regardless, it looks sturdy enough.

CRACK

Crap! The limb detaches itself from the tree. I mean, I don't weigh *that* much. I fall the last few feet, then land in Adam's arms – at first, anyway.

As Adam hits the ground with me on top of him, "Ooff," is the only sound that escapes from his lips.

He caught me, but that knocked him off his feet. Inertia, you know? So I guess you could say he broke my fall. Did I mention I'm not that heavy? Okay, in the past I've referred to myself as an Amazon, because I'm five-eight, but at least I'm slim.

"Adam!" I jump up quickly, toss my camera bag toward my backpack, then kneel beside him and see blood seeping from the side of his forehead.

"I'm good," he says, in a low husky voice.

As Adam stands, I see the sharp edge of the rock protruding from the ground right where his head had been. And when I look toward him, the blood is streaming. I

spring to my feet. "You're not good! You're bleeding!"

He puts a hand to his bloody forehead. Looking at sticky crimson fingers, he says, "It's nothing."

The blood begins to gush. "Adam, you're hurt!"

"I'm fine," he says, then takes two steps and collapses.

CHAPTER 2

I rush to Adam and drop to my knees by his side. The wound is bleeding like crazy, so I rip off my t-shirt and wrap his head.

I place Adam's hand on the wounded area beneath the makeshift bandage. "Press here."

Adam applies pressure as instructed, while I shine the flashlight of my iPhone to check his pupils. When I pull up one of his eyelids, the pupils constrict. Sometimes that can rule out a concussion, but not always.

Disgusted with myself, I huff out a deep breath. Just whose bright idea was it to take this job in the first place?

Mine.

And a very stupid idea it was, at least in retrospect. When I found out hiking *and* a cheating spouse were involved, I should've said no. But as the stereotypical struggling private eye and the owner of Black Ops Detective Agency, I'm hardly in a position to turn down a paying customer. Yet, pay aside, why did I think I had to prove to Adam that even though I'm black, I can be a nature girl? As I said, I took a tree climbing course, but the woods are not my ideal habitat. Don't get me wrong, I do what I have to outdoors. As a twenty-eight year-old, I'm in great shape: ex-cop;

former FBI agent; and I run outside. But Adam's more comfortable with this hiking thing than I'll ever be. He's a guy to start with, and an ex-Navy SEAL. They're used to roughing it in all kinds of tough situations on sea, air, and land. Oh, and Adam's white.

It's just past ten thirty in the morning, but it's already eighty-five degrees. I wipe the sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand. In addition to really *not* being a nature girl, I can be a klutz at times, which you probably noticed earlier. Sure the branch broke, but I was on it. And because of me, Adam's body is sprawled on the ground, his eyes are closed, and his head is bleeding.

"Adam, stay awake."

"I'm —"

"You're not good." In the distance, I hear Denise and Johann in the throes of passion. Apparently, they're feeling no pain.

Adam must hear them too, because the next thing he says is, "Got pics?"

"I got the pictures. Just keep talking," I say to him.

"Right."

"I need you to say more than just one word at a time."

"Yeah."

As you can see, Adam is a man of few words. Opening his eyes slightly, he says, "The pics."

I retrieve my camera bag and take out the Konica, then pull up some of the photos on the LCD screen. The last one showing the couple collapsed on the blanket.

"Wish we could do that," Adam's eyes slowly move to mine, then close again.

"Oh, great," I mumble. Another amorous sound emerges from the lovers in the distance.

I shove the camera into the bag, then wave my phone around, searching for a signal. "Say something else."

"So can we?"

He knows my feelings about doing the deed before

marriage. "Nice try, but keep talking."

"Dying wish?"

"That's an even better try." I hold my phone upside down and finally locate a signal. "Talk to me some more, Adam. Open your eyes wide and look at me. I'm calling 911." While I wait for Adam to respond, a recording says, "Your call is important to us."

"That sounds good, but it's probably a lie," I say.

"Right," Adam agrees.

"Keep talking," I encourage him.

The recording continues, "Call volumes are higher than usual, you may encounter a longer wait time."

"Longer than what?" I say.

"Got me," Adam says.

The recording goes on, "Many issues can be handled on our website."

"That sounds like they're trying to convince me that I shouldn't have called!" I protest.

"Little ice; I'll be fine," Adam says.

"If this is a true emergency," the recording says, "please remain on the line."

"Disconnect," Adam says.

"No! This is a true emergency, whether you like it or not! You really need professional assistance." Besides, his mom isn't thrilled that he took a bullet during our last gig. We tried to keep that from her, but she found out. Despite that, I think she's slowly warming up to me and I don't want to jeopardize that.

I peer into Adam's face. Even with a head injury and his dark hair covered by my turbaned t-shirt, he still manages to look good.

He opens his dark brown eyes. They stare back at me from that perfectly chiseled face. You know, the kind you see in action movies or Abercrombie and Fitch advertisements: strong jaw-line with the male model sculpted chin and cheekbones. For a moment he looks like

he's never seen me before. I'd like to think the sweat slathered all over me makes my brown skin glisten like gold, or at least the lesser element of copper.

Do I look otherworldly to him or something?

Doubtful, even after a head injury. Maybe the finger-in-a-light-socket look of the extra frizz the humidity has caused in my kinky ponytail is freaking him out. After a second, his gaze zeroes in on my chest.

That's a good sign. I'm on the busty side.

"Maybe instead of me using my hand, you could use that compression bra to compress my injury," he says hopefully.

I smirk. "I don't think so." My sports bra is the only thing I'm wearing above the waist since my t-shirt's holding his head together.

"911," a male voice finally says from my phone, "what is the address of your emergency?"

"Red River Gorge," I say.

"How far have you hiked in?"

"Oh, gosh, at least five miles!"

"Half a mile," Adam mumbles.

I correct myself, "I meant five *tenths* of a mile."

"Okay, so where are you now exactly?" 911 asks.

Where? Good question. "A...trail?"

911 says, "Can you be more specific?"

"Rough Trail, Section One," Adam mumbles.

"Rough Trail, Section One," I reply with authority.

"Okay," 911 says, "I have the location and number of your cell. What's the nature of your emergency?"

"I've got a head wound that needs immediate attention," I say.

"You sound pretty good to me," 911 replies.

Eye roll. "My boyfriend has a head wound –"

"Gotcha. When did it happen?"

"Five minutes ago," I say.

"Is he conscious?"

"Yes. He wants to doze off, but I'm trying to keep him

awake."

"Do your best to keep him talking," 911 says. "Are his pupils dilated?"

"No."

"Is he bleeding?"

"Yeah, a lot, but I've wrapped the injury with a t-shirt."

"Where's the wound?"

"On the side of his forehead along the hairline."

"Help is on the way," 911 assures me. "What's his age?"

"Thirty-five."

"What's your name and the name of the injured party?"

"I'm Tracy Black, Adam Slade is injured." By the way, I call my agency Black Ops because of my last name, *not* because I'm black, which I am, and *not* because I do hit jobs, which I don't.

"Okay, Tracy, you'll need to apply pressure to Adam's wound."

"He's already got his hand—"

"A compression bra would work for that, right?" Adam interrupts loudly enough for 911 to hear.

"Great idea!" 911 exclaims. "A compression bra would be great if you have one handy."

Seriously?

With eyes closed, Adam smiles, but says nothing.

I hesitate, but do what's best for him. He'd do the same for me, even though a guy baring his chest really bears no comparison. I take a quick look around. Gotta make sure nobody's nearby with a phone recording video.

I'm hoping Denise and Johann are too involved with their carnal endeavor to hear all the commotion over here. Yeah, so sue me! I'll take pictures of someone else in a compromising position, but I don't want to be caught in a similar predicament. I have enough problems as it is, so it would really suck to end up on YouTube like this.

I've already had my share of trouble with the Internet. Besides, you don't see black people hiking that often. A

topless black woman hiking in Kentucky would likely go viral. The coast is clear. I pull the sports bra over my head, then tighten it over the make-shift bandage on Adam's head.

"Keep him conscious," 911 reminds me.

"Say something, Adam! Don't go to sleep," I yell.

He opens his eyes. "Wow!" he smiles, as I cover myself with my arms. "I'll have to cut my head open more often, since that's the only way I can get you to take off your bra."

"Sounds like the wound is compressed and you've found a great way to keep him conscious!" 911 says, with a little too much enthusiasm. "Keep him talking. The RedStar Rescue will be there soon."

Okay, I have relationship issues. Adam's my boyfriend, or should I say, fiancé? After what sounded like a proposal, I'm still waiting for it to be made official, with or without a ring. Long story short, I've been keeping things pretty chaste between us, so he's thrilled to see me like this. Still covering myself, I quickly turn away from him, and skitter to my backpack in search of something to wear. I pull out a plastic poncho I bought at the Dollar Store. All of Adam's hiking gear comes from REI, but my two-dollar glorified trash bag is good enough for me. I slip the bright blue plastic over my head, then return to Adam's side.

As I begin to feel like I'm wearing a very sticky portable sauna, Adam says, "You're workin' that poncho, but it was sexier when you were just wearing your skin."

CHAPTER 3

While I wait for help to arrive, I do my best to keep Adam engaged in conversation. But after a couple minutes, I hear footsteps rustling in the brush. It's too early for the rescue team. They're on foot, so they couldn't arrive that quickly.

"Ah you in need of azzistance?" A male voice asks, with a thick German accent. It must be the Austrian native Johann!

Could this be any more awkward? The people we're spying on find us! They don't know us, and chances are we'll never cross paths again. Regardless, I prefer to conceal our identities as bumbling private detectives. Adam isn't that recognizable beneath the blood and a turban of ad hoc bandages. The only way for me to obscure my face is to put up the hood of my poncho and pull it low enough to partially cover my eyes. I look in Johann's direction. With my hood low and my view obstructed, I can only see khaki colored shorts up to his waist, but I have a great view of his muscular legs—not that I'm staring. "Thanks," I say, "but a rescue team is on the way."

"Yeah," Adam says, with eyes closed, "rescue team."

"I haf extensive fust aid experience." He sounds determined and takes one step closer. As a former military

man, of course he wants to lend a hand, and he's pushy about it. "I could provide—"

"No," I stop him. "Really, it's okay."

A woman appears by the man's side. I only see long shapely legs up to her shorts. "They've got it under control," she snaps, sounding irritated, like running into someone with a head injury is really cramping her style. This must be none other than Denise. After a brief pause, she asks, "Is that a compression bra on his head?"

"You bet." Adam smiles, though his eyes are still closed.

When we hear what sounds like a brigade off in the distance, Denise says, "Come on, Johann. We gotta go. More exploring to do before the day is over."

Right. And I know just what kind of exploring she's got in mind.

"But vee should wait viz zem until zee medics arrive to assist him."

"No!" I exclaim, then realize how rude I sound to someone trying to be Good Samaritan, even though he's sleeping with another man's wife. "I mean, that's really not necessary. The rescue team should be here any second." Hopefully the couple will get the hint and just leave.

"Yeah," Denise says, "it's not necessary."

At least *she* doesn't wanna stick around.

Denise grabs her lover's hand. "Come on!"

As Johann is reluctantly pulled away, he says, "Es tut mir Leid! I mean, I apologize. I hope—"

"They'll be fine!" Denise interrupts.

As the two lovebirds vanish, I see the rescue team, six big guys wearing yellow safety helmets, orange t-shirts and khaki pants, running toward me carrying a litter.

I put down my hood. Then, trying not to exhibit anything, I clutch my poncho close.

From behind a pair of clear safety glasses, a swarthy guy says, "You're in good hands!" Yet before the group starts tending to Adam, the swarthy guy asks, "Is that a

compression bra on his head?"

Adam is quickly transported by the rescue workers from the trail. I follow behind, but lose them as they quickly navigate the craggy terrain. By the time I make it to the parking lot, Adam has already been transferred to a waiting ambulance and taken to the hospital.

Once in my car, I break every speed limit to get to Red River Gorge Regional Medical Center. I rush into Emergency with my pulse racing and stop at reception where a freckled brunette in her mid-fifties mans the station. She looks friendly enough.

Slightly out of breath, I say, "I need to know the status of Adam Slade."

The woman smiles. "Are you family?"

Crap! I knew she'd ask that. We're almost family. I mean we're not married...yet. "Well," I hedge, "not exactly. But we're *practically* engaged."

"Practically?" She cocks her head. "That won't do, honey."

"What?"

"I can't tell you anything."

"Nothing?"

"Sorry," she shrugs. "HIPAA."

"But..."

The woman looks at me sadly, letting me know with her eyes that there's not a thing she can do. Crushed, I slump away from the desk, realizing the only thing I can do to prevent this from happening in the future is to marry Adam-sooner, *not* later!

I plop into one of the slick white vinyl chairs in a nondescript waiting room that smells like scented antibacterial wipes. The walls are a vivid white, and harsh fluorescent lighting hangs from a drop ceiling, creating a glare on a sterile looking white tile floor.

Since it's just past noon on a Saturday, the place isn't

packed. Only two other people wait to be seen. A young woman in sweatpants and fuzzy slippers is slumped in a chair asleep in the corner of the room, and two seats away from me is a skinny guy wearing Harry Potter glasses. He has a swollen hand that's literally bent out of shape. Inwardly I cringe, just because it looks so painful. As he holds his phone with his uninjured hand, scrolling with his thumb, he catches me staring and smiles.

"Motrin does wonders," he says, "but I think I broke it."

He leans toward me and extends his fracture in all its glory. His hand and forearm are puffy and his lumpy, misshapen wrist looks like it was jammed against an extremely unforgiving surface. Now I can't help but outwardly cringe.

"Yeah, it looks pretty bad. Colles fracture, according to WebMD."

I nod, offering a strained smile. "Thanks for sharing."

He retracts his hand, but his gaze lingers on me a bit longer than necessary. "Nice parka."

"Thanks." Distracted by that disfiguring injury, I almost forgot I'm still wearing my Hefty Trash bag attire, aka the dollar store poncho. I ought to be able to buy a t-shirt at the gift shop, but when I approach the reception desk and explain my situation, the freckle-faced lady tells me the gift shop is closed for renovations.

"Great!" I flap my arms once, creating the noisy sound of a family-sized bag of Ruffles Potato Chips.

"Maybe I can help," she says, then disappears through a door behind her desk. Moments later she reappears, holding a folded piece of cloth with small pink and purple polka dots. "Here," she hands it to me. "Maybe you'll be more comfortable in this. It won't be nearly as hot as that plastic."

I shake out the cloth, realizing it's a hospital gown. Beggars can't be choosers, and it was really considerate of her to help. "Thanks," I say, with what I hope looks like a genuine smile. I go into the restroom to change, then reclaim

my seat in the waiting area.

The gown isn't that much better than the poncho, but at least it's more comfortable and not nearly as loud. I scoot down in my chair, clutching the fabric close to my body. I feel a little self-conscious with my back partially exposed.

The guy with the hand injury glances at me. He almost creeps me out until he says, "You're quite the fashionista."
"Definitely."

After an hour's wait of scrolling through my phone stressing out while I read about traumatic head injuries, the emergency room doctor calls me. When I approach, I see her lanyard says Dr. Kringe. But her appearance is hardly cringe worthy. The woman is too pretty to be a doctor. Yeah, I suppose I'm stereotyping. Get over it. She's a slim redhead with large green eyes that give me a quick once over. I realize it's hard for me to be taken seriously in my polka dot hospital gown. Maybe I should have kept on the poncho. Then again, I'm not sure which outfit makes me look more like a nut job.

"Miss Black?"

"Yes."

"Are you..." the doctor gazes at my hospital gown, "injured, too?"

I quickly explain how my clothing was used as a makeshift bandage, yadda, yadda.

And Dr. Kringe's eyes dance. "Oh, that explains the compression bra that was cut from his head."

"Um, yeah..." For a brief moment I glance at the blue blouse beneath her white coat and notice she has two buttons undone instead of just one. Too revealing, even though there's no cleavage visible. Just the hint of suggestion is bad enough. Gee, do I sound like an old lady or what?

"Adam's given me permission to speak with you."

I nod, and then for a split second wonder why I'm Miss Black and she's on a first name basis with Adam. "Is he all

right?"

The doctor smiles brightly. "He's fine!"

She's the exuberant, vivacious type bordering on obnoxious. I'm glad he's fine, but she's showing just a little too much enthusiasm, like she thinks he's hot.

"He's being released shortly," Dr. Kringe goes on, "and he has my number."

"Your number?"

She does an annoying over the shoulder hair toss. "I can make myself available."

"Available?"

"To answer any questions," she giggles. Gag! "He said you'd be able to check in on him for the next twenty-four hours."

"Of course." I cross my arms, then catch her gazing at my bare ring finger.

"Wake him every few hours to make sure he's not experiencing any deteriorating symptoms from his head injury, like increased dizziness. Make him say something so you know his speech isn't slurring. These are just precautionary measures."

"So how serious is his condition?"

"His wound has been sutured with twelve stitches that'll need to be removed in about six to seven days. He had a neurological exam and he's feeling a little dizzy and slightly nauseated; signs of a mild concussion. I didn't order any imaging because his headache isn't severe, and he's not vomiting or having seizures."

Impatiently I ask, "Is it safe for me to drive him home? We have a two hour ride."

"He'll be all right," she assures me.

"So what else do we need to do? What about side effects? What about medication?"

"I recommend he take it easy the next couple of days, and limit his mental activity. That'll help his brain heal faster. He needs rest, and for his headache, he can take one to two

Tylenol every 4-6 hours as needed.”

I yank out my phone and look at a page I pulled up a little while ago. “Anything in particular that we need to be concerned about? According to this site, it says concussion symptoms can last for days, even longer.”

“You’re a good friend to be so concerned about him.”

Friend? Of course she’d say that, since it appears we’re not engaged, let alone married. Maybe *she* wants to stake a claim on Adam.

“It’s best not to be around people or situations that could stress him out,” Dr. Kringe explains.

Note to self: try not to cause Adam undue stress or exhibit shrew-like behavior.

“And it’s normal to experience issues with memory for a few weeks after a concussion,” she goes on.

“Memory issues?”

“I’m not saying it will happen, but it’s possible.”

And what if it does happen? A good memory is an asset for a private investigator. It increases speed, accuracy and efficiency, not to mention self-confidence. Regardless, we’ll make it. We’re a team, even if I have to be the memory and he’s just the muscle. But, if Adam does forget anything, hopefully it’ll be how pretty the ER doctor was.

As I drive Adam home, I think about the logistics of checking on him later. “I’ll sleep in your living room tonight so I can look in on you periodically.”

“The couch isn’t comfortable.” He reaches over and gives my knee a gentle squeeze. “Just sleep next to me,” he says, his brown eyes hopeful. “I’m incapacitated; I won’t try anything. Promise.”

Hmm... Dubious, I think about this for a moment. “I’m not incapacitated. And in your delicate condition, *I* might take advantage of you.”

“I wish.”

That evening around midnight, I creep into Adam's bedroom. I shake him gently, but he immediately grabs me in a headlock. SEAL reflex.

"It's me," I say. He lets me go, then peers sleepily into my eyes. "Say something," I command.

"I love you," he responds.

My heart melts... And he didn't slur any words.

CHAPTER 4

"She's a witch with a capital B!" Blake Geist hoots about his wife. His squinty gray eyes peer from little round glasses that make him resemble a tubby little screech owl from the neck up. But from the neck down he looks like a penguin, in the black suit and starched white shirt he wore to a funeral earlier in the day. Adam and I are in Blake's office at his East Walnut Hills brewery waiting for our pay after completing the dirty job he assigned us.

When we got home Saturday, I emailed Blake the pictures. Adam rested up yesterday, so we couldn't make it to The Hop Spot, Cincinnati's most successful craft brewery, until today, Monday. Adam's on the mend. The stitches along his hairline remind me of Frankenstein's Monster, but I'm not complaining. He's alive and well with no side effects from the concussion.

While Blake rants, I reflect that you'd never know this guy, who's only about five feet six, is an ex-football player. Though the Bengals, our hometown team, are pretty phenomenal now, when he played, they were totally incompetent and known as the Bungals.

Blake was a running back, but his fast twitch muscles have since run away along with his athletic physique of years gone by. What's left behind is a short, squat body. If he did bodybuilding back in the day by cutting and bulking, it looks like he's only doing the bulking nowadays.

My eyes move to Geist's huge walnut desk and expensive leather chairs in his wood paneled office, as he blusters on, "It all started with the dog. I look outside and see him dry heave, like he's tryin' to puke. Five minutes later, I look out again, and he's still tryin'. Finally, he starts coughing. Then I see the strangest thing, he coughs something up! And when I go out to check on him, I see what it was. A leopard print thong – a *man's* leopard print thong – that wasn't mine!"

He's never shared this tidbit before. I suppose only rage could possess him to share it now. I mean, who'd wanna tell somebody that?

"My wife said it was a gift for me, that she hid it, but the dog musta got hold of it," Blake continues angrily. "Do I look like I'd ever wear a leopard print thong?"

No comment. Adam and I remain mute, as we assume this is a rhetorical question.

"I've already called my lawyer's office to make an appointment to begin divorce proceedings and informed Duh-nise that I know all about what really went on during those hiking trips with her 'girlfriend.'" He makes air quotes with short stubby fingers. "What kind of idiot did she think I was?" He begins to wiggle his thick hips, and in a high-pitched voice mimics, "'I wanna be on that TV show *Living in the Wild*, so I gotta practice with help from my,'" air quotes again, "'girlfriend in Kentucky every weekend.'" Dropping his voice, he grumbles, "Right."

Adam and I feel pretty awkward. Who wouldn't? But Adam manages to say, "Sorry things turned out this way."

Blake shakes his head. "When it rains it pours. Last week a good friend died from a heart attack, and now I find out for sure my wife is cheating. I should've known," he laments. "I'm twenty years older than she is and I'm hardly Mr. Universe."

He's right about that. Blake isn't very tall, and he's very round through the middle. I shudder to think of *him* in a leopard print thong. He's also balding and has one of those thick craft brew beards. You know, the kind of beard that food and parasites thrive in. Not that it's any of my business, but maybe if he'd married a woman closer to his own age who loved him for him and not for his ex-Bengal status and money, things might have worked out. Just sayin'.

Blake glances at his watch. "I need to wind things up. I've got a twenty-five dollar gift certificate I need to use before it expires. My buddy, the deceased, had a niece and nephew. I'm gonna treat 'em to lunch. Funerals suck, but what better occasion to eat and drink? Check those out." He motions to a vase on his desk filled with artificial roses, only they appear to be wrapped in shiny red foil. "Dark chocolate roses," Blake says. "My friend was a chocolate maker. Somebody sent those in his honor."

My eyes move from the flowers to Blake. "And how did you end up with them?"

"I took 'em. Nobody'll miss 'em and somebody has to eat 'em. Besides, his niece and nephew were just gonna donate the real flower arrangements to a hospital. I figured they didn't want these either."

After a beat of silence, Adam says. "We'll be outta here as soon as you pay us."

Blake clasps his hands. "Tell you what, in lieu of payment, come back Friday evening —"

"What do you mean in lieu of payment?" Adam asks, crossing his muscular arms. By the way, *he'd* look good in a leopard print thong.

"Don't get touchy," Blake says, "I got the best food trucks in town here on Fridays. Dinner'll be on me, all you can eat. I'll make arrangements with the food truck guys. Just tell 'em you're my detectives and they'll know to pass your bill on to me. And you can have all the beer you want, uh, with the exception of the bourbon barrel stout. You can even bring a couple friends with ya."

"We had a deal," Adam fumes, his face brightening to red. "A few beers and dinner won't cut it!"

"Yeah!" I start angrily, I'm probably red too, you just can't tell. Then I remember the doctor said Adam shouldn't be around stressful people or situations. I don't want some

Incredible Hulk scenario to happen with his stitches bursting open or something. I've got to preserve Adam's health by reducing the pressure around him. So even though we'll probably have to cough up more than a couple thousand dollars for the ER visit and the ambulance ride, I try to soften my tone; a challenge. "I mean, you did sign a contract."

"Look," Blake says, "I've spread myself a little too thin..."

With that spare tire around the middle? I don't think so.

"...I'm payin' ya, it's just in a different way," Blake goes on. "Come back every Friday for say, the next three months. That's fair."

Not really, but for Adam's sake, I'll give in. I don't want to engage in a taxing exchange because of his head injury. So I'll do my best to smooth things over, even though smoothing things over is *not* my area of expertise. "Well, I suppose we could work with that," I say. After all, I can eat enough for a small village. "But may I make one small request? Wine instead of beer for me."

Blake smiles. "No wine and we have a deal."

"A year, with wine for her, *and* the bourbon barrel stout, *then* we have a deal," Adam says.

Blake hesitates, thinning his bearded lips. "Okay, a year it is, and wine...and the bourbon barrel stout," he adds grudgingly, "but only bring friends the first time around."

We leave his office and a smell like ripe fruit and vinegar envelopes us as we walk toward the exit of the brewery.

"Geesh, what a jerk," I mutter as I take in our surroundings. Blake's place is a renovated mercantile building that's dimly lit with a copper bar and distressed wood tables that line each long wall.

I pause at the bar for a moment to study a line of cobalt blue growlers set high on a shelf behind it. They look expensive. I can't help but wonder how much they set him back. Usually growlers are just generic amber colored jugs that look pretty boring, but these look like art.

"You like my growlers?" Blake asks, walking up behind us. "They're one of a kind, not the growler, but the color. My supplier only makes that cobalt blue shade for me."

"How'd you manage that?" I ask.

"Yeah, sounds expensive." Adam says. "That why you can't pay us?"

Blake shakes his head with a wide smile, disregarding Adam's last comment. "They're not expensive! I worked out a deal with the owner. I provide him free beer in exchange for exclusivity plus a steep discount. He's an alcoholic."

My mouth drops. "You're exploiting his illness like that?"

"It was his idea! You wanna fill one up for the road?"

"Only if that's a part of our pay," Adam says.

Blake scratches the side of his beard. "Your pay only applies to Fridays."

"Then we'll pass." Adam touches my shoulder. "Come on."

The two of us walk toward the door, as Blake calls, "Have a great day!" But neither of us turn to wish him one back.

It's just a little after twelve-thirty, but on our way out we pass by several patrons inside already imbibing, including one strange looking character standing at the bar sipping a pint of something the color of pale urine. He's a beefy redhead with a beard and man bun who looks like a leprechaun on steroids. I want to ask him if he likes Lucky Charms, but that would be rude.

When we step outside into the sunlight, I see a chubby tall guy walking with an attractive dark haired woman on the opposite side of the street. They're both dressed in black. Adam says, "They must be the niece and nephew." He frowns. "Hope they get enough to eat on a twenty-five dollar gift certificate."

"It's not like Blake's expecting to feed three people just with that... right?"

Adam doesn't respond, which makes me think twice about what I just said, so I change the subject. "What were people doing in that brewery drinking? It's Monday! Don't they have jobs?"

"Got me," Adam says. "If they're working, they must be well paid. Those beers cost seven bucks a piece."

"It's not like the beginning of the work week is anything to celebrate," I say. "But, shouldn't *we* have something to celebrate soon?"

"With you," Adam says, taking hold of my hand, "every day's a celebration."

"Because I'm so abrasive?" I'd never win Miss Congeniality.

We stop walking. He smiles at me, then wraps me in his arms. As our lips touch, my brain pops happily with dopamine and I feel a series of pleasant little shockwaves throughout my entire body. When Adam slowly pulls his lips from mine, he says, "You know you're the woman of my dreams."

My heart flutters. "So when will things be...official for us?" I just miss sounding demure.

"Official?"

I reconsider the direction of this conversation. It could be stressful. I don't want to do anything to aggravate his injury. "You know what? Never mind."

"Did you mean official... engagement wise?" he asks, as we start walking again.

"I don't mean to be a nag, but... yeah."

"You're not a nag," Adam says as we approach his shiny black Lexus. "You just gotta be patient. We need a paying gig – a big one – for a ring. You deserve the best."

My heart skips a beat. "I don't really need a ring," I say, although I envision the rock my sister Sheena wears. Her husband's loaded.

Adam opens the door for me. He bought this car at a sheriff's auction for a very low price. "I want you to have a ring," he says.

"Well," I smile, "okay."