

elementary,
my dear
watkins

mindy
starns
clark



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ELEMENTARY, MY DEAR WATKINS

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Jo Tulip sat across from the detective, trying not to be distracted by his tie. It was obviously silk, but it was flat and dull and very much in need of freshening. She wondered if it would seem intrusive if she advised him to turn his iron on the highest setting, wrap a damp cloth over the soleplate of the iron, and run it back and forth directly over the fabric, almost but not quite touching it. The steam would bring the tie back to life nicely, for sure.

“That’s as close as we gonna get to this person, unless we stake out the library,” the detective was saying in a thick Bronx accent. “And that’s not gonna happen. So I guess it ends here, least ’til something further develops. But thanks for bringing the situation to our attention.”

Jo took her gaze from the man’s tie and met his eyes. He was in his mid-forties, chubby and red cheeked, with a collar too tight for his thick neck.

“Until something further develops,” she repeated. “You mean like when somebody gets hurt? Or even killed?”

He glanced at his watch.

“I’m sorry, but at this point, we can’t justify the manpower for a stakeout if there’s been no real crime.”

“But look at his second e-mail. It says something’s going to happen ‘in a day or two.’ He wrote that one on Monday—and it’s already Wednesday!”

“So maybe whatever he was talking about is over and done with by now. Like I said, there’s really nothing we can do about it anyway.”

Jo sighed heavily, wishing Chief Cooper had come with her. His official cop presence might have carried more weight with this guy than she obviously did. Harvey Cooper, who was both a friend and the local

police chief for her hometown, had helped trace the source of the strange e-mail Jo had received at her “Tips from Tulip” website, a trail which led to a library in Kreston, New York. The police there hadn’t responded with much interest to the chief’s report or Jo’s subsequent phone calls, so she had decided to stop by the Kreston station today in person, since she had to come up to nearby Manhattan for an appointment with an orthopedic specialist anyway.

Now that Jo was there in person, however, she was still hitting a very frustrating dead end. The detective who had agreed to meet with her had contacted the library, but they said that since a library card was not required for using the computers, there was no way to check their records to learn the real identity of the person who had been online at the time the e-mails were sent.

“Chances are, the person with that e-mail address will be back again,” Jo said to the reticent detective. “I believe you can put some sort of electronic alert system on the computers in the library. Then if this person logs on again, you’ll be notified and can move in and apprehend them.”

“No can do.”

“At the very least, couldn’t you stake out the library between seven and eight each night? He sent the first one at 7:43 last Thursday and the second one at 7:22 on Monday. Obviously, he has some sort of routine. Can’t you at least try?”

The detective shook his head.

“Again, kind of hard to apprehend someone who ain’t done nothing wrong. There’s been no real crime here. He just says he knows someone whose life is in danger. That could mean a lot of things. Maybe his wife’s brake cables are nearly shot or his brother keeps playing golf in a thunderstorm or his diabetic mother won’t stop eating ice cream. We got no way of knowing.”

“But—”

“Or it could be a woman,” he continued, clearly on a roll, “maybe worried that her husband’s been drinking too much or that her best friend joined a motorcycle gang. Whatever. There just isn’t enough information here for us to act on.”

Jo shook her head. Surely, that’s not what this person—man or woman—meant.

“He, or she, whatever, called what’s going to happen a *crime*,” she argued. “They said they can’t get involved because in the past they’ve had their own mix-ups with the law. It sounds very serious to me.”

The detective looked at her with what seemed to be a cross between scorn and pity, as if he were sorry she was quite so dumb.

“Miss Tulip,” he said, patting his tie and tucking it into his jacket, “as a celebrity, surely you know there are nuts of all kinds out there, and some of them love nothin’ more than to play with the heads of good folks like you.”

“I’m not exactly a celebrity. I just write a newspaper column.”

“Yeah, a nationwide newspaper column, which makes you a lot more well-known than the average person. I mean, we appreciate what you’ve done to track this down and all, but I think you’re gonna have to write this one off as a prank. You’ve written back, urging this person to contact the authorities. I think that’s the most you can do.”

Jo watched as the man slipped the papers she had brought into a manila folder and then placed the folder on top of a filing cabinet behind him. She felt sure that the moment she walked out of the door that folder would somehow find its way into the trash. But what else could she do?

Actually, she knew exactly what she could do—and it didn’t involve trying to convince this guy with logic or reason. It was time to pull some strings over his head.

“Well, I appreciate your time,” she said, standing. “If you’re not going to follow up, may I have my paperwork back, please?”

“Uh, sure,” he said, handing her the file.

“Thanks,” Jo said, adding the words *for nothing* in her mind.

“No prob,” he replied, standing as well.

As Jo limped toward the door, trying to keep her weight off her injured foot, she started to turn around to tell him about the benefits of using steam on silk. But then she decided she wouldn’t.

A man with that kind of attitude deserved to walk around with an unfreshened tie.



Danny skipped down the steps of the *Métro*, relieved to see a crowd waiting at the platform and his train just coming to a stop. He had cut it so close, he was afraid he might have missed it.

The doors opened with a *whoosh* and he climbed aboard with the others, taking a seat on the gray plastic bench along the wall. As he did, he glanced at his watch and calculated the time back home in the States.

It was 6:28 in the evening, Paris time, which meant 12:28 in the afternoon in Pennsylvania. For some reason, the longer he and Jo were apart, the more frequently he felt the need to calculate the time difference and think about her and picture what she might be doing at that moment. Right now, she was probably also on a train, heading from Kreston, in the Bronx, to Manhattan, where she would meet up with her grandmother and go see some world-renowned medical specialist.

Danny was interested to hear what the doctor would have to say about Jo's ankle, of course, but he was also eager to learn about her visit to the police department in Kreston, where she had gone to report some creepy e-mails she had received last week through her Tips from Tulip website. Danny knew that Jo's life was complicated enough as it was; she surely didn't need to be hassled by some nut with an anonymous e-mail account and a dirty toaster oven.

In the past year, Jo had been instrumental in solving several high-profile murders, so now apparently someone had decided she must be the go-to gal not just for cleaning questions, but for police-related matters as well. Six weeks ago Jo had been caught up in an investigation that ended with a bang, literally, landing her in the hospital after being caught in an explosion. Since then she had had a lot to adjust to: injuries from that explosion, her home in ashes, a temporary residence, and her best-friend-turned-boyfriend moving to Europe to take a three-month magazine internship. At this point the poor thing needed a break, not more crime-related complications. Danny's hope was that the Kreston police would take matters into their own hands and leave Jo free to concentrate on her recovery, her work, and her housing situation. The last thing she needed was another mystery on her hands.

"*Vas-y, vas-y,*" a mother said to her young son as they squeezed on board. The train car had filled up fast, so Danny gave his seat to the woman and reached for a handle in the middle instead. Once they were moving, he held on tightly as the walls outside of the windows turned to a blur.

He waited for the third stop and then got off and walked up the steps. He was still two blocks from the restaurant, so he started sprinting, covering the distance as quickly as possible, weaving in and among the more slow-moving pedestrians. He hated being an ugly American, rude and pushy and in a hurry, but this dinner was at the invitation and expense of his friend and coworker Luc, and Danny thought it would be even ruder to show up late to a free meal.

At least it felt good to be able to move so fast. Coincidentally, Danny had broken his foot a few days before Jo had—though his injury had come from pure stupidity, slipping on a rock while trying to help Jo’s dog, Chewie, scamper out of a pond. Danny’s cast had come off last week, but, unlike Jo, he’d had no further complications and was already almost back to normal. The doctor said he recovered so fast because he was in such good shape to begin with, but Jo was in better shape than he was, so the delay in her recovery really wasn’t fair. Besides, it was a relief to be on two good feet, and it made him sad that Jo wasn’t also able to enjoy that feeling yet.

He reached the restaurant and stepped inside, pausing in the foyer to catch his breath and run a hand over his messy brown hair. From what he could see, the place was definitely swanky and oh-so-French, with several low-lit crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, lots of pinched-lipped waiters, and tiny servings on fancy plates. Stepping into the dining room, Danny spotted Luc discreetly waving him over from a corner table, where he was sitting with an older man dressed in a suit and sipping a glass of red wine. Danny hadn’t realized anyone else would be joining them, but considering the way the guy was dressed, he was glad he’d thought to throw on a jacket and tie at the last moment. Crossing the room, Danny reached the table and was introduced to Chester Parks.

“Nice to meet you,” Chester said, shaking Danny’s hand.

“Sounds like a good ol’ American accent to me,” Danny replied with a smile, taking his seat. “Where are you from?”

“New York.”

“Chester’s with *Haute Couture* magazine,” Luc added, one eyebrow high.

Danny simply nodded, immediately reassessing the situation. Luc was quite ambitious, with aspirations more cosmopolitan than the nature photography of *Scene It* magazine, where he and Danny both currently worked. Danny realized that Luc must be angling for a position with *Haute Couture*, and his hope was that Danny would make him look good.

Danny could do that. He liked Luc well enough, and the guy was a decent photographer, if a bit of a cold fish. He and *Haute Couture* might be a perfect fit, especially blue-tinted shots with unsmiling models draped stiffly around stark sets. That wasn’t Danny’s cup of tea, but if that’s what Luc wanted, he’d be happy to help out.

“*Haute Couture*? Impressive,” Danny said. “What brings you to France?”

“I had some business in our Paris office,” the man replied. “Tonight, however, you might say I’m on a recruiting mission. But enough of that for now. What will you have? I recommend the *coq-au-vin*. In fact, may I order for all of us?”

That sounded good to Danny. His French was still a bit rudimentary, and the descriptive phrases in the menu were mostly over his head.

“Please do,” Danny said, closing the menu and handing it to the tuxedoed waiter. “I’m game for anything except *escargot*—a mistake I won’t make twice.”

Chester placed their orders in fluent-but-American-accented French, and once the waiter was gone the conversation turned to New York. Knowing that’s where Jo was right now, Danny felt a sudden, painful surge of loneliness. After being apart for nearly five weeks, the separation was getting harder and harder to take. In the beginning, his job had absorbed so much of his time and energy that he was able to put thoughts of Jo out of his mind for most of the day. Lately, however, that was getting more and more difficult to do. He couldn’t imagine how he was going to get through two more months without her.

Chester was waxing poetic about the city, and as he went on, Danny kept picturing Jo, striding—well, limping, maybe—through stately Penn Station, meeting up with her grandmother’s limo for the ride to the doctor, peering out of the vehicle’s sunroof at the tall buildings that flanked the busy Manhattan streets.

Danny especially missed Jo tonight because he’d had such a busy day that he never had time to go online and check his e-mail. She usually wrote to him throughout the afternoon, either from her home computer or from her handheld digital assistant if she was out and about, and the near-constant communication kept him feeling connected to her despite the distance that separated them. Though he would enjoy this dinner, the highlight of his day was going to be when he got home to his computer and had a chance to go online and read about Jo’s day.

“Earth to Danny,” Luc said, and Danny glanced over to see his friend staring at him. “Are you—how do you say—zoning out on us, *mon ami*? The food *est arrivé*.”

Startled, Danny looked up to see the waiter placing a small plate in front of him. The first course featured a long, thin slice of cucumber wrapped around a dollop of what looked like crab salad. Called an

amuse-bouche, the small but tasty serving was supposed to wake up the appetite and whet it for all that would come next.

“Sorry,” Danny said, forcing a smile as he picked up his fork. “It’s been a long day.” Sure enough, just the sight and smell of the food in front of him made him realize how hungry he was.

The men began to eat, resuming their conversation between bites. As they talked, Danny asked a discreet and silent grace first, asking God to bless the food and please, please bless Jo as she navigated the complicated waters of that disturbing e-mail that had sent her to the police in Kreston—not to mention the even deeper, more turbulent waters of having to spend time with her grandmother.



Jo’s grandmother, Eleanor Bosworth, sat stiffly in the limo, shaking her head. The diamonds in her earrings caught the sunlight as she did so, casting a shower of tiny sparkles around the elegant interior of the vehicle.

“You’ve been reckless, Jo,” Eleanor said. “For such a sensible person, I must say I’m surprised at your cavalier attitude about your health.”

Jo sighed heavily, regretting ever telling her grandmother about the complication with her ankle. This was so like the woman to step in after the fact and try to run the show—when she’d never even bothered to show up once when Jo was in the hospital or in the weeks of her recovery since.

“I’ve not been cavalier, Gran. The doctors have signed off on every one of my injuries except for the foot. And at this point, they say it’s simply a matter of time.”

“Tell me again what your little doctor told you,” Eleanor said with a flippant wave of her heavily bejeweled hand.

“She’s not a ‘little doctor,’” Jo said. “She’s a highly qualified surgeon.”

“In Mulberry Glen, Pennsylvania. I’m sure.”

Jo ignored the biting comment and explained that her doctor had X-rayed her foot again once the cast was off, and that she was perfectly satisfied with the healing of the bones.

“The pain I’m having now is not from the break but from the sprain, which is taking longer to heal,” Jo explained. “She recommended ice packs and anti-inflammatories. At this point, it just seems like overkill to

consult one of the nation's preeminent orthopedists for a mere sprained ankle."

"Darling, you're only twenty-seven years old. A bad healing at this point in your young life could prove to be disastrous down the line. Trust me in this. It's worth the risk of a little overkill if it saves you from foot problems when you're older."

The woman had a point there. Jo didn't even know why she was still arguing with her. She was here, wasn't she, en route to the doctor's office? Argument or not, her grandmother had already won this particular battle.

Besides, Jo had something more important to discuss anyway. As they inched their way through heavy traffic, she opened her bag and pulled out the printouts of the e-mails and the report from Chief Cooper that she had brought to the police.

"On a different matter," Jo said, glancing down at the papers, "I was wondering if you might know anyone of influence in the Bronx."

"The Bronx? Yes, I suppose, but why?"

"I need you to pull some strings in Kreston, if possible."

"Kreston?" her grandmother asked with a sneer. "Why on earth would you want to have anything to do with Kreston?"

Jo didn't share the sneer. She had thought the blue-collar town had been quaint, if a little rough around the edges, and certainly nothing at which to turn up her nose.

"Don't be a snob, Gran."

"Snob, schnob. What do you want me to do?"



Danny sipped a hot cup of decaf as Luc and Chester enjoyed an after-dinner drink called a *digestif*. The meal had been delicious but slow, dragged out through nine courses, and Danny was ready to call it a night and take off. Unfortunately, Chester pulled out a cigar, which probably meant he was just settling in.

Since coming to France, Danny had learned that the evening meal often continued late into the night, way past dessert. Sometimes that was fine, but tonight he was exhausted, having spent the day helping to prepare for an upcoming international photo shoot. There had been many details to handle, with no room for error, and because Danny had been

in charge of packing up the film, equipment, and other supplies for the photographer, the pressure had been intense. Now, on top of his physical exhaustion, the heavy meal was making him sleepy. He decided to make a pitch for Luc as best he could and then hit the road.

“So, Chester,” Danny said as the man lit a match, held it to the tip of the cigar, and puffed furiously. “You say you’re here tonight on a recruiting mission? I think that’s very exciting. Luc is a highly skilled photographer, and I know he would be an asset to your magazine.”

Chester and Luc exchanged glances as Chester continued to puff his cigar. Once it caught, he flipped his hand to put out the flame and then pulled the stogie from his mouth.

“It’s not Luc I’m here to recruit,” Chester replied, blinking from the smoke. “It’s you.”

Danny hesitated, wondering if he had heard the man correctly.

“Me?”

“Yes. Your work has come to my attention, and I’m interested to see if you might consider a move to New York and the world of high fashion photography.”

Danny was dumbfounded. He looked at Luc, who merely smiled and shrugged. Luc didn’t seem disappointed, so he must have known all along that this wasn’t about him.

“Thank you, but that’s not the type of photography I do—or want to do,” Danny said. “I’m a *Scene It* kind of guy all the way.”

“*Scene It*, bah,” Chester scoffed with a flip of his cigar. “What’s the challenge there? Snap a few close-ups of some big cats in a zoo and call it an African safari?”

“No, they—”

“You want to see fangs and claws? Try putting three models in Prada bathing suits and tell them the best-looking one gets the cover shot.”

Luc laughed, but Danny was deeply offended. There was nothing fake or engineered about the photography for *Scene It*. The zoo? Get real. Their photo shoots were some of the most notoriously ambitious and authentic in the industry.

“Even if *Scene It* is your type of place,” Chester continued, “surely you can’t be enjoying the piddling little internship salary they’re currently paying you. What have they got you doing, anyway? Running the fax machine? Making coffee?”

“Mostly rights clearance and color corrections,” Danny replied, listing jobs that were a step up from making coffee—though not by much. “But

it's not about the money right now or my specific duties. I'm learning the ropes. I'm seeing the magazine business from the inside out. I've been able to work with some of the top nature photographers in the world. Just today I met Kalunga Bashiri and helped prepare for his next photo shoot to Switzerland and then Africa." Danny smiled at the thought of the tiny man with the big lens, a legend and a hero to nature photographers around the world.

"I know your background, son," Chester said, shaking his head. "Before you landed this internship, you were nothing but a backwoods portrait photographer with some stock photo sales on the side. Small potatoes."

"That's not exactly true," Danny said defensively. "One of my stock photos was recently bought by Twentieth Century Fox for background in a movie poster. I wouldn't call that small potatoes."

"Perhaps. But how many times can lightning strike? Come work for *Haute Couture*, and we'll make you much more than the underpaid color monkey you are here. You'll be a contract photographer doing studio product shots."

"Thank you so much, sir, but I'm afraid I'm not interested. Not my kind of photos and not my kind of magazine. No offense."

Chester took a puff on his cigar, the smoke hovering around his lips like a tiny gray cloud.

"I can offer you a retainer of one seventy-five plus bonuses and expenses. Effective immediately."

Danny blinked, momentarily speechless.

A hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars plus bonuses and expenses? Even though Danny had absolutely no interest in working for a fashion magazine, the thought of that much money made the *coq-au-vin* turn a flip in his stomach.

He swallowed hard, wondering what he'd done to deserve such an offer.



In the end, one of the top orthopedic surgeons in the country told Jo that her pain was coming from a sprained ankle, and he would suggest ice packs and anti-inflammatories.

“But you were right to bring me here anyway,” Jo admitted humbly to her grandmother as she climbed back into the waiting limo. “He also gave me a removable cast and an order for physical therapy.”

Jo settled onto the deep leather seat and held out her leg to show off the black removable cast. After the doctor’s thorough poking and prodding, the bad foot felt worse than before, and Jo found the support and security of the cast to be an absolute relief. She was glad she had come.

“So your doctor was right too,” her grandmother conceded. “Just not as aggressive in her treatment.”

“Correct.”

Both women smiled. With Jo’s grandmother as stubborn as she was, a draw was usually the best outcome to their arguments. As the driver pulled away from the curb, Eleanor surprised Jo by inviting her to come and stay at her estate for the duration of the physical therapy.

“The timing couldn’t be better,” Jo’s grandmother said, directing the driver to head toward Westchester County. “After I had the stroke last year, we converted the carriage house into an on-site medical facility. There’s a whirlpool in there and all sorts of machines. The physical therapist already comes every other day. It’s ridiculous for you not to take advantage of it as well. We’ll pick up a few clothes and toiletries to tide you over tonight and then you can send for your things tomorrow.”

“That’s very kind, Gran,” Jo said, surprised that her grandmother was still getting so much therapy this long after her stroke. It had been more than a year, and she seemed almost completely recovered other than tiring more easily and needing the wheelchair for longer excursions. “I didn’t realize you were still under treatment.”

“Oh, the therapy’s not for me these days. We have a young guest at the house—but that’s a long story. I’m sure you’d find her delightful, and I know she’d welcome a new face around there, particularly someone younger.”

“What about Chewie?” Jo asked, knowing that her grandmother would never allow Jo’s rambunctious chocolate Lab to roam the hallowed halls of her home. Six weeks ago, when Jo was first injured and in the hospital and her own house had burned to the ground, her grandmother had offered Jo the use of her vacation home in the Poconos until she got back on her feet. Jo had accepted her offer, but when she learned that Chewie was not a part of the bargain, she had turned her grandmother down and made other arrangements.

“Darling, that’s what kennels are for,” Eleanor answered, smoothing her skirt across her knees as she repeated the sentiment she had expressed the last time.

“Yes, well, like the last time, that doesn’t work for me,” Jo said, instructing the driver to take her to the Times Square Marriott instead. “But thanks for the offer.” Forsaking her precious pet for the sake of a little convenience and pampering was out of the question.

As they drove, Jo’s grandmother was quiet, seeming to be vaguely offended by Jo’s refusal. Jo tried to make conversation, asking more about her grandmother’s young houseguest, whoever she was, but the subject was closed. Finally, tired of the cold shoulder, Jo decided to change course and toss out something that was sure to get the woman’s attention.

“I guess you’re wondering why I want to be dropped at Times Square rather than back at Penn Station,” Jo said matter-of-factly.

Her grandmother shrugged, still staring out the window. “I suppose you’re going to the theater.”

“No, I’m going to meet with Bradford,” Jo said, referring to the man who had jilted her at the altar last fall, ducking out of their wedding without excuse or explanation. Since then, she and Bradford had barely spoken, except for several irritating phone calls and one bizarre moment when he showed up in her hospital room six weeks ago, begging her for another chance at a relationship. Shocked and vulnerable, Jo had called for a nurse and had him removed from the premises.

“Bradford?” Eleanor replied, turning to Jo, her eyes wide. “Last I heard, you were having him escorted out of your room by hospital security.”

“Well, he deserved it,” Jo said. “Waltzing in there without warning and me lying there injured and helpless. The last thing I felt like doing was dealing with him.”

“But you’re willing to see him now.”

“We’re finally going to talk. He’s called a few times since then, asking me to meet with him, so I finally gave in. I think I need to find some closure. I suppose one meeting with him won’t kill me, and maybe it’ll help me put the whole relationship to rest once and for all. I still don’t know why Bradford dumped me then, or what he wants to tell me now.”

“No chance of a reconciliation?” her grandmother asked. She had always been partial to Bradford, most likely because he was from a wealthy family and at one time had been a real up-and-comer in the family business, Bosworth Industries. Bradford used to work directly for

Jo's father, who was the CEO of the company. Since the whole wedding fiasco, however, Jo had no idea if he even worked there anymore or not. She and her parents didn't talk about him, and she'd had no extended communication with him herself.

"A reconciliation?" Jo asked, thinking of what her friend Marie would say: *Not for all the pumps in the DSW Shoe Warehouse*. Putting it in terms her grandmother would understand, Jo amended the saying: "Not for all the blue boxes in Tiffany's, Gran. Trust me, the only shred of emotion I have left for that man is sheer contempt."

"Ah, Jo," her grandmother said, sighing and shaking her head. "You always have been far too influenced by your emotions. He still would be a good, logical choice for a husband whether you truly care for him or not."

Jo bit her lip to stop her own reply. She knew her grandmother well enough to know that there was nothing she could say to convince her otherwise.

"Then again," Eleanor added, "your Danny is a nice boy too. From what I hear, he's turning in an impressive appearance with the powers that be at *Scene It*."

"I'm sure he is," Jo replied, simultaneously glad that her grandmother approved but irritated that she was keeping tabs.

They reached Times Square, and the driver pulled through the drop-off lane of the Marriott and came to a stop. A hotel doorman opened the door, and as Jo gathered her purse and tote bag, her grandmother reiterated her invitation to come and stay at her house, insisting that her door was open in case Jo changed her mind.

"Thanks, Gran. That means a lot," Jo said, leaning over to kiss her on the cheek. The woman, in turn, flinched from the kiss and then dismissed Jo with the wave of her hand.

"Love you," Jo said softly.

"Very well," her grandmother replied. "Keep us posted on the foot, won't you?"

Feeling oddly rejected, Jo stood and watched as the limo pulled away. Then, walking awkwardly in the new cast, she thanked the doorman and made her way into the vast hotel. It was times like this that Jo most missed her other grandmother, who had passed away a little over a year ago. Jo's Grandmother Tulip had been everything that Grandmother Bosworth was not: warm, nurturing, and incredibly kind. Truly, if not

for her paternal grandparents, Jo might have grown up without any real love at all.

“Except for Danny,” she amended to herself, smiling, as she stepped onto the escalator. Danny had always been there, in Jo’s life and in her heart. Now that they had moved from friendship-love to love-love, it was as though a missing puzzle piece had finally fallen into place. That’s probably why she was now able to face Bradford and wrap up all of those loose ends and unanswered questions. Once Jo talked with him and heard what he had to say, she could finally move forward with her life.

Jo took a whole series of switch-back escalators to get to the hotel’s main lobby on the eighth floor. Though she wasn’t willing to share a meal with Bradford, there was a nice public area with plenty of comfortable seating where they could sit and have coffee and talk in relative privacy.

She glanced at her watch, glad she was early. She wanted to choose the seating herself, not to mention collect her thoughts, put together an ice pack, and check her e-mail. Last night, just before going to bed, she had thought about e-mailing Danny to tell him about this visit with Bradford. But in the end, she had decided against it. News like that was better given over the phone, so she would tell him the next time they talked instead.

In theory, Danny wanted Jo to have one final, wrap-up conversation with Bradford so that she could finally put all of her questions to rest. But in reality she knew that the idea of her getting together with her former fiancé while Danny was an ocean away was probably a bit unnerving. She just hoped he wasn’t worrying too much. There was nothing for him to worry about.

Danny had her heart hook, line, and sinker, and he always would.

Jo found the perfect spot, isolated yet public. She ordered a soda and an extra cup of ice and made herself comfortable, discreetly propping up her foot on the wide, low table in front of her. Once her drink came, Jo pulled a small plastic bag from her purse, poured the extra ice into the bag, sealed it, and propped it on her foot, against her sock, under one of the Velcro straps. When she was all set, she pulled out her handheld digital assistant and checked her e-mail. There was nothing from Danny yet, much to Jo’s disappointment.

There was, however, a new message from anon6592@mailnet.com, her anonymous library correspondent. Heart pounding, Jo scrolled

down and pressed the button that would bring the e-mail up on the tiny screen.

The sender had copied back part of Jo's last e-mail: <<May I help in some way? Perhaps act as a go-between with the authorities?>>

The reply, which followed underneath, took Jo's breath away.

Dear Jo Tulip, I don't need you to be a go-between because the person in danger is YOU.

There, I told you. Please don't try to find me. I got nothing to do with this, I just heard about it and thought you deserved to know. I've seen you on your website and in the newspaper, and you seem like a nice person and I don't think this is right.

Be careful and watch your back.

The note was signed, as before, by *Trying To Stay Out of It*. Underneath was a PS: *One of the toaster ovens I'm looking at has a Teflon interior. What do you think? Would a nonstick coating be worth the extra cost?*

"Hello, beautiful."

Jo looked up, startled.

There, in front of her, was Bradford, smiling and holding out a dozen roses.