

Identity Crisis

By Melissa Olson

*"People think it's an obsession. A compulsion. As if there were an irresistible impulse to act. It's never been like that. I chose this life. I know what I'm doing. And on any given day, I could stop doing it. Today, however, isn't that day. And tomorrow won't be either."
-Batman*

"That's part of the rule. Never quit. Never let them see you're afraid. Above all -- never let them see you're hurt. Never let them see you cry. Never." – Catwoman

"I had no idea that such individuals exist outside of stories." ~ Dr. Watson

Chapter One: In Which I Meet the Client

Nate Christiani came into my life the same day I found out I was pregnant. It was nearly the same moment, actually. Five minutes before I met Nate, I was sitting in my office chair staring at that infamous little white stick, coveted prize and dreaded enemy to women everywhere. It was my third positive test in the last thirty minutes, and I finally had to concede that yes, I was definitely pregnant. Looking blankly at the little pink plus sign, I realized that I was probably supposed to be doing something - jumping around or crying or at least calling my husband, Tobey. I was definitely supposed to *react*. But instead, I just sat there for a long time, numb and hollow and hazy. Until my partner knocked on my door and entered my office, and I had to scramble back to my day.

My partner, Alexa Richardson, and I are private investigators in the esteemed firm of Dane and Richardson Investigations – not the most creative name around, but when it came time to choose I didn't think Alexa would go for “Awesome Girl Ninja Attack Squad.” Although the two of us and our assistant, Bryce, make up the entire staff, it's very rare for Alexa to stop in my office during the late afternoon – or at all, really.

“Selena? Have you got a minute?”

“What? Yeah.”

I straightened up in my chair like I'd been caught cheating on the SAT's (real subtle, there, detective), cupping my hand around the pregnancy test and sliding it quickly off my desk, down my body and into the trashcan by my legs. Alexa stepped neatly across my secondhand Oriental rug to one of the comfy green chairs that face my desk, her photographer's eye taking in the clutter that threatened to pile off of the other one. She was impeccably groomed as usual, wearing a deep red pencil skirt, a thin cream-colored

Angora sweater that framed her long neck, and sensible-but-sexy two-inch kitten heels. It was spring in the Midwest, and while everything else in Chicago seemed to be covered in mud and rain, Alexa didn't have a hair out of place. I automatically smoothed my own long, dark blonde hair behind my ears, fidgeting. Alexa tends to make me feel like a lower-class klutz, and baby or not, when she's around I spend a lot of time reminding myself that I'm a grownup.

"I have this 14-year-old boy coming in, Nate something with a C, referred by a guy who got divorced last spring. It sounds like a pretty basic background check, but I actually need to run Lorna Hapshaw is possibly going out to an early dinner with her new...special friend. Mr. Hapshaw is extremely interested in me tagging along on their date."

I smiled inwardly. For the last five years, Alexa has exclusively handled divorce cases, the bread and butter of private investigation. That means for thirty hours a week, every week, she follows cheating spouses around Chicago with a camera. And yet she still uses polite terms like "special friend" and "date" to describe her sleazy cases. It's kind of cute, like Grace Kelly running around a dive bar. You just kinda go "awwwww."

"You want me to take over the kid?" I asked, checking my watch. It was quarter to five, but Alexa tended to schedule things late.

"Yes – like I said, it's probably an hour and a half on some search engines, but it's too late for me to call him and reschedule. Are you terribly busy right now?"

I looked at the clutter that was slowly choking the function out of my desk, as though it would tell me the right answer. I'm not a messy person, I promise. It's just that messes

sort of find me. My eyes wandered down to the trash can beneath my desk. I was so not in a hurry to go home.

“Actually...no. I wouldn't mind sticking around for another hour.”

Alexa was already rising, re-smoothing down her crimson skirt in a precise, fluid motion. “Great. I'll have Bryce send in the file. Just fill me in on how everything goes tomorrow.” She was gone as quickly as she'd come. Alexa is efficient to a fault, which makes me wonder what exactly she does to the men she has to pretend to seduce. I'd never found the guts to ask.

I spun my chair around in circles, my mind wandering. Dane and Richardson Investigations is located in one of the in-between neighborhoods of Chicago, not quite the suburbs and pretty far out of downtown. It's a nice enough office, sharing the building with only one other company, a custom book binding plant, but the view from my office window isn't exactly breathtaking. My window faces busy Michigan Street, with center stage occupied by a White Castle and two dingy gas stations. I looked longingly at the restaurant, pulling my knees to my chest and wrapping my arms around them. I'd gone vegetarian after a particularly gruesome murder case back when I was cop, but there were moments when I felt my dedication waver. With a shock, I wondered if my sudden urge for a burger was a craving. Was that possible, already? When did you start getting cravings?

At that moment Bryce knocked on my door and glided in, wearing his trademark preppy smile and pink Chuck Taylor sneakers. Bryce is gay as the springtime, but spends his nights working on a criminology degree at the U. He's adorable, though I do worry about what'll happen to a vivacious, well-adjusted 25-year-old gay man who tries to sign

up for the Chicago police academy. I hope things have gotten a little more enlightened since I was there.

“Here’s your file, Lena.” He perched it on top of the pile nearest to my face. “Alexa said it was fine for me to take a look – it’s kind of an interesting case, for being so typical.”

“Poetic.” I slid my legs back to the floor and leaned forward to open the plain manila folder. Every client starts our services with a free phone consultation, during which the intake investigator – Alexa, in this case - goes through a standardized series of questions. About 70 percent of clients actually choose to come in for an initial meeting, so the phone weeds out the 30% who bail.

“Kid’s trying to find his dad, who dropped off the grid in 2000. The mom is deceased, and the kid’s been raised by his stepfather, who doesn’t know a thing about his predecessor.”

“How long has the stepfather been the sole parent?”

“Ummm...” Bryce leaned over the desk and flipped the next page in the file, reading upside down. “Five years.”

“Okay, so why is the kid just going after the biological father now?”

“That’s the interesting part. The stepfather is dying.”

“Oh.” Nate Christiani was still a minor, and without a parent or legal guardian, he’d be put into the system.

“Yeah.” Bryce frowned. “No other living relatives, so the kid’s pretty anxious to figure out what’s going on with the biological dad.”

“What time is he coming in?”

“He actually just walked in the door,” Bryce shrugged. “Sorry that doesn’t give you a lot of time.”

“It’s fine. Give me two minutes to look at this and then send him in.”

Bryce nodded firmly, dropped the file on top of the desk, and sashayed out again. I grinned at his back and retrieved the file. I paged through the intake form, wondering if the kid’s stepfather was a part of this plan. We could feasibly run into some problems if a minor tried to hire us without permission from the guardian. I scribbled a note on my legal pad to check with an attorney.

There was another knock on the door –a high-traffic afternoon for me - and a reddish-brown head poked in, trailed by a lanky, uncertain-looking body. Nate Christiani stepped into my office, hesitant green eyes flickering around the office, taking in my massive writing desk, the two chairs, the Oriental rug, and the framed still photo of Bogie in *The Maltese Falcon* that I have hanging on the wall behind my desk. Nate was tall and slender, dressed in a completely nondescript polo shirt and jeans that I was betting came from the Gap. High school is supposed to be all about labels, but I couldn’t immediately peg the kid. With the right accessories and enough practice he could end up being the second string quarterback, the star of the chess club, the lead in the school play, or the self-assured captain of the debate team. Right now, though, he was stuck looking like a paper doll that no one had added any personality to. I smiled warmly and leaned across the overworked desk to shake his hand and motion to the open chair.

“Hi, Mr. Christiani, I’m Selena Dane. Is it okay if I call you Nate?”

“Um, yeah, that’s cool.” His voice was low and unsure, as though he doubted his control of it.

“Great. And I’m Lena.” I sat back in my desk, settling folded hands politely in my lap. “Let me tell you a little bit about me and what I do, and then we can talk about your case, okay?” He nodded, looking relieved, and I began my prepared speech. “Okay. Like I said, my name is Lena, and I’ve been a private investigator for about six years. Before that, I was a vice detective with the Chicago police department, and before that I worked in Homicide. I handle a lot of missing persons cases, and I do a little bit of other things like bodyguarding and insurance investigations.” I saw Nate smile despite himself. Lots of people are amused to learn that I do bodyguarding detail, given that I’m average height and weight 120 pounds soaking wet. I kept going without missing a beat. “I know you talked to Ms. Richardson on the phone – did she tell you about our rates?” He nodded. “Okay. Do you have any questions for me right away?”

He thought for a long moment, glancing at me through long reddish eyelashes that women would kill for. “Do you have a gun?”

“Yes. I have a Browning 9 millimeter.” I held open my brown leather jacket – it gets cold in my office – so he could see the shoulder holster.

He considered the gun for a moment. “Why did you leave homicide to work in vice? Don’t most police officers go in the other direction?” I raised my eyebrows, and he blushed. “I mean, on TV they always make it seem like Homicide is like, the one all the cops want.”

“You’re right, many cops do want to get to Homicide, although plenty like working in other areas. For me, I was sort of stolen from Homicide to go work vice. I wasn’t necessarily thrilled about it, but I didn’t have a whole lot of choice.”

“Why did they steal you?”

I bit down on a sigh. I hate, *hate* extended questions about my police background. I vastly prefer to just gloss over that part. “Because of how I looked,” I said levelly. “The department needed a girl to play the bait.”

“Oh.” He looked at me as if I’d just appeared out of thin air, taking in my jacket and sweater, and the foot and a half of untidy hair hanging loose on my shoulders. Tobey, my husband, says when I put on my shoulder holster I look like PI Barbie. My face is pretty enough, with high cheekbones and unnaturally dark brown eyes, but it also isn’t *too* pretty, which is why I was originally recruited for vice.

“How come you stopped being a cop?”

Two years ago, this question would still have made me twitch, but enough time had passed and the lie rolled smooth and thick off my tongue. “I grew tired of the politics. So I came here and started my own business with Alexa, and now you know pretty much everything about me.” He nodded, accepting this, and I pressed on. “So, Nate, what can I do for you today?”

His smile vanished, and he fidgeted uncomfortably in his seat. One hand rose to twist itself into the hem of the polo shirt. “Well, I’m trying to find my da- my biological father, I guess. He sort of disappeared off the earth when I was five.”

“And you were living with your mom and stepfather?” I picked up my pen and started taking notes.

“Yeah. Yes. My mom died when I was nine, she was in a car accident. She left me with my stepfather, and he’s been my dad pretty much all my life. But he’s sick now.”

“I’m really sorry to hear that, Nate.”

His eyes darted to my face, gauging my sincerity, and then dodged back to his lap.

“Yeah, thanks. It’s, um, cancer. And he’s not going to get better.”

I wanted to know how much time the stepfather had left, but couldn’t muster a tactful way to ask. Nate sensed my question.

“He’s stopped treatment entirely – he doesn’t want to spend the rest of his time in the hospital – so they think he’s got about four good months left. Then he’ll decline pretty rapidly.”

I felt a gut-stab of sympathy for the kid. ‘Decline rapidly’ was not a phrase the average fourteen-year-old came up with. He’d heard it from doctors.

“Is someone taking care of you right now?”

“Yes,” he nodded, eager to show me I didn’t need to get Social Services on the phone. “Tom, my stepfather, is pretty functional – I mean, he can take care of his own, um, needs and stuff, and he gives our next-door neighbors some money to cook us both meals. But they’re both pretty elderly.”

“And does your stepfather know you’re here?”

“Yes.” He nodded firmly, prepared for this question, too. “He’s very supportive of trying to find Jason – Jason Anderson, that’s my bio father. I got some money from insurance when my mom died, and Tom and I agreed we should use it to try to find Jason.”

“Okay, well, why don’t you just tell me as much as you know about your biological father, and we’ll see where we can go from there.”

He nodded again and leaned forward so he could pull a small notepad out of his back pocket. With his eager expression and tiny notebook, he looked a little like Jimmy Olsen, from the Superman comics. I tried not to smile.

“Okay. I’m just gonna use first names, so it’s easier to understand. My mom, Sarah, and my father, Jason, were married in 1991, here in Chicago. They had me in 1995. They were divorced four years later, in ’99, and about a year after that my mom lost all contact with Jason. Sarah married Tom in 2002, and we both had our last names legally changed to his, Christiani. Her accident happened in 2004. Before she died, Sarah told Tom a little bit about Jason, but not that much. Tom knows he was a writer, and that he often wrote under a pen name. I have a picture of him.” Flipping through his notebook pages, he pulled out a battered wallet photo and handed it over. It was a studio shot of a 30ish man holding a tiny baby – Nate, I assumed. I frowned inwardly. The guy was completely average-looking in every way. Why can’t more people get face tattoos?

“Jason’s parents are dead- I mean, deceased, and he was an only child like my mom. So I really need to find him.”

“I don’t suppose you have his social security number?” The boy shook his head. Hmm. Jason Anderson from the Midwest, who was probably using a different name. Great.

“Do you know where your father grew up? Was he from Chicago?”

“I don’t know. My mom never mentioned it to me when I was a kid, and we didn’t really talk about Jason much once she married Tom. It was like, okay, I have a dad now, so I don’t need to worry about that other guy.”

I nodded. “I get that. Is there anything else that do you know about him, Nate? Anything at all?”

Nate leaned forward again, reaching into his back pocket. Jeez – what kind of pants are they selling at the Gap these days? Finally he set an old, warped paperback on my desk next to the photo. I peered at the cover: *Sunset Dies*, by J.P. Hashly.

“I, um, think my father wrote this book.”

“Okay...” Not what I was expecting to hear. I picked it up, looking at the cover.

“I don’t have any proof or anything, but the book is about a guy who gets married pretty young to a woman named Sarah, and they live in Chicago and have a baby. Some of the details” – he blushed – “match some of what my mom told me when I was a kid about her and my dad and why they split.”

I picked up the little book and flipped to the cover page. Published by a company called Savvy Printing here in Chicago in 2001, two years after the divorce. That fit with Nate’s timeline.

“How did you get this?”

“One of my mom’s friends read it and talked to her about it. Tom and I found a copy with her stuff after she died.” He shrugged. “I think, maybe, she was saving it for me, for when I got older. Or in case I wanted to find him. But she died before she could give it to me.”

“Just out of curiosity, how did you know where your mom found the book?”

“Mrs. Shariton, my mom’s friend, told me about it after the funeral.”

I leaned back in my chair. “Nate, if your father really did write this book, I’m not sure you need me at all. You can probably just call the publishing company and track Jason down through them.”

He was already shaking his head. “I thought of that. The publishing company went out of business five years ago, and I haven’t been able to find any sort of contact information for any of the executives. And there are no other books by J.P. Hashly.” He smiled, for the first time since he’d entered my office. “I called the Library of Congress.”

I thought for a moment, while Nate waited patiently. Sometimes I wish I had a moustache to twirl for moments just like these. Bryce was right – this was a strange case, for being so typical.

“Okay, Nate. I’m happy to take the case, if you still want to hire me.” He nodded eagerly. “Great. Now, the first thing I’d like to do is talk to your stepfather. I know he’s ill-“ I held up a hand, stifling Nate’s protest, “but I want to ask him myself about anything he might remember about Jason Anderson. And, please don’t take offense, but I do want to make sure he knows that you’ve hired me and we’ll be working together. I’m guessing I may need to talk to him about the financial arrangement. It’s pretty unusual for a minor to hire a private investigator. Not illegal, but very unusual.”

Nate’s fingers drifted up to push his lower lip between his teeth, and he chewed it for a long minute. “Okay,” he finally said reluctantly. “I’ll ask him.”

“Cool. Now, if it’s possible, I would love to talk to him tomorrow. Then I’ll start to dig into the publishing angle, and we’ll go from there. How does that sound?”

“It sounds good.” The kid looked relieved, and I paused for a moment, my heart going out to him. This was all a lot to ask of any 14-year-old, especially one who was about to lose his second parent in five years.

“Can I borrow this book and the photo? I’ll return them to you.”

“Yeah, that’s cool.”

“All right, then.” I stood up and Nate took my cue, shaking my hand over the desk. I walked around and walked to the door with him. “Have a good night, Nate, and I’ll call you in the morning to talk about meeting with your stepfather.” He thanked me and exited.

I sat back down at the desk and spun the chair around in circles for a while as I thought about Nate and his case. Tobey said once that spinning in circles at work is the most childish thing he’s ever seen, but I maintain that it’s my best thinking aid. Besides, I do plenty of things that are way more childish. Tobey doesn’t know what he’s talking about.

Tobey. Holy shit, I’m pregnant, I remembered. Suddenly frantic, I leaned forward and started rummaging through the trash bin under my desk for the pregnancy test.

“You know, if I were a detective, I might find this behavior kind of suspicious.”

Crap. I looked up, narrowly avoiding smacking my head on the desk, to see Bryce leaning in my doorway, watching me dig through the garbage.

“Lose something?” Bryce strode across the room to plop in the empty chair. I sat up.

“Don’t you have things to do? Filing and whatnot? If you’re looking for work, I can tell Alexa you want to start cataloging all the archived intake files.”

“That’s not funny,” Bryce intoned severely, wrinkling his nose. “I wanted to ask you about the Christianti case, but I would be happy to go back to my desk if you can give me a good reason for going through your own office trash.” He leaned forward, trying to peer over the side of the desk. I’m a great liar when I have time to plan my story in advance, but I’m an absolutely terrible on-the-spot liar, which Bryce enjoys pointing out.

“I accidentally threw away my credit card.”

“Uh-huh. Not buying it.”

“I dropped a piece of gum in here this morning, and I thought there might be a little chew left in it.”

“That’s just stupid.”

I sighed. “Fine.” I retrieved the pregnancy test from the bin and tossed it unceremoniously on the desk near Bryce. He leaned forward to see and looked up at me immediately, shocked.

“So, I’m guessing the plus sign means…”

“Positive. Yep.”

“Whoa.” Bryce sat down in the vacant chair, looking staggered. “So? What’s the deal? Were you and Tobey trying?”

“You know, you’re awfully nosy for an employee.”

“But I’m just nosy enough for a PI,” he reasoned. “And if you didn’t want to tell me about it you should have prepared a dumpster diving story in advance. You know you raised me to be inquisitive.”

That was fair. “Okay. No, we weren’t particularly trying, though we weren’t particularly NOT trying, either. Tobey does not know yet. I didn’t even know, until about five minutes before I met with Nate Christiani.”

“Oh.” He paused for a moment, sorting his questions out into appropriate and inappropriate categories. Finally, he settled on, “Are you excited?”

“Yes. I don’t know. I haven’t really thought about it too much. I had the pregnancy thought, took the test right away, got into this meeting right away, and now here I am.”

“Is...is Tobey going to be happy?”

“Will he be happy that I’m pregnant? Yes. Definitely.” Bryce looked at me inquiringly, but I just shook my head.

I decided not to go straight home, because in many important situations, I am a coward. Instead, I headed downtown to the family business.

My sister and I grew up with just my dad, who has owned a comic book store in downtown Chicago for more than 35 years. Great Dane Comics has never been incredibly successful, but it’s never struggled much, either – my dad has a unique knack for bringing new people into what’s become a very ‘insider’ trade, and this gift has kept a steady stream of new and regular customers in and out of the shop. They love my cheerful, kindly father, who can just as easily converse with a college sorority sister writing a paper or a die-hard Iron Man fan who can’t stop ranting about the latest crossover debacle. He loves them all, and I think the customers can sense that.

Dad never really got over my mom, who died when I was two. But despite his grief and his boys-club profession, my father was never fazed that fate gave him two little

girls, teaching us that we could love comics just as much as the boys. He even named us both after his favorite female comic characters - my full name is Selena Kyle Dane, named for Catwoman's alter ego – which turned out to be particularly ironic when I developed my childhood fear of cats. My big sister is Aurora Munroe Dane-Daniels, kind of a bastardized spelling of the alter ego of Storm, from the X-Men comics. I know the whole thing seems a little weird to new people, but when you grow up surrounded by posters of the Hulk and Spiderman, having a comic book name never really seems that strange. Besides, we're both just grateful he didn't try to actually call us Storm and Catwoman.

About five years ago, my sister Rory graduated from business school and took over all the financials for the store, leaving my dad free to putter and talk to customers, which is what he likes best anyway. Then Rory married a comic book geek slash graphic designer named Mark Daniels, and the two of them produced two little superheroes of their own, Cassie and Chad. My father, God bless him, was not consulted on baby names.

I've kind of stopped keeping up with most comics at this point, switching to graphic novels and compilations for convenience, but I'm still a frequent visitor to Great Dane. I parked my Pontiac Vibe in my father's reserved spot in the lot behind the store, and walked around the outside so I could enter in the front.

“Hey, Ro.” I kissed my sister's cheek as I entered. With ten minutes to close the store was deserted, and Rory perched on a stool behind the enormous counter, reading a new issue of the Amazing Spiderman. Rory's a comic reader in a brainy, intellectual kind of way. She smiled at me without looking up from her page.

“Hey, Little Sister.”

“Where’s Dad?” I dropped my carry-all bag behind the counter and pulled myself up onto the second wooden stool by the cash register.

“He left early for a doctor’s appointment.” She twirled a pen absently in her long fingers, which are just like mine. Rory looks a lot like me, with brown eyes, broad shoulders, and long legs. She has my high cheekbones, too, but her long hair is chestnut instead of blonde. She also carries about twenty pounds that I don’t, souvenirs from her two kids and her too-busy lifestyle. Today she was wearing mom clothes – a cream-colored turtleneck under a green cardigan, and prim ankle-length jeans. The whole thing was probably from Eddie Bauer. At 31, Rory is fully on board the Mommy bandwagon. Actually, I’m pretty sure she’s driving the Mommy bandwagon.

“Was it just a checkup, or is something going on?” I asked.

“Just a checkup on his heart and man-parts and stuff-“

“Ew.”

“But I told him he didn’t need to come back in anyway,” she continued, ignoring me. “We don’t have any shipments tonight, and Aaron and I were able to handle the crowd. I sent him home 45 minutes ago.”

“Cool.” Aaron was one of the few teenagers who had successfully sweet-talked Rory into letting him work part-time for her.

“So, Ro,” I began, reaching over to tug lightly at a lock of her dark hair, “I need to talk to you about something. Actually, I need to talk to *someone* about something, and you’re my second or third favorite person in the world, so I’ve chosen you.”

She looked up for the first time since I’d walked in. “Who’s first? Tobey?”

“Most of the time.”

“Did I beat Dad?”

“It’s neck and neck, and it all rides on whether or not you have any pretzels under the counter right now.” Rory rolled her eyes, tugging her hair out of my hand, and reached into a cupboard under the cash register, tossing me a half-full bag of pretzels. What? I was hungry.

“Okay, you’re number two.”

“Wow. Your affection comes at so cheap a price. What do you need to talk about?”

“Well, please don’t freak out on me, okay, seriously. Really. But I’m sort of, a little bit...pregnant.”

“What!?” She jumped up and threw her arms around me, knocking the bag of pretzels to the floor and almost knocking me off the stool. Jeez. For my reserved sister, that’s pretty much the equivalent of running down the street naked. “That’s so great! When did you find out?”

“About an hour and a half ago.” I pried her arms off and said, “Dude. You’re going to squash the baby.”

Rory ignored me, but she settled back on her own stool. “Were you guys trying to get pregnant?”

“Why is that everyone’s first question? Rude. But no, not really.”

“Did you tell Tobey yet?”

“Not yet. Just Bryce, because he saw me with the test.”

She paused in her jubilation and looked at me carefully. “Okay. So why aren’t you rushing home right now to tell him?”

“I kind of don’t want him to know.”

Rory gasped, gaping at me. “You are planning on *keeping* it?”

“Yes, yes. Which, I know, means I’ll eventually have to tell him, or explain why I get increasingly fat and then much skinnier.”

“So true. So, again, you aren’t telling him because...?”

I had to admit, I didn’t really know, so I took the easy feminist way out. “If I tell him, I’m afraid he’s going to want me to quit my job.”

“Ah.” Rory leaned back in her seat. “I see. Do you know that for sure?”

“I don’t know. When I was with the cops he used to complain that it was too dangerous for both of us to be in law enforcement.”

“But *he* was with the cops then, too.” Tobey and I had met when he was a Homicide detective and I’d just been assigned to the department as a 23-year-old uniform. He’d quit the force a year after me and went private, too, but he works for an enormous, enormous investigation company in the city. Everyone thinks its weird that we’re married PI’s, but most of the time I feel like we’re barely in the same industry.

“Yeah,” I said, “but he still considers what I do dangerous, and I don’t think it’ll matter if *his* job is mostly desk now.”

“Well, in his defense, you did get shot last year. And stabbed the year before.”

“Whoa,” I protested immediately. “First of all, I wasn’t stabbed, I was slashed a little in the arm, and it barely needed stitches-“

“Wasn’t it, like, twenty?”

“And that wasn’t even *on* a case, that was when I found those three kids trying to beat the snot out of a homeless guy. It had nothing to do with work. *And* I kicked their asses.” Rory snorted.

“Secondly,” I continued, ignoring her, “Okay, yeah, I got a teeny bit shot,” – I put my left thumb and index finger a half inch apart to demonstrate the triviality of the whole thing – “But that little girl is home tonight because of it.”

Amanda Ann Rink was a four-year-old who was snatched from home last year by her worthless heroin addict father, Ray, who figured he could ransom her to his ex-wife for drug money, and then rent Amanda out to his sexual predator friends. The police didn’t know about the drug connection and dismissed the whole thing as a domestic squabble. So I spent two weeks living and breathing the case, and when I finally found the shitty apartment where he was keeping his daughter, Ray managed to shoot me in the right shoulder before the police arrived. But though the little girl had been through a lot, I’d found her before Ray could let anyone else touch her. Now every couple of months, Amanda mailed a homemade postcard to my office with what was new in her life lately. As she is still only five, Amanda appears to spend a whole lot of time in the company of squiggles.

“I know. And I know you saved her from going through some pretty awful stuff, much less maybe being killed,” Rory said calmly. “But, Lena, a few inches over and you would have been shot in the heart.”

“And a few inches over and the bullet would have missed me entirely. Shit happens.”

Before Rory could respond, the little bell over the front door jingled, and two preteen boys with acne and skateboards skulked into the shop, making a beeline for the DC section.

“Guys?” Rory called. “Excuse me?”

In perfect, eerie unison, they both paused and turned around to face us at the counter.

“We’re actually closing up. We’re open ten to seven tomorrow.”

They looked at each other, mirroring each others’ befuddled expressions. Then they silently pivoted and beelined right back out. Rory and I looked at each other and burst out laughing.

“Oh, God,” I moaned. “I’m like, making one of those.”

“Yeah, but hopefully yours will be able to tell time. Can you grab the lock?”

“Sure,” I said, hopping off the stool. I speedwalked over to the front door and flipped the deadbolt. Then I returned to the counter and climbed back on my stool.

“Look, Lena,” Rory continued, “I’m not going to sit here and debate with you whether your job is too dangerous for you, or too dangerous for you as a mom. That’s not my thing. But this topic must have come up before now. You guys *have* talked about kids?”

“Of course. I just... I just kind of figured this would sort itself out, later.”

“Little sister,” Rory said, not without sympathy, “it’s later.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Here’s the deal. I won’t spill the beans about the baby-“

“Thank you-“

“But,” she interrupted, “No matter how you and Tobey decide to handle things, you’re going to have to be incredibly, incredibly careful with yourself during the next...what, eight months?”

“A little over seven. I think I’m almost two months along.”

“Okay. Seven months and change. And I know you’re worried about it, but you are going to have to tell your husband that you are pregnant.”

“Right. And how long do you think I have before I have to do that?”

Rory threw up her hands, almost losing her balance on the old wooden stool. “Selena Kyle Dane. Are you listening to me at all?”

“I am, I promise. And, Rory, I do know that I’m just delaying the inevitable here. But you know, lots of pregnant women wait awhile to tell people.”

“Yeah, but not the *father*.”

“I hear you, but can you just pretend for a minute that I just want to keep it private a little longer to make sure the baby’s healthy? Please? And tell me how long before I will start to show? I mean, our bodies are pretty much identical.”

Her jaw dropped. “*That’s* why you came to me? Not for sisterly advice, but to quiz me on our similar body traits?”

“Pretty much, yeah. But the other thing, too.”

“Fine.” She sighed, patience incarnate, and thought about it. “With Cassie, I didn’t show until four and a half months. With Chad it was right around four.”

I crunched a couple more pretzels. It was after seven, and I was eating for two now. “Okay. So I’ve feasibly got four to six weeks before I have to start telling people. I can work with that.”

She glared at me suspiciously. “Job-wise, are you working on anything dangerous right now?”

“Not at all,” I said, prepared for this question. “I’ve got, let’s see, an insurance scam that’ll be wrapping up next week, some background checks for that computer software company that we work with a lot, and the Emerson case, which I’m going to terminate

because I've got nothing and I'm draining their money. Oh, and a kid hired me today to find his biological dad."

"That doesn't sound too bad." She frowned. "No bodyguarding?"

"No bodyguarding," I promised. There was never really a science to which cases were dangerous and which were less so, but bodyguarding was about the only thing I took on where you were practically assured a threat against your person. My entire family hated when I had those cases, but sometimes people needed a woman who could blend in at clubs and events. Can I help it if I'm cute as a button?

"Okay," Rory said finally, "but Selena, you will take care of yourself, or I promise you I'll step in here."

I swore Rory to an extremely reluctant secrecy and finally went home. Tobey and I have a pretty posh apartment in Chicago proper, thanks to his cushy corporate PI job. Parking the Vibe in my underground spot, I said a syrupy-sweet hello to Tucker, the doorman, who merely sniffed. I'm pretty sure he hates me. When Tobey and I first moved in Tucker was very pleasant - right up until he found out I hadn't taken Tobey's last name when we got married. To Tucker, who probably irons his undershirts, this is too unladylike to be tolerated - which just amuses me, because if Tucker knew I carried a gun he'd probably shit his neatly pressed boxers.

Our place is a two bedroom on the fifth floor, and I usually jog the stairs because elevators give me the willies. I was only panting a little when I pushed the key in the lock and heaved the heavy door open with my shoulder. Mmmm. Nina Simone was on the stereo, and I could smell pasta sauce.

“Hey, baby,” Tobey called from the kitchen. Then there was a crash and a thunderous pounding as Toka the pit bull cleverly detected my presence and threw himself off the bed to get to me. I dropped the carryall, crouched down, and submitted to having my face licked thoroughly by the brindle dog’s oversized pink tongue. Some police friends of ours rescued Toka during a raid on a dogfighting ring in the Loop two years ago, and he came to us. He’d still been a little puppy, not yet old enough to compete in fights, which saved him from the violent temperament that accompanied so many tortured pits. Toka was the only survivor – all of the other rescues had to be put down.

Finally, the dog decided my face was clean and lumbered into the kitchen to investigate the food smells. I stood, wiping my face on my sleeve, and followed suit, rounding left into what we called the Big Glorious Kitchen. Tobey and I can both cook simple things really well – pastas, lasagna, various inventive uses for vegetarian chicken – but the kitchen is way out of our league. The whole thing is granite and stainless steel, with a wet bar island in the center and state-of-the-art fixtures all around. It happened to be a part of the apartment we wanted, but now if we don’t use it at least five times a week we feel guilty about wasting it. When I walked in, Tobey was leaning over the restaurant-sized stove stirring organic Ragù with vegetarian ground beef mixed in. I circled the island to kiss him on the lips.

“Hey,” I said back, “what’s cookin’, good lookin’?”

“I am cooking. And I’m a who, not a what.” he kissed me again. “Though I certainly am good looking.”

“Yes you are. Did you feed Toka?” Hearing his name spoken in the kitchen, the dog sat down and looked at me hopefully, wagging his tail.

“Yup. And we’re next. How was your day?”

“Good.” Despite my intentions I felt the pregnancy news bubble up my throat, but I swallowed it down. “I have an interesting new case.” I told him about Nate Christianti and the mysterious novel.

“Wow, that is kind of out there. Are you going to read the book?”

“Yup, it’s in my bag. I figure if nothing else I can figure out a little about how this guy thinks.” I reached into the waiting pot of cooked noodles and pulled out a long string to pop in my mouth. Mouth full, I asked “How was *your* day?”

“Pretty good. I had a meeting with new clients, too, this fancy law firm that suspects one of their new associates is there as a corporate spy.”

“Oooh! Intrigue! Mystery! And at a law firm, no less.”

“I know. Way more exciting than my last two insurance cases put together.”

“Yeah, like that’s a tough challenge.” Insurance cases had slowly become Tobey’s specialty since he joined Consolidated Securities Investigations. It wasn’t so much that he liked them best, it was just that my levelheaded husband was the only one who was consistently able to handle the boredom. I’ve had a few of those cases myself, and they mostly involve following a guy in a wheelchair to see if he stands up suddenly. Tobey’s fancy cases were a little more high-end, but the principle is the same: sit. Watch. Long to pee.

“You wanna set the table?” Tobey asked me. “I haven’t gotten that far.”

“Course.” I jumped up to set out a couple of place settings and grab last night’s leftover salad from the fridge.

We ate peacefully, with Tobey telling me about the corporate spy case and Toka spinning in excited circles underneath the dining room table, trying to catch any scraps of food. I’m betting that Tobey slipped him some fake beef under the table. I know I did. Unless Tobey’s actively training the dog to do something, we’re terrible disciplinarians.

There was a lull in the conversation, and my mind wandered back to the baby in my body. With the sudden shock and the decision to cover it up for awhile, it hadn’t really sunk in that there was a living creature inside me, that would some day grow until it was as big as I am or bigger. If you think about it, it’s basically a parasite, I mused, which is kind of gross. I mentally rolled my eyes. Great maternal instincts, Selena.

I put my fork down and looked across the table at my husband, who remained oblivious. Who would the parasite look like, me or him? Tobey is great-looking in a clean-cut, Irish Catholic way, like Colin Farrell with a little less eyebrow and no bar fighting. He’s also 6’2”, which means I get to wear the tallest heels I can handle, not that that’s saying much. Would the baby be pale and Irish like Tobey or darker and mixed-breed like me? Most of my ancestors run towards German and Norwegian, and Danish, of course, but my maternal grandmother was Native American, and Dad says there’s at least one Mexican in his family tree. Rory and I both have the kind of olive skin that means we could play at a dozen nationalities, including very tanned white people. It comes in handy on cases.

Tobey was talking to me. “Lena? Lean? Did you hear me?”

I actually physically shook my head, to clear out the mist of new thoughts.

“No, I’m sorry. What did you say?”

We did the dishes together, and then Tobey retreated into the living room with Toka to watch the football game. Our apartment consists of the Big Glorious Kitchen, a small dining room, a living room with the television and DVD player, our master bedroom, and a second small bedroom that we take turns using as an office. When we first moved in I went to town with paint, coloring two or three walls in every room with a basic cream color, then painting the other walls with different deep colors – the living room had a dark red, the bedroom dark blue, etc. In the office, two of the walls were green, my favorite color, and one boring weekend Tobey and I had installed a giant, wall-sized bookshelf on one of the cream walls. A small desk with a laptop, a sturdy wood futon, and a big overstuffed blue armchair took up the remainder of the room, but despite the crowding the whole thing felt relaxed and sort of collegiate, the perfect place for reading case files or paging through online search engines. That’s where I settled in after dinner, with Nate’s book, a cup of decaf tea, and a pad of paper for notes.

I started on the laptop. The reality of modern private investigation is that it’s harder and harder for people to actually be missing these days. With so many free and cheap web databases available, I can track people down by their credit reports, whether they own property, if they’ve ever been in jail, if they’re dead, through a driver’s license, and so on. It’s actually pretty easy, though often tedious. Unfortunately for me and my case, most of those search engines require either a social security number or a date of birth, at the very least. Because Nate barely knew his father and his stepfather had never even met him, I had neither.

I checked anyway, going through the white pages, the Social Security Death Master File (yep, they really do keep a list of dead people, and they really do call it that), Illinois drivers' records, and so on. I even checked the Federal Bureau of Prisons website. The news was not good. It wasn't that I couldn't find any info on a "Jason Anderson," it was that I found too much, and I had no idea which Jason was the one I needed – Chicago alone had 14 listings for Jason Anderson, but that would be assuming he'd stayed in the city, which seemed unlikely. I frowned, thinking. It might be possible to trace the guy through his marriage license to Sarah, but if she had remarried in Illinois the old license might not be on file. It was a perfect storm: the lack of background information on Jason, the fact that Jason had one of the world's great common names, and my inability to trace him in all the usual methods. It suddenly occurred to me that maybe Jason Anderson hadn't *wanted* to be found. From the little I knew about him, it sounded like Jason really wanted to shirk any responsibility when it came to his family – and it was conceivable that he was trying to hide from alimony or childcare payments. Fantastic. Letting it go for the time being, I switched from the desk to the armchair, pulled a fleece Chicago Cubs throw over my lap, and settled in to read "Sunset Dies."

I ended up mostly skimming. Tobey and I are both big readers, but our tastes tend toward biographies, crime novels and a bit of nineteenth century English literature for me: Sherlock Holmes, naturally, and Jane Austen's novels, and some poetry. We're also, of course, big mystery people - we like to race to figure out the killer, each marking where in the book we think we know. (It's a great game, but nobody *ever* wants to borrow books from us.)

But “Sunset Dies” wasn’t something that either of us would have looked at twice in the bookstore. Nate’s father’s book was more of an obvious attempt to write what my high school English teacher would have called a Great American Novel, one that would accurately sum up the human experience of trying to live in these conflicting times. It was a noble, ultimately insurmountable goal, and the whole book came across as somewhat pretentious and unformed. My English lit professor would have said it just screamed “first novel.”

It was, though a very personal story. The main character, Caleb, was a family man in the Chicago suburbs (check) with a pretty young wife named Sarah (check) and a brand-new baby son (check). In the book, “Caleb” is trying to eke out a living as a writer and struggling with feelings of unfulfillment – he feels too big, too unique, for the suburban dad lifestyle he’s trapped in. The novel was about his dissatisfaction with his life, his agony over being trapped between the man he wants to be and the man he feels responsibility to be, and his tortured decision of whether to leave his family for no reason that anyone would ever understand, or stay and never again be understood.

It was extremely depressing stuff, and I did feel some sympathy for Caleb-Jason, despite his woe-is-me attitude about his life. But there was another voice in this beat-up novel – Nate’s. The teenager had gone through the book with a red pen, underlining sections that he thought proved that his biological father and J.P. Hashly were the same person. Caleb’s house has a red door and blue shutters, which Nate has marked with a little note that said, “this is true!” Sarah in the novel has broad shoulders, wide hips, and chin-length red hair, a description that earned a bright red affirmation from Nate. There’s even a scene in the book where Caleb breaks down in tears when a neighbor asks him

what color the baby's eyes are, and Caleb can't remember. It's supposed to be symbolic of Caleb's feelings of discomfort and unsuitability about being a dad, I guess, but Nate has determinedly circled the whole section with a red pen, noting "Story confirmed by next-door neighbor Chris Hoppe on 9/13/2007." Reading this, I felt tears well in my own eyes. One way or another, Nate had been researching this book's authenticity for at least two years. I couldn't imagine spending that amount of time going over and over how much your father wanted to leave you.

It was nearly eleven when I finished skimming through the book, and I felt weary and depressed with the story. I transferred the book and paper from my lap to the desk, stood up, and stretched, arching my back with a yawn that I felt in my toes. Before I called it a night, though, I perched on the desk chair and turned to a fresh page in the notepad to write out a list of research angles. I love lists. *Track down the publishing company, I wrote. Talk to neighbors, stepfather RE known associates. Call 14 Chicago Jason Andersons.* A long shot if ever there was one. I chewed on the pen cap, thinking, and finally finished with *Research possible aliases and name changes. Interview stepfather RE Sarah's opinions of Jason.*

All kinds of different people go missing, for all kinds of different reasons. But every missing persons case starts with the same two steps: do research on the computer, and talk to friends and family. I would say almost 90 % of my missing persons are found, dead or alive, in those first two steps. But this was a weird case, and I was beginning to think that things wouldn't go nearly so smoothly. I wondered momentarily if I should be trying to take the case further – look for cousins, ex-wives, half-siblings, and so forth. But I'd been hired to find Jason Anderson, not to find Nate a guardian. At least not yet. I

tore the list off the pad and set it aside to go in my workbag. Looking at the fresh page of paper in front of me, I considered starting a new list, of baby preparation steps. I stared at the paper for a full three minutes before dropping it into the desk drawer and slamming it closed. It could wait.

I rose, stretched out my stiff legs, and padded tiredly to the living room, where Tobey was quite predictably fast asleep on the couch, stretched out on his side. His legs were bent, making a right angle, and Toka was curled up in the crook, wound into a happy little knot of muscle and fur. As I leaned in the doorway, the dog's eyes rose to meet mine, saying, "are you gonna wake us up? Do we have to do something?" I whistled softly and patted my leg, mouthing the magic word: "out." Toka sprang up, and dashed to the door, while Tobey slept on without stirring. Tobey does tend to sleep as though he's hibernating. I clipped on the dog's heavy-duty canvas leash and we headed for the elevators for our end-of-the-day walk.

When we got back to the apartment, I tiptoed into the living room and draped myself across the back of the couch, wiggling in between it and Tobey. I snuggled against his back, and he mumbled nonsense at me.

"Tobey," I sang, "it's bedtime."

"Sleep here," he muttered.

"Nope, no go. It's time to get up and get into bed. With your gorgeous wife."

"No. Tired."

"I don't want to have to do this, but I *will* shove you off this couch."

He woke up enough to form a cohesive statement. "You wouldn't dare."

Yeah, right. I braced my shoulders against the back of the couch and pushed, dumping my semiconscious husband on the ground.

“You’ll pay for that, Dane,” he growled, and I scrambled over the back of the couch and raced into the bedroom, Tobey and Toka at my heels.

Nate Christiani let himself into the still house, which lately seemed humid with the heavy atmosphere of sickness, a creeping, growing fog that gained a little more ground every day. It had taken four buses and almost three hours to get from the PI agency back to the suburbs, but Nate had used the time for homework and a little light forgery. There was a note from the principal’s office about Nate’s new habit of sleeping in class, a permission slip for an upcoming class trip to the Field Museum, and a letter from Child Services regarding the status of Nate’s future care. Nate seriously doubted any of them would bother to compare the signature with older forms from Tom, but he wasn’t taking any chances. Using an old check stub, he’d painstakingly retraced the signature on each form, taking care to lift his pen every time the bus jolted to a stop. On the third bus an older girl, probably a college student, noticed what he was doing, but she just smirked knowingly, in a “been there” kind of way, and Nate gave her a sheepish smile back. Let her think he was trying to avoid getting in trouble. As explanations went, it was far more fun than the truth.

At home, as he stepped inside the foyer, he carefully paused to pick up the casserole dish that Mrs. Frederick had pushed through the doggy door. Their dog Rufus had been dead for three years, but the door had found new life and new purpose since Tom had gotten sick and Nate had struck the deal with the neighbors. The sticky note on top of the

casserole lid instructed him to microwave it for two minutes if he got home after six, but Nate simply carried the dish through the living room into the kitchen, took a dirty fork out of the sink, wiped it on his shirt, and dug into the hamburger casserole. Hungry, he was almost a third through the pan when he heard the weak tinkle of the bell from upstairs. Nate hastily pushed the casserole dish into the fridge and hurried back to the staircase in the foyer. Taking the stairs two at a time, he paused outside Tom's door, collected his game face, and crept in.

His stepfather had once been a big man, hale and hearty with that little extra layer of fair-skinned fat that seemed unique to Midwesterners. Now, though, the slight beer gut and cheerful ruddiness had vanished, and Tom's skin seemed to have stretched inwardly into his body, erasing flesh and muscle and pulling Tom smaller and smaller into himself. Nate had a recurring nightmare where Tom just shrunk until he disappeared completely. The bedroom was tidy but cluttered with the evidence of the cancer: instruments and wastebaskets and rows and rows of pill bottles. Nate knew the name and purpose of every instrument, every medicine. He'd studied them harder than he had for any test in his life.

On good days, Tom could still get up and move about the house: watching television, fixing himself cereal, and doing very light housecleaning. Today was not a good day. Nate moved closer and grasped Tom's hand, squatting on the small stool next to the bed.

"Hey," Nate said softly. "Do you need something?"

Tom grinned weakly up at him. "Not really," he rasped. "I heard you come in, wanted to see how it went. How was the investigator? What was she like?"

Nate considered the question carefully. “She seems tough. She’s friendly, and smart, and pretty cool, at least so far. But she wants to meet with you, to talk to you about, um, Jason.”

“Okay,” Tom said gently, “that’s fine. Why don’t you ask her over for tomorrow after school?”

“Are you sure?” the boy asked, worried. “I don’t want to tire you out any more than you are.”

“It’s okay, Nate. I can handle one visit.” Tom reached up to tousle his hair. “It’ll be okay. Right?”

“Okay, I guess.” Nate said softly. He said goodnight to Tom and return downstairs to retrieve his backpack. Since Tom had gotten sick, Nate had instinctively limited his movements to a few areas of the house: kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, foyer. While those rooms gathered the grime and debris of constant use, the rest of the house seemed pristine and impersonal, a hotel room threatening the personalities of its fleeing inhabitants. Bag in hand, Nate locked the front door, trudged up the stairs, and for the third night in a row, fell asleep fully clothed, a textbook spread out beside him on the bed.