

PRIYA KHAJURIA

BOOK
1

Bollywood
P.I.

CALIFORNIA
DREAMING

Bollywood P.I.

California Dreaming

PRIYA KHAJURIA

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Cover model photograph copyright: Sofia Zhuravets

PUBLISHED BY:

JOYFUL LIFE MASTERY

ISBN: 978-1-7770525-9-1

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/priyakhajuriabollywoodpi>

Praise for BOLLYWOOD P.I.

"Khajuria's deftly written *Bollywood P.I.* has absolutely everything: it's funny, it's smart, it's exciting—and it's unlike anything else I've ever read, in the best possible way. With Jita, Khajuria has created a sassy, street smart character who also has a beautiful heart, and some seriously good one-liners. You will not want this book to end. When it does, you'll want to read it again... If you love great books, you'll love this book. If you love to laugh, you'll love this book. There are so many reasons to love this book!"

MARISSA STAPLEY, bestselling author of *The Last Resort*

"*Bollywood P.I.* was one of the most enjoyable mysteries I've read in a long time (and I read a lot of mysteries). The characters are hip, the dialog is fun, there's a lot of action, a good plot, and a sweet resolution. What more can you ask for in a mystery? I enjoyed every page and look forward to more from Priya Khajuria."

MARC ALLEN, bestselling author and publisher of *New World Library*

"This is a wonderful, warm, inspiring story that will inspire you and lift your spirits."

BRIAN TRACY, bestselling author of *Create Your Own Future*

"...A great storyline with plenty of twists and turns, nicely rounded out with some excellent humour."

LORRAINE MACE, bestselling author of the *D.I. Sterling* series.

"...intriguing...an immensely satisfying mystery."

"...a fun, light-hearted read. Part romantic-comedy, part mystery novel, its main character, Jita, is a funny, likable heroine, endowed with the amazing ability to get herself in — and out — of various scrapes. Jita's interactions with her mother, who is determined to see her wed, were hilarious, and the cast of side characters added color and humor to the tale. This is the first book in what promises to be an engaging series in the same vein as Janet Evanovich's *Stephanie Plum* series."

READER'S FAVORITE * * * * *

*“There is something infinitely powerful that will transform you in the fight between right and wrong, between good and evil. What is this power?
Look inside... you will find the answer.”*

Inspector Dutt

CHAPTER 1

I leapt backwards and fell to the ground, rolling down Vinod’s driveway. The car backed into the road and headed for me again with a screech, the sun flashing ominously off the windshield.

I picked myself up and ran towards the car and past it. They couldn’t turn that fast. A narrow alleyway between two houses opened up in my peripheral vision and I bolted through it into the next street over. I’d bought myself only a minute or two. The sedan careened around the corner towards me with heart-stopping suddenness and I spun around again, running as fast as I could in the opposite direction.

At the end of the street sat a group of guys, smoking weed and playing music. One of the men, wearing pants hung low in Soggy Diaper Style, made kissy sounds as I ran in their direction.

“MOVE!” I shouted. *“Get out of the way!”*

Wheels ripped up behind me and I whirled around. Sure enough, it was the black car. I picked up speed, pounding right through mini-gardens, dodging fences. The car drove up onto the sidewalk, trampling over flower beds.

“What the hell, man!” There was a loud smacking sound behind me and I turned just in time to see a folding chair bounce off the car. The guys whooped and ran alongside the sedan, throwing beer cans and pop bottles.

The car bounced back onto the road, turning around with a screech of tires, then sped away. I slowed down and stopped at the end of a cul-de-sac. The men loped over as I stood bent at the waist, gasping for breath.

“What’s going on?” asked the taller one who’d thrown the chair.

“I . . . I don’t know!” I tried not to hyperventilate.

“Well, we got ‘em. It’s gonna cost to fix them dents. You okay, lovey?”

I nodded dumbly.

“Come and have a nice smoke with us. Loosen you up.”



(Wait. I’d better take you back a little bit.)



My name is Aparajita Patel. Also known as Jita, when I don’t want my name mispronounced every which way.

Unaware that my life was about to change forever, I tied a gold rakhi around Sunny’s wrist for the brother-and-sister festival of Raksha Bandan and beamed. After a

meaningful pause, Sunny laughed and handed me two-hundred and fifty dollars in crisp notes for what he called the dubious honor of being my cousin.

“I assume you’ll be putting this money towards that enormous credit card bill of yours?”

I assumed he wouldn’t mind not knowing I planned to buy two Dolce & Gabbana knock-offs and a ticket to see Clutch.

Sunny glanced at his phone as he made his way across the living room. We sat down on Mama’s couch, the leather squeaking, cradling steaming mugs of jasmine tea, the perfume strong and heady.

I slipped the latest *Bollywood P.I.* installment into the DVD player. Inspector Dutt, sixty-something and elegant with only the faintest hint of paunch, sauntered onscreen across the camera, sunglasses flashing roguishly. He had forty-five minutes each weekday to solve a mystery, do three songs and dances with multiple wardrobe changes and look fabulous. This week featured Uncle Bhinder, who reported a robbery from his bank’s safety deposit boxes.

Fifteen girls, dressed in outfits that would have driven Hollywood celebs into a slaverling blub of envy, sprang out in the middle of the bank and minxed their way through a dance number. I made a mental note to Google some of those outfits.

Sunny turned off the TV and put the remote down.

“Hey! I was watching that!”

“What are you up to for the next few evenings?” asked Sunny.

I raised my eyebrows. Sunny worked overtime at least six days a week and when he was seen by the general public, he’d plug into his iPhone like a starving animal at feeding time.

“How about we go for a burger tomorrow at La Mesa?” he said. “And maybe we can just hang out for the rest of the week.”

“Sure,” I said, delighted. “How’s work?”

He rubbed his face and looked up at the ceiling.

I knew that look. “That bad, eh? I’ll give you a minute. I’m going get more grub.”

I stopped outside the room on the way back with more cookies. Sunny was talking but it took a minute before I realized he wasn’t speaking to me.

“I told you already. She moved here about four years ago. I can’t understand why there’s no record of her.”

He paused for a moment while I debated walking into the room.

“That doesn’t make sense! And why has no one locally heard of her?”

I opened the door and walked in, feeling awkward. Sunny ended the call abruptly.

“You’re on a case, aren’t you? Sorry. I might have overheard a bit.”

“Yep. Naina,” he said. It was a sweet name, meaning *beautiful eyes*.

“Who’s that?”

“A missing woman. She got married to an American. Her family told my guy that she flew out of Mumbai. Her father’s from a small village and had a note of the flight and date but he wasn’t at the airport. We tried checking through Air India but there was no record of her on that flight or any others during that month. We haven’t been able to narrow anything down yet through the other airlines.”

“I guess you tried tracing them through passports or visas?”

“Yes, but nothing’s come up.”

I shook my head. “Sunny, how did you get this case if her family lives in India?”

His eyes skittered away from mine. “Interpol.”

“Interpol!” I stared at him. “Then this isn’t a typical missing person case.”

He looked away. “Forget about it. So are we on this week after work? You’re not busy, right?” Sunny drained his tea and set the mug down.

That depends on what one would consider “busy.” On weeknights I surfed the Internet for best leave-in hair conditioner reviews, browsed Amazon for designer knock-offs or left short and useless posts on PlayBook.

“I’ll meet you in front of La Mesa at six.”



Four fun evenings with Sunny passed quickly. On the fifth day, I joined him on a bench at Stearns Wharf. Tourists meandered past, grouping outside the wharf restaurants to peer at the menus. Small groups of gray clouds moved quickly across the sky, brushed gently by the winds, the skies breaking out with sudden warm hits of sunshine.

The palm trees lining Cabrillo Boulevard stood impossibly high, swaying fronds lazily scratching the skyline. Children ran by, shouting and laughing, their little footsteps thumping down the boardwalk. The wharf creaked gently on its stilts, a gentle reminder that we were standing over the ocean, surf crashing yards away. I took a deep breath of the briny air, the strong breeze whipping at my ponytail.

Sunny smiled and closed his book as I sat down.

“What are you reading?”

“The *Laws of Success*.”

“Is that about the Law of Attraction?” My eyes lit up.

“Business motivation, actually,” he said and I grimaced.

I studied him closely, alarmed by his appearance. He had dark circles under his eyes and looked drawn and anxious. “Sunny, what’s going on?”

“Don’t worry,” he said, glancing around. “Everything’s fine, I’m just tired today.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re cutting back on the overtime.”

“You and me both. Let’s go get some ice-cream.”

Selections made, I sauntered out of the ice cream parlor behind Sunny who was striding towards an empty bench.

“Have you thought about what I was saying?” asked Sunny.

I dragged my eyes away from the hypnotic palm trees. “We talked about a lot of things this week. Remind me again?”

“Jita, I’ve been talking about this every night.” Sunny ran his hand through his hair in frustration. “Before you get married—”

“I’m not getting married!”

“Well then, before that unlikely event happens, do something fun for a change. Why don’t you travel? Maybe date a little bit? Where’s that wild-child gone? You’ve become all reserved and uptight. Remember when you wanted to drop out of college to start a Singles Club?”

I searched my memory. “That was for *pets!*”

“It was still a cute idea. You always loved trying new things. And you liked psychology. Have you thought about getting your masters or doctorate and treating patients?”

“I’m not that great about controlling my *own* mind, how am I supposed to help someone with theirs?”

He shook his head. “And then there was your P.I. dream.”

I snorted. “That was a childish fantasy. I’m all grown up now.”



I remembered the first time I’d told Daddy. Sunny had been there.

We’d met for tea at The Wholesome Café downtown. Daddy ordered tea with carrot cake, I guzzled an Aloha Bubble smoothie and Sunny sipped a veggie juice.

“Here!” I said excitedly, handing my father a business card. I was proud of that card. It was on extra-nice card stock and everything.

“Jita,” said Daddy, in that tone he reserved for telemarketers. “I’m a little concerned about this, er, new direction you are suggesting.”

“What’s wrong with it?” I asked.

“Well,” he took a contemplative chew of cake and squinted at my card. “To start with, what is this *P.I.* title? Why don’t you just put *Bookkeeper*? That is what you are doing now and getting paid for.”

“That’s my mock-up card!” I said, bubbling over a bit desperately. “I really want to do this, Daddy.”

“Last year you tried practicing meditation and hypnosis. You ended up with airy-fairy clients - smokers and people wishing to visit past lives. And some very questionable fellows who seemed like they were interested in more than just meditation and hypnosis. I wasn’t comfortable with you sitting alone in a room with these strange boys.”

“They were fine! They just needed a little empathy and centering. But I *especially* want to be a P.I.”

“I can’t see how you would build a career on that,” said my father. “Probably you would get clients wishing for proof on cheating spouses – that is not a good career for a nice girl. Anyway, you should be concentrating on your long-term goals. And come to think of it now, why be a bookkeeper when you can be an accountant? There’s still time to start in a new direction since it’s clear you are not focused.”

“I could talk to Uncle Suresh – he’s a P.I. He could help get me started.”

“How many clients has Suresh had?”

“Two.”

Daddy choked on his tea and Sunny thumped his back. “Two? *TWO?*”

“I’ve got to start *somewhere*,” I said.

“Somewhere is right! That is more like nowhere,” he said. “Neetu Singh is looking for a mutual funds trainee at the bank. Why don’t you apply? Start with that. If you don’t want an accounting designation, you can study the funds program at night. What do you think?”

What I thought was: “mutual funds” and “gag reflex” go nicely in the same sentence.

“Sunny, don’t you think Jita would make a good accountant or banker?” He shot a piercing look at Sunny over his glasses.

Sunny smiled diplomatically. “I think that Jita would be great at whatever she does.”

“Arrey, what great-great?” Daddy’s voice rose slightly. “We are not talking about being great at *anything*. One can be great at cleaning the bathrooms!” He waved his fork around excitedly. “The point is to choose a proper profession and stick to it!”

“Uncle, what is the issue? If you don’t mind me asking,” said Sunny.

“Of course I don’t mind, dear boy!” thundered Daddy good-naturedly. “You remember University. After all those fees, Jita got bored and almost flunk—”

“Daddy!”

“Almost fail—”

“*Daddy!*”

“She loves everything for five minutes, then gets bored. Forget the P.I. stuff. I don’t know anyone who can help her career with that. But we all know hundreds and *hundreds*” - his voice rose again to fever pitch – “of dak-ters and lawyers and engineers and accoun—”

“I’ll help her,” said Sunny.

Daddy gave him a look. “Arrey, how can *you* help her?”

“I’ll be there for moral support for her bookkeeping.”

I felt some of the light die out of my eyes. “Thanks,” I said.

“Moral support is nice but not much of anything. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing,” said Daddy, shaking his head at me. “I forget who said that but somebody did.”



“Jita?”

I came back to the present and looked at Sunny.

“Jita, you change your mind all the time. At UCSB you took courses in International Reporting, Psychology, what else? Oh yes, Eastern Religion, Philosophy, Cultural Aspects of Food. There was that year in Montreal studying Canadian politics, except you mastered Quebecois swear words instead, Astronomy, a course in Mining Engineering and, of all things, Forest Sciences. Mind you, you failed that one quite spectacularly,” he said fondly.

“I like learning new things.”

“Maybe it’s time to stop learning and start doing. I’d love to see you enjoying life. Why don’t you ditch the bookkeeping and do something you’ve always had a passion for?”

“You weren’t very supportive about me being a P.I.,” I said, reproachfully. “Why in the world are you bringing it up now?”

“I have my reasons,” he said, looking away.

I held my temper in check. “Don’t be so condescending! Besides, Daddy’s right. Being a P.I. is not sustainable. The bookkeeping keeps my income steady and it’s a decent enough job. I’m lucky to even have a job given the hiring climate.”

“How long are you going to make that lame old excuse? Do you love it?”

“Oh yeah,” I said. “I *adore* debits and credits! Have you forgotten about my student loans? I have to have a steady job.”

He gave me a look. “All of us offered to help you out with your loans and you refused. That was your choice. And you live at home now – that’s more of a chance to save money than most people get. But you let your dad scare you out of going in a new direction. And yes, I admit I wasn’t that supportive either. But frankly, if you were paying your own fees, why look for permission to be a P.I. from Uncle? Why didn’t you just go ahead and do it anyway?”

“I thought it was right to mention it to him. He is my father after all.”

“You know what I think?” Sunny sat back and gazed at me through eyes that were disconcertingly clear. “I think you gave away your power to him on purpose.”

Why the hell was he bringing up this stuff now? “Sunny, I tried a bunch of stuff and I failed. Not everyone gets to do what they love. Now can we change the subject please?”

His voice softened. “Jita, you could never be a failure.”

I wiped a blob of chocolate ice cream off his book. When I looked up, Sunny was staring across the street with a strange expression in his eyes. I looked towards that direction. A figure dressed in a dark hoodie and jeans disappeared quickly into the crowd and I felt a chill down my spine.

“Hey, guys!” We turned back towards the shoreline. Angie jogged up to us, dressed in a cream and lime tank top with matching biking shorts. She and Sunny eyed each other.

“Sunny. How are things?”

Sunny smiled. “As good as they can be. So who’s in the hot seat this time?”

“A real man,” she said, wiggling herself between the two of us until she got comfy. If Sunny and Angie weren’t each other’s idea of hell on earth, I’d think there was an attraction.

“Was that Jacob from the Gauchos I saw you with at the art show?”

“That was last month,” said Angie, sipping from a mini water bottle. “I have never seen a man so obsessed with white. His clothes are white, his furniture is white, everything in his place is white. When he started picking out white clothes for me, I said, Jacob, I am going to go *Goth* on your ass if you don’t stop this.”

“So you and Jacob...”

Angie turned off her iPhone. “Yeah, we parted ways.”

“Wow, just over white?”

“Nah, he was mad I said *ass*.”

We cackled for a while.

Angie flicked through her screen and showed me her phone, giggling.

“Check this out. It’s FreshGirl’s latest post on *Chew On This*. She gets into the worst scrapes.”

Angie is my colleague and closest friend. She’s a sports therapist at our clinic, *Radiant Health*, and loves to date sports stars.

“FreshGirl is a character all right. But don’t change the subject. Back to you. Sorry to hear about Jacob.”

Angie shrugged.

“Maybe you just haven’t met the right guy yet,” said Sunny.

Angie gave him a look over her sunglasses. “And that would be who? Someone like you, who’s going to have the little lady stationed at home to plan the meals and decorate the baby’s room?”

“I like cooking myself.”

This was true. Sunny had taken plenty of culinary classes in wine country.

“Yeah, Sunny, I can just see you at that - a vision of domestic bliss,” said Angie.

“At least I *know* what I want,” he said suddenly. “Why don’t you take a break from these guys?”

Angie paused, her water bottle halfway to her lips and we turned to stare at him.

But Sunny wasn’t smiling. “Why don’t you take some time out for yourself and find out what you *really* want? What you feel *good* doing. And maybe date a *real* person one of these days? Not these guys who have to read the papers to find out what their own name is!”

A little girl running after a puppy careened into the bench, breaking the moment. I didn’t dare look at either Sunny or Angie. The bench was getting cold now and I wanted to go home.

Angie gave me a what-the-heck-is-wrong-with-*him* look.

“I don’t know!” I hissy-whispered back. “He’s gone all Rambo on me too.”

“I *am* sitting right here, you know,” said Sunny. “Quit gossiping.”

“Lord save us from old-fart bachelors!” I whispered meanly to Angie and then I crossed myself rather hypocritically.

“I heard that,” said Sunny.

“See y’all later. I’ve got a date,” said Angie, plugging in her earphones.

I turned to Sunny after she left. “What was all *that* about?”

His smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Never mind, forget what I said. I just care about you guys, that’s all. Everything’s cool.”

“You’re not yourself at all these days. What’s bothering you?”

“I want to talk to you about Uncle,” he said, after a moment.

“Don’t change the subject.” I stared at him. “What about Daddy?”

“Jita, maybe it’s time to let the past go...”

“If you’re talking about the P.I. stuff, don’t worry. It’s all in the past.”

“I mean Timmy.”

I sucked in my breath. “I’ve told you already – I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Jita, he’d never knowingly - ”

“*No.*”

We sat quietly, the air now thick with tension. Brilliant oranges and reds from the sunset flickered brazenly over passers-by. The sun, an enormous glowing orb, lovingly touched the ocean with sentimental licks of fire as it sank into the gleaming Pacific, as though in farewell.

I sighed and turned to my cousin. “Do you want to play pool tomorrow?”

Sunny looked down at his hands. “It’s going to get busy next week. That’s why I wanted to spend some time with you now.”

“How about we go out for a drink instead?”

Sunny thought for a minute. “What’s the date tomorrow? Yeah. It should be fine.”



The next night at the Hot Tequila, I glanced at my phone. I’d already searched both floors and there was no sign of him. He was almost an hour late. What was taking him so long? I shifted on my stool self-consciously.

As if on cue, a guy with a shirt emblazoned with I TANGO NUDE slouched up to me, holding a Corona. “You alone?”

“Pardon?”

He assessed me up and down slowly as though he was picking out a prime steak.

“Wanna drink?”

“Oh. No thanks. I’m waiting for someone.”

“Your husband?”

“Er no. Someone else.” My eyes darted towards the door.

He winked and drifted off.

I checked for messages with a bartender at the counter in case he hadn’t been able to reach me. Nothing. Back at my table, I re-dialed Sunny’s phone but there was no answer. No responses to my texts either. Where *was* he?

“Hel-*lo* again.” Tango man smiled widely, revealing a gold tooth and yellow incisors. Probably looking for his next tango partner.

“You so sexy. Very nice.” He said *nice* in a slow, throaty growl that made me want to run.

“Excuse me.” I dialed Sunny again but it went straight to voice mail again.

“O-*kaay*.” Tango Man sang. “You get too picky, you’ll end up an old maid.” God, he sounded like my mother.

I exhaled sharply. That was it. I’d given Sunny more than enough time. I picked up my bag and stalked towards the exit.

At home, a tiny glimmer of worry nagged me when I saw my answering machine, the o sitting still and red. This wasn’t like Sunny.

I drove to work the next morning in the pouring rain. There wasn’t much traffic but the rain was slowing the drivers to a crawl. A phrase jumped out of the radio playing in the background - “*A car has been found floating off the shores of Channel Drive. Police identify what’s left as an orange BMW...*” My tires spun and moments later I was at Channel Drive.

Just past the cemetery and off Fairway Road, a small knot of police clustered in an area cordoned off with yellow tape. Cars were slowing down to look so I swerved into the far lane and pulled off onto the shoulder. The car door slammed behind me as I ran towards the cops, straight through the muck and tape. A young policeman quickly cut me off.

“Where is he?” I pushed past him.

Another officer, older and heavy-set, moved towards us, blocking me. “You can’t come in here. It’s a secured area.”

I folded my arms. “I want to know where my cousin is! You found his car, didn’t you?”

They glanced at each other.

The older cop leaned towards me. He smelled like bananas. “Ma’am, it’s better if you go up to the station and ask for Detective Dering.”

“*Where’s Sunny?*” I screamed. “You’ve got his car. Where is he?”

“Sorry, ma’am.”

They turned to escort me back. I took a deep breath – and ran around them towards a second group of police next to the water and grassy sand dunes. Behind me I heard shouts and running feet pounding through the mud and sand.

I stopped in my tracks, rain pouring down my face, and stared past them into the water. A red tow truck with rusty doors was dragging out Sunny’s car. It was crumpled like an accordion, the front part of the car completely smashed in. The sight burned into my brain in an instant; a horrifying photo negative that would forever haunt my memories.

Hands caught me as I slumped to the ground. Voices floated around me as I lay immobile, blank. The officers dropped me home, one of them driving my car but the memories were a blur. Only one thing was clear; no one had mentioned the body.

The next day, I walked into the white, adobe building that housed the Santa Barbara Police Department.

“I must see Detective Dering.”

A muscular officer with 3-D veins and a crew cut sitting behind a standard government-issue counter barely glanced up. “He’s not here.”

I didn’t move. “Can I leave a note? Please?”

The officer sighed loudly and slapped a yellow sticky pad and a pencil with a chewed-off eraser onto the counter. Moisture gleamed on the end of the eraser and I averted my eyes.

I waited in vain for Officer Dering to call me. The following week, I went back to the station. The day was glorious, contrasting against my foul mood. A group of schoolgirls practiced their singing across from the station but even the sweetness of their voices jarred.

The officer leaned back in his chair and laced his hands behind his head, glancing at his biceps. "He's out of town."

The wake for Sunny had been bizarre, a funeral without a body. Reena, my cousin and Sunny's sister had greeted everyone wordlessly. After the police had been to see her, she had closed up and refused to talk about Sunny. There was no closure.

I wanted answers and if Reena was too grief stricken to talk about it, I'd talk with the police myself. I left voice mails, calling at odd times and hoping to catch the detective unawares, in case he was avoiding me. But avoid me he did.

Mama helplessly watched me descend into a depression. My father, who was divorced from my mother some years ago, checked up on me every day. Poor Daddy. He tried to stay anonymous but you couldn't miss his voice bellowing over Mama's cell phone.

Of course, *I* didn't think I was depressed. Living off Puffcorn and playing Super Mario eight hours straight seemed like therapy. Once a week for variety, I'd put on *The Sound of Music* and blubber through *Edelweiss*. Apart from that, I didn't care about anything.

Three weeks later, as I surfed the internet disinterestedly, a yellow neon pop-up blinked up at me.

Become a Private Investigator!

Become a P.I. in six easy semesters of distance learning. Look for missing people, investigate extramarital affairs, do undercover investigations and much, much more! Only \$900 in 3 easy payments! This AMAZING discount is only available until tomorrow. Act fast!!!

I pursed my lips. Then I clicked the link.

A week later, the P.I. package arrived at my office. I stared at the books:

Business/Corporate, Domestic/Family and Online/Document Research with chapters like Infidelity Checks, Hidden Videos and Semen Analysis. By the following weekend, I'd worked my way through the first of the six binders and finished the semester assignments in advance.

It's funny how a reason to live so nicely replaces a reason to die.



A week after I got my books, I sucked in my stomach, pulled on a black Spandex outfit and laced up my Doc Martens. I stuffed a balaclava into my pocket along with thin black gloves and left for Montecito.

Montecito, pristine and relatively unscathed by the earthquake of 1925 that destroyed most of the downtown buildings in Santa Barbara, was one of Santa Barbara's

jewels. Beautiful cottage-like adobe galleries and shops sat dotted in between hidden elegant rolling estates and winding hillocks.

Sunny's office was tucked around the corner from the lower village and housed in a two-story block that resembled a square marshmallow. A plaque the size of a small envelope near the front door, engraved with only the building name Casa Beltado, heightened the sense of discretion.

The hallway opened into an inner foyer, which spanned the full two-story height. It was an older building that had undergone extensive renovations and some designer work since I'd last visited. Staircases with oak banisters flanked and curved around an enormous Art Deco chandelier, spilling crystals of light in every direction.

Cavernous pots of crimson begonias flared with color in the corners of the hall and at the base of each staircase. I checked my watch - it was just before 7 pm. There would still be people working late in the legal office, poor sods, but at least reception would be manned by skeleton staff.

I ran up the stairs two at a time and stood, face averted and pretending to root around in my pockets, around the corner from the frosted glass doors of Sunny's firm. Now what? Did I just open the door and walk in? What if someone recognized me? Maybe I was getting in my own way. Maybe I should practice a little first, then come back.

As I turned back to the stairs, a young woman talking into an earpiece and holding a Quiznos bag climbed up the last step and headed for the legal office. I watched her turn the knob. As the door swung behind her, I reached forward and grabbed the edge, peering in at the reception desk. A redheaded woman spoke into her headphone and as

soon as she had turned away, I zipped by and towards Sunny's office. I felt something fall. Shoot. Better keep walking.

Sunny's door was sealed off with police caution tape, shocking in its stark and simple brutality. I reached to get my gloves out of my pocket – only they weren't there, neither was my balaclava. So that's what had dropped.

I used part of my Spandex shirt to turn the knob and looked into his office. It was completely stripped. There was nothing in there, not even furniture. Sunny's office, once a warm cream tone, now looked shabby and bare. I closed the door, my heart beating wildly.

Why did they remove the furniture? Was that normal? After a moment I turned left, away from reception, and headed to the corner office, which belonged to David Hutton, one of Sunny's partners. I heard a noise down the hall and quickly closed the door behind me.

Sunny's colleagues were likely the last ones to see him alive. There was a good possibility David might know something. Shortly after Sunny disappeared, David had left on sabbatical for his condo in Maui. I thought this was suspicious but apparently the cops didn't, as they'd done dick-all about it.

David favored dark woods and glossy leather upholstery. His desk was cleared off, with only a blank sticky pad free of writing indents next to the phone. I slid open the drawer to the right. It was jammed with supplies and a bottle of headache pills. I jiggled the left-hand drawer. Locked.

I smiled and pulled out a hairpin. Slipping it into the lock, I wiggled it around until it gave with a squeak. I rifled through it hurriedly. It was crammed full of file folders and I pulled out the closest one. It was labeled *Mark Beens*.

There was only one sheet of paper nestled in the file with scribbles such as “Has only billed 75 hours a week from February to end of June. Note: I don’t believe he’s ready to be considered for Partnership. Sunjay Patel does not concur, will re-evaluate quality of work next May.” Sheezus. It looked like a bucket of fun to work here.

A large closed-door bookcase flanked the desk, the bottom covered with scuff marks, likely from David nudging it shut with his foot. I opened it and rifled through the shelves, stacked with innumerable books on law and tomes such as *Seven Habits of the Highly Effective* and *Laws of Success*, books I clearly hadn’t read. A higher shelf was loaded with water polo trophies.

My eyes drifted back to the *Laws of Success*. It looked familiar. A flash-memory of Sunny on the wharf. I pulled it out instantly and my skin prickled. The ice cream stain was still on the cover. I flipped through and turned it upside down, giving it a good shake. Not a thing fell out.

As I made to close it, a mark in the inside cover caught my eye. Something had been doodled in the corner, then scratched out. I held it up to the light and turned it a few different angles. It looked like an 88. I placed the book back on the shelf. For all I knew, it could have cost \$0.88 at a used bookstore. I turned back to the desk and flicked through the rest of the files.

“What’re you doing?” said a voice from behind me.

I whipped around. A tall, well-built and ruggedly handsome man with shiny, dark brown hair stood inside the doorway regarding me with amusement. He was dressed completely in black and an almost tangible aura of suppressed power emanated from him. His eyes held mine and just for a second, I felt funny.

“I’ve been called to fix the latch,” I said. “The drawers were stuck.”

He laughed out loud.

“That’s a good one. Remind me to call you when *my* drawers need attention.”

“Excuse me?”

“Are these yours?” He held out my gloves and balaclava. Faces peered around him from the hallway.

I stared at his hands. “I’ve never seen those before in my life.”

He glanced down at my outfit as I tried to aim my spandex backside out of sight.

“Okay, Catwoman, let’s see some ID.”

“And who are you?” I said, hands on hips.

He flashed a badge. “I’m a police officer. The question is, who are *you*?”

I sighed and handed over my wallet. He flicked through my IDs with no comment, then looked up at me with intensely blue eyes laced with tawny-gold close to his pupils.

“So, you’re the one who’s been calling. You’re Sunjay’s cousin.”

My eyes widened.

“I’m Detective Dering.”

My eyes narrowed. “Did you get my messages?”

He didn’t respond.

“Did you get my *voice* mails? My *letters*?”

“Yes.”

“And you didn’t reply. *Why*?”

There was a slight pause. “The case is classified.”

“So you’re unavailable after a *real* crime,” I said. “How come you’re here now?”

His expression was guarded. “I live in the area.”

“Why is Sunny’s case classified?”

“I can’t tell you anything more, Ms. Patel. What I *can* say is that you’re trespassing. It’s time for you to go home.”



I hope you enjoyed this sample chapter!

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Have fun!

Xoxo

Priya