

The Last Four Digits by Julie Leo (excerpt):

...When Michael came back, we took off for the Lock 'N' Load twenty-four hour self-storage facility just off the 10. I wore sensible shoes and brought a pulp private eye novel with me; I needed a good read in case we ended up on a long stakeout. This whole covert op thing was a big risk for both of us, and we knew it. Michael never would have done it if he'd known who he could and could not trust in the LAPD.

"When you don't know who to trust, you have to trust no one," he said. "At least you're not in the department."

"Well, it's obviously worth the risk for me, since I'm a suspect."

"The only suspect."

"Right. Thanks for reminding me. But I'm still surprised you're letting me come."

"I haven't got anybody else."

"Thanks a lot!" I said.

"Besides, it was your idea. I know how I'd feel about that. I'd damn well want to be there when it went down."

He was right; I did damn well want to be there. Michael punched in the code and the gate slid open. We drove past the unit first and continued on through all the rows of storage units and tarp-covered cars near ours. Nothing looked unusual. We found a good spot at the end of our unit's row, parked, closed the windows, and locked the doors. We threw a tarp with some strategic rips over Michael's car and positioned it so we could see out. His windows were also heavily tinted. It would be difficult, though not impossible, for someone to spot us. It could be a long night, or not. With luck, the mole would go to work quickly, but if not, our scheme might take a whole lot longer to play out.

We had brought cartons of Chinese food, but I was so wound up I couldn't eat. Michael could eat, no problem. Hours passed. Around midnight, we took turns trying to sleep, but I couldn't. Michael could sleep, no problem. Around four in the morning, he woke up after about three hours of sleep.

"Tell you what, spygirl," he said. "I didn't think when we finally spent the night together it would be like this."

Just then, an SUV turned into the row and crept along with its lights off. It was a black Cadillac Escalade with tinted windows.

"Looks like your boyfriend's car."

Eye roll. But it did look like Santiago's SUV. I wondered briefly if he had lied about finding the Dostoyevsky novel on his desk. It could've been in his glove box because he was the one delivering them to warn people off. But bottom line, I didn't feel that Santiago was Dostoyevsky. Mexican mafia, maybe, but Russian mafia, nyet.

"Half of southern California drives that car," I said.

The Escalade stopped midway down the row. The driver's window buzzed down and a flashlight beamed out at one of the storage units. The Escalade inched forward and the beam flashed on the next one, and the next. It stopped in front of our unit. The flashlight went off, then the rear window slid down.

"This is it," Michael whispered.

It suddenly hit me that what we were doing was insane. We had no backup. Worse, nobody knew we were there, not even Molly. If these people were Russian mafia, they would have AK-47s. They would gun us down without the least hesitation.

"Michael, we—"

"Sshhh. Later," he said. It was too late to back out.

The driver's door of the Escalade opened. Trench Coat emerged and walked up to the door of the storage unit. Another man got out on the passenger side and joined him. Trench Coat carried what looked like a gun, but it was a battery-op power saw. There was a brief, loud whine and yellow sparks flew and then the padlock fell off. Trench Coat put the saw in the back of the Escalade while his comrade pushed up the overhead door. The two men walked inside.

We sat straining to see them come back out. They were inside the storage unit for what seemed like twenty minutes, but was probably about thirty seconds. It couldn't have been long; the storage unit was empty. When they returned, Trench Coat shook his head at whoever sat in the back of the SUV. Then each man pulled a Dragunov from his coat and held it ready. They walked down the row of doors with their guns drawn. Trench Coat headed straight for our car. The other man set off in the opposite direction.

Michael drew his gun and we slid down as far as we could under the dash...