

1

MY NAME IS J.D. CAVENDISH. Technically, it's Juliet Delores Cavendish. I don't see myself as a Juliet, Jules, Julie, or any other cutesy nicknames. And I hate the name Delores. Sorry, Great Gramma, but Delores was cool when you were little, not so much anymore. In fourth grade, I decided initials were totally awesome, but my friends felt two syllables were too complicated. Everyone started calling me Jade. Except my ex—ever since I nearly shot him, he's called me Jaded. But we'll come back to that later.

Through a combination of circumstances not under my control, on this particular Monday, I'd become the owner of the Beachtown Detective Agency. Technically, my dad still owned the business. If things went well, I'd be able to pay off the purchase agreement over time. If not, Dad would be coming out of retirement.

But I had high hopes. The agency had put food on our table since I was little, given me my first work experience, and helped send me to UCLA for my degree in Criminal Justice. I hadn't thought about keeping the business after Dad retired, but as the saying goes, plans change.

Outside the front window, strolling tourists and a few locals meandered in search of tchotchkes, cool art, and decadent

chocolate. That's Carlsbad for you—an eclectic mix of galleries, gift shops, and restaurants. It had been the same for as long as I could remember. The faces might have changed over the years, but the energy was always dialed up on the laid-back scale. Here, I could surf, run, bike...whatever I wanted. Just not today.

So here I was at ten a.m. on my third cup of mint tea. I was waiting for a client. Any client. Well, almost any client. Dad had given me only one cardinal rule—no divorce cases. Other than that, I was free to run the place as I saw fit. What I hadn't realized when Dad said he'd notified the clients of his retirement was the effect his letter would have on the business. To be polite, let's just say that unless someone walked through the front door soon, the memorial service would be on Saturday.

At eleven-fifteen, just as I was contemplating how I might scare up even a missing pet case, a familiar looking blonde walked in. I'd seen her before, but couldn't place her. Her tailored black top, pants, and beige safari jacket were all high end. We seemed to have the same fashion sense, just not the same budget. I got my tank top for \$9.99 on sale at Target. This fashionista's clothes hugged every curve. Mine curved in places they shouldn't—probably from one too many trips through the dryer.

Having only practiced this routine about a dozen times in the past three hours and fifteen minutes, my introduction and invitation to sit came off smooth as butter in July. "How can I help you today?"

Blondie twirled a curly lock and gazed at me. "I want to divorce my husband."

I sighed. One rule. One. Could the universe be anymore twisted?

"I'm sorry, but I don't really handle cases involving marital disputes."

THE CASE OF THE AMOROUS ASSAILANT

She raised one perfectly plucked and penciled eyebrow and looked me in the eye. “What’s your hourly rate, Ms. Cavendish?”

Hourly rate? Without a client, I didn’t have one. But what the heck? It would be good practice to actually say the words. I leaned forward, planted my elbows on the desk, and smiled coolly. “One hundred an hour.”

Blondie pulled out her checkbook, scribbled out a check for two thousand bucks, and slid it across the desk. “Money is not a problem.”

Gawping is so unseemly, but it was the only first check I’d ever receive as an entrepreneur. One rule. That’s all Dad had given me. Screw it. This money was all mine—well, mostly mine. Mom and Dad still got their cut.

I picked up the check and read the name on the account—The Rose Investment Trust. I shot a glance at Blondie and blurted, “You’re Gina Rose. Excuse me—Darlington.”

Blondie grimaced, then let out a heavy sigh. “You were correct the first time. I kept my maiden name.”

Holy crap. How had I not recognized her before? She dominated the local tabloids. Ran a financial empire. Was a fashion icon. Supported a gazillion charities for kids, families, trees. You name it, she was there. And she’d zipped through her Ivy League education while I was juggling part-time jobs, filing scholarship applications, and using my parents’ contributions to help me through UCLA. We might be the same age, but we were from different worlds.

The heat began in my neck and spread into my cheeks, which now felt like they were glowing scarlet. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to go all fangirl on you. My mom always told me I blush because I have an overactive sympathetic nervous system. Oh, gawd, I’m rambling. Sorry.”

She smiled again and nodded. “Don’t worry, everybody does it. Look, call me Gina. I hate formalities. You don’t mind if I call you Jade, do you?”

I had no idea what the etiquette was for when a twenty-six-year-old heiress who had been born and bred to run her father’s real-estate empire plopped herself down in your guest chair. “No problem...Gina.” I did my best to hide the fact that I was totally gobsmacked. “We’re talking about Bert. Right? You two have been married for...what...a year or so?”

“Two-hundred-seventy days.”

Okay. Who was I to judge? My long-term relationship with Jason Taylor—the ex who, in my defense, deserved to be shot—cratered before I made it to the altar. “How long have you two been having problems?”

“We’re not.”

“Excuse me? Then why do you want a divorce?” Okay, I was gawking again.

“Because he’s been stealing money from me. I’ve suspected something for about eight months.”

And they’d been married for nine? I didn’t feel like such a loser now, but it didn’t erase the overwhelming urge I had to ram my fist into Jason’s jaw. I know, next to the involuntary blushing, my anger over his betrayal ranked right near the top of my must-fix personality defects. After all, I owned a Taser and a gun and my biggest fantasy was still inflicting bodily damage on him in a very personal manner. But I was now an entrepreneur. A grownup. Someone with responsibilities. I pushed down my anger and focused on my new client.

“If my math is correct, that means you first noticed the problem in August of last year?”

“Jade? Are you okay? Your face is all red and you’re carrying a lot of tension in your voice.”

THE CASE OF THE AMOROUS ASSAILANT

I forced a smile. There was no need to burden her with my personal baggage. She wasn't my emotional porter. She was Gina Rose. *The Gina Rose*. And this was supposed to be a business transaction. Right? So I lied. "It's nothing. I broke up with my ex recently, but I'm working through it."

Gina sat up straight, the fine lines of her face now hardened by anger. "Was he cheating on you?"

Cheating? What a nice way to say I caught him screwing another woman in our bed. "We'd been together for five years and I was expecting a ring. Apparently, I didn't know him as well as I thought."

"So you caught him *in flagrante delicto*?" Gina nodded knowingly.

In the back of my head, I could hear Dad telling me to stop baring my soul to a perfect stranger or a client. Dad was right. Soul-baring was not a way to impress clients. "Let's just say I had no idea he was so creative," I said casually.

We were both silent while I grappled with the gravity of this moment. Gina was what my dad always called his dream client—she had the money to pay the bill, a desire to get things done, and a problem she needed fixed. It was basically the same thing as the means, motive, and opportunity test the cops used, but in our case it meant we—correction, I—could pay the rent. Dad had spent years learning how to handle this type of client. I had, what, ten minutes?

"Do you want to talk about it?" Gina asked.

My jaw dropped. It? Which part? The Jason part? The still living at home part? The I-hadn't-prepared-myself-to-be-a-grownup part?

"I like you, Jade. We girls have to stick together. What happened?"

"You don't want..."

“Of course I do. I told you. I like you. I think we could be friends.”

Friends? With Gina Rose? Since when did the hoity-toity make nice with the hired help?

“Do you surf?” she asked. “You look like you do.”

“What kid who grew up here doesn’t? Right?”

“Me,” Gina said. “Daddy would never let me. He said it was too dangerous.” She glanced over her shoulder toward the front window. “I’ll bet your ex was one of those guys who loves his surfboard more than anything. Daddy always said they were heartbreakers.”

Was this let’s-be-friends thing some sort of nouveau business tactic? Make the hired help feel comfortable so they’ll work harder? Or maybe this was some other kind of game... either way, I was intrigued. Gina definitely had my curiosity up.

“It wasn’t one of them,” I said. “His name was Jason, and I thought we were happy. I’d been to Fredericks of Hollywood and spent a bundle.”

“You wanted to make him realize you were sexy,” Gina added. “I know. I did the same thing with Bert at first.” She leaned forward in her chair and peered at me. “How’d you catch him?”

Nope. Not going there. I needed to get this back on track. “Let’s talk about Bert. Okay? Why do you suspect he’s stealing money from you?”

Gina stiffened as though she’d been slapped. “Jade, I need to make sure we’re simpatico. That means I need to understand you as a person. I see this as a potentially long-term relationship. If you don’t want that...”

The way she let the last words hang in the air, her intent was obvious. My first client could easily become my last. There was only one thing I could do. Go with what Dad told me right before

THE CASE OF THE AMOROUS ASSAILANT

my first karate match when I was seven. I'd been petrified because my opponent was a year older. But Dad had given me sage advice when he said, "Sometimes, honey, you just gotta poke the bear."