

Dearly Beloved Departed

Except for her black pencil skirt and the leopard briefcase she shouldered, Pat was dressed entirely in green clothing that matched the center emerald in her new engagement ring. She'd exchanged friendly greetings with the receptionist at the law firm where Jason Forman worked and been directed to his office. As she walked down the hallway, she glanced at the third finger of her left hand and smiled a discreet only-for-her smile, wondering if she'd ever tire of looking at the ring.

"Hey Pat, is that you?" a deep, silky voice called out through an open office door as she passed it.

Pat did a quick backup step and peered into the office. Mark Bellows had risen from his seat and was walking toward her. "I know you like yellow, but with your strawberry blonde hair, green is your color. You look marvelous, glowing, I think."

Pat could feel her cheeks begin to flush and was immediately annoyed that a flirtatious Mark Bellows could still bring color to her cheeks. There had been a time when she would have welcomed a compliment from him, probably flipped her hair and smiled invitingly at him, but that time was long passed. She knew too much about him now and— while he could still elicit a few involuntary quick heartbeats—she didn't like the man.

"I've been meaning to give you a call to see if you were free for dinner."

Her answer was a cool, "I'm not."

"But you don't even know what evening I was about to suggest."

"All my time is taken for the rest of my life," she replied. That thought made her smile happily.

"I don't understand."

Pat held up her left hand. "Tim and I are engaged. We're planning to be married soon."

"Tim? The deputy sheriff?"

"Sergeant," she corrected, annoyed at herself for doing so.

He squinted. "Isn't this kind of sudden? I would have sworn that you had a bit of a soft spot for me not that long ago. And a peace officer? Pat, I always thought if you got married it would be to a man with whom you had more in common, that you'd aim higher, maybe shoot for an attorney, for example," he winked.

The color in Pat's cheeks returned, this time from anger. "I'm marrying the best man I've ever met. Excuse me, please. I have an appointment with Jason Forman."

"Seeing a divorce attorney already? Is he doing a pre-nup for you? You talk a good game," Mark chuckled, "but you don't sound that sure about the sergeant."

Pat didn't even bother with a reply as she brushed past him and marched down the hall. Her stiletto heels hit the hallway carpet sharply, but were silenced by it as she put the beguiling Mark Bellows out of her mind and opened the door labeled Jason Forman.

A slight, sixtyish-year-old man dressed in a sweater vest, khaki pants, and loafers greeted her. Unlike his tall, impeccably dressed law partner, Mark Bellows, Jason Forman wasn't imposing, and he certainly wasn't ready for a GQ photo shoot. He looked cozy, like you could tell him your story, tears and all, about a failed marriage, confident that he would offer soothing words and know just when to produce a tissue or a comforting, fatherly pat on the shoulder.

“Pat, it’s so good to see you. Come in. Come in.” He motioned her toward a plush armchair. “Please sit down,” he said as he took another seat. “Would you like coffee or tea?”

“Coffee would be welcome,” Pat smiled.

He pressed a button on a small device on the low table between them. “Shirley, could we get two coffees, please? Thank you.” He frowned, “Pat, I think you being let go as the County Law Librarian was a travesty—I voted no to replacing you with a less expensive...and less qualified...person—but I’m glad you’ve become available to conduct research on my daughter’s fiancé. Your efforts may save her from a disastrous marriage.”

“Thank you, Jason. I appreciate your confidence in me,” Pat said, “then and now. But, I’m a bit puzzled about why you need my services. Your law office has access to the computer programs I’ll use to begin my research. With the staff you have here, couldn’t you have some in-house research done on your prospective son-in-law?”

“I felt uncomfortable asking staff to delve into a personal matter so I’m delighted you can do it for me now that you are working as an independent investigator.”

Shirley arrived carrying a tray with two coffee mugs and an array of liquids and sweeteners to put in them. She smiled at Pat and more broadly at her boss as she placed the tray on the low table. Shirley liked him, Pat noted, and didn’t consider bringing him coffee a demeaning task.

“Thank you, Shirley,” he said, returning her smile.

“Did you look him up on your own?” Pat asked as she doctored her coffee.

“I assign the background checks necessary to help my clients to Shirley. She’s a master on the computer, and I am not, but I do have some computer skills. I did a quick Google search of him. Even with minimal effort, I found enough about his past to get worried, which is why I need your help.”

“What sort of things did you discover about his background?”

Jason leaned toward her like he and Pat were conspirators. “For starters, I discovered he’s a gang member.”

“Did you tell your daughter that?”

“I did. Julie said he had told her all about his past. He said he had been in a gang, but he promised he had severed all gang ties years ago when he joined the Marines.”

“But you don’t believe him?”

“No, I don’t. Oh, he may not be driving around in cars menacing other gang members any longer, but I think he’s still active, maybe higher up in the organization. And he was never a Marine. I was, so I know about shoes. Marines shine their shoes. Even ex Marines do. I’ve seen the state of his shoes; if he’s lying about his military background, he’s probably lying about other things, too. I can’t prove my theory, but I have a gut feeling.

“That’s where you come in; your job will be to find out what he’s been up to lately. I have a printout for you with his name—which he changed by the way—birthdate, what he says his current business is, the address where he lives—too expensive for what he says he does for a living—his phone number, name of the gang he belonged to and probably still does belong to, basics like that.”

“I’ll take a look,” Pat promised. “Jason, just one question before I go,” Pat asked him as he rose, walked to his desk, and picked up the piece of paper with his future son-in-law’s information on it.

“What is it?” he asked as he handed her the paper.

“Are you hoping I’ll find—as you said when you called me before—‘he’s as innocent as a newborn baby or find some serious dirt on him’?”

“My expectations are you’ll find the latter.”

“Is that what you’re hoping for or only what you expect?”

Pat thought the smile on Jason Forman’s mouth before he answered her had a cruelty about it.

“I want you to find out the truth about him,” he said.