SERENA JONES MYSTERIES • 2

ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER DALI

A SERENA JONES MYSTERY

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To Jed—
for inspiring your namesake character
and making me smile when I'm stuck

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I tore my gaze from the porch that wrapped around the drug dealer's house and cringed at the number on my phone's call display.

Mom said there'd be days like this.

Tanner, still decked out in his SWAT gear, peered over my shoulder as the phone vibrated insistently in my hand. "Good thing you're a field-hardened FBI agent, so you don't let little old ladies scare the pants off you."

I sent him a silencing glare. Ignoring his grin, I turned away from the rest of the team traipsing in and out of the building, and clicked Connect. "Hi, Nana," I said, injecting fake cheerfulness into my voice. "What's up?"

"I need you to come see me."

"You nee—are you okay?" My heart stuttered. If anything happened to Nana . . .

"Of course I'm okay. Stop stammering, girl."

Tanner, still hovering close enough to hear her strident tones, snickered.

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I placed a muffling hand over the phone.

"Excuse me, *sir*," I said sweetly. "Don't you have a forgery to Bubble-Wrap?"

"Forgery?" His stunned look was so comical I forgave myself for rushing to a verdict before my usual careful perusal. Not that I was in any serious doubt about this particular painting.

"Really?" he said, broad shoulders slumping. When I arrived on scene, he boasted they'd turned up art so hot it was still smoking.

"Yup. Fake." I, too, felt a pang of genuine regret that the "Renoir" hanging in the drug dealer's den wasn't the one on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list.

But I'd left Nana hanging.

Straightening my shoulders, I put the phone back to my ear. "Sorry, Nana. Um, I have to be at the youth drop-in center by seven to teach the art class, so . . ." I glanced at my watch and cast about for a workable solution, but there just wasn't enough time. "I'm afraid—"

"Never mind," she interrupted. "Obviously, you're at work." *Where you shouldn't be taking personal calls*, her tone implied. "Call me when you get home."

"Okay," I said to dead air.

Annoyed at myself for the guilty feeling I couldn't stop from churning my stomach, I turned to study the front of the house once more. Something was niggling at my brain.

"Um . . . Tanner," I said, hesitating.

"Yeah?"

"There's something . . ." I squinted against the dropping September sun, mentally reviewing the interior.

He grinned. "Stop stammering, girl. Spit it out."

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"Ha, ha." *Wait* . . . "Oh, that's got to be it!" I stuffed my phone in my pocket and headed back inside.

Tanner followed me. "What's *it*?"

I stopped at the door to the den and glanced at the window three feet from the side wall.

"Serena? What's going on?" Tanner pressed, trailing me to the next doorway, this one into a bedroom.

"The window is three feet from the wall, just like in the other room."

"So?"

"Where's the attic hatch?"

"Mason checked the attic."

"Humor me."

"Don't I always?" Tanner said. "I'm a funny guy."

"Uh-huh." He actually had the quickest wit of any guy I knew, even if he did run to cheesy puns sometimes.

Not that I'd admit that to him.

"Over here." He steered me toward a stepladder set up near the back door. "But there's nothing up there except insulation and mice."

"Mice, huh? Are you trying to scare me out of looking?" I started climbing, and Tanner moved in to hold the ladder steady.

I pushed open the hatch and stuck my head into the attic.

"See?" Tanner said.

"Yes, I do." I stepped down a couple of ladder rungs and flashed him a grin. "A false wall six to eight feet in from the back of the house."

Tanner squeezed past me and beamed his flashlight around the vacant space. "Unbelievable. Mason should've caught that."

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"The wall's covered in cobwebs and dust. It wouldn't have registered unless you were looking for it."

Tanner muttered something I couldn't make out, but having been on the receiving end of his displeasure during my FBI training—granted, always earned—I didn't envy poor Mason.

Tanner hoisted himself into the attic, then balance-beamed his way across a joist to the wall and examined every inch of it. "I don't see any way to access what's behind it." He shone the light over the attic's insulation-covered floor and then the shoe impressions he'd left in the dust on the joist. "It doesn't look like anyone else has been up here recently. There must be another ceiling access panel." He climbed back down, eyeing me with interest. "How'd you know to look for a secret room?"

I shrugged evasively.

Tanner followed me back to the room where the fake Renoir had been found and swept his flashlight beam over every inch of the ceiling. "There's no other way up there that I can see."

I maneuvered around the agent photographing evidence. The wall between this room and the next was decorated in wood panels and elaborate moldings that looked uncomfortably familiar. I ran my fingers along the moldings.

Tanner studied me. "What are you doing?"

"Looking for a secret panel."

"Uh-huh. And you seem to know exactly what you're doing here, Nancy Drew, because . . . ?"

I expelled a breath. "There was one at my grandfather's house, okay?"

"Your grandfather? The one who was murdered?"

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"Yes." I blew away a strand of long, blond hair that had escaped my ponytail. "Maybe you could be helpful instead of giving me the third degree?"

"Sorry." Tanner beamed his flashlight at the section of paneling I was running my hands over.

My breath caught as my fingertips made contact with the pressure sensor I'd been seeking. "Tanner, I've found—"

"Wait!"

Primed to open it, I tossed a frown over my shoulder. "Are you really going to pull the SWAT-clears-every-room-first rule on this one?"

"No, I thought I'd rock-paper-scissors you for the privilege." He motioned me to get out of his way.

My finger still on the sensor, I sidestepped two feet so he'd have a clear view as I pulled back the panel. "You ready? I'll slide it open and you can call the all-clear." I slid it three-quarters of an inch and froze. "Uh-oh."

Tanner cursed. "Please tell me you're messing with me."

I gulped. "You don't hear that ticking?"

He crouched down and shone his flashlight through the gap I'd opened. "Blast, Serena, don't move a muscle."

Yeah, got that.

"Blast!"

"Tanner, could you *stop* using that *word*?"

"Everybody out!" He shooed away the agents conducting the search. "We've got a bomb, people. Move it. Send Douglas in here. And call in the rest of the bomb squad. Now!" Tanner returned to my side. "You okay?"

Sweat slid down my temple and into my eye. My arm was trembling from the strain of trying to hold the panel still. "Do I look like I'm okay?" I said through gritted teeth.

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Tanner squatted at my side once more and squinted at the gap. "The panel's been spring-loaded." He angled his flashlight in another direction. "And we're looking at enough C-4 to level the house if you make a wrong move." An expletive slipped out. "Tell me more about the setup at your grandfather's house."

I squeezed my eyes closed, then opened them again and looked Tanner in the eye without moving my head. "There was a secret staircase behind a panel exactly like this one. He figured it was built to aid the Underground Railroad."

"You mean like the caves under the cobblestone streets at Laclede's Landing?"

"Kind of, but his led to the attic, not a tunnel." I closed off the memories before they could—

"Hey," Tanner said softly, giving me the little half smile that crinkled the laugh lines around his eyes. "It's okay. We're going to get you out of here."

"I know." He'd never let me down.

I concentrated on his six feet four inches of solid muscle reassuringly standing between me and the opening, and an idea made its way to my brain. "If you can find something the same width as my two fingers, I think there's enough back pressure on the panel to hold it in place."

Tanner shook his head. "If you're wrong, we'd have less than two seconds to clear that window."

I squinted at the small slider.

"It's eight feet away. And painted shut. Not an option, Jones."

"What about tacky putty? That'll stay put."

Tanner looked at the gap and nodded. "That could work." He shoved a couple of squares of chewing gum into his mouth.

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"No, it can't," Special Agent Spencer Douglas of the St. Louis Division's bomb squad said, entering the room. "The spring pressure could make the panel squish it like a raisin. Give me a chance to see what we've got before you try any heroics."

I gulped. Okay, this was worse than I thought. Much worse.

"How are you going to access the bomb if she can't move?" Tanner demanded.

"Check the next room for another access panel," I said. I cleared my throat, embarrassed by the quaver in my voice.

"Did your grandfather's place have a second one?" Tanner asked.

"Yes."

Tanner shot Douglas a look. "Be careful. It could be booby-trapped too."

Douglas motioned Tanner out of the way, then fished a tiny camera through the crack and slanted the viewer so we could see it with him. "There's a staircase."

"Our access to the secret attic room," Tanner said, sounding pleased. "Just like Serena called it."

"Hello? Bomb, people!" I reminded them.

Douglas turned the camera toward the stack of C-4. "Looks like we might have a way in from the other side that's not booby-trapped. You two"— he motioned to Mason and a bomb squad member—"check the next room for another panel."

As the sound of heavy furniture being moved vibrated across the floor, Douglas moved the camera around the bomb. "The detonator appears simple enough to disarm."

He glanced up at Tanner and me. "I don't get it. The drugs were left in plain view. The money was stuffed in the wall safe. So why plant a bomb?"

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"There's got to be something we're not seeing. What could be so important that they'd blow up everything to protect it?" Anticipation welled in my chest despite the scant quarter-inch of wood between me and an armload of plastic explosives.

Douglas pulled back the camera. "They're in. Time to get out, Tanner."

"Not. Leaving. My. Wingman," Tanner ground out. His eyes radiated sincerity, holding mine with fierce intensity.

My heart did a ridiculous flip. "Don't be an idiot," I said as Douglas shook his head and left the room to supervise the bomb's defusing. "There's no point both of us risking our lives."

Tanner's serious look morphed into mirth, making me miss whatever Douglas had barked on the other side of the wall.

"I can't believe you didn't catch that reference, Miss Movie Buff," Tanner said, grinning.

"Huh?"

"*Top Gun*." He leaned in close to me, taking distract-Serena-from-the-bomb to dangerously stupid levels, and smiled. "Tom Cruise, right?"

I blinked.

Oh for crying out loud. *Really?* "You think *now* is an appropriate time for this?" My voice squeaked a little, to my mortification.

Okay, so I had a habit of connecting people to their Hollywood look-alikes. And I'd never told Tanner who I thought his doppelganger was. But was this really the time?

Tanner's calm was unnatural. "I can't go to my grave not knowing what movie star you think I look like."

"I—" *Wait a minute.*

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Something was fishy here. I mentally reviewed what Douglas had said . . . and that I'd missed some of it. "Did he just give you the all clear?" I demanded.

Tanner's eyes widened into a picture of innocence, and my arm twitched as I quelled the urge to punch him.

"Hey, careful." His hand shot out to steady mine, and my heart tripped over another beat. "Your mother would kill me if I let you get blown to smithereens." He grinned. "And now that your Aunt Martha is buddy-buddy with that Malgucci mob guy," he went on, "your mom wouldn't even have to get her hands dirty. She could probably get Malgucci's *family* to do me in for free."

This time I did smack him.

Douglas pushed the panel open from the other side and held up the stack of C-4. "You're batting two for two, Tanner. Your Renoir was a forgery, and so's your bomb."

"I guess they hoped it would be enough to scare off any nosy parkers," Tanner said, and he must've felt me tremble because he wrapped an arm around me and gave me a brotherly jostle. "Hey, pull yourself together." He radioed in the rest of his SWAT team. "We have a secret room to explore."

The instant the musty smell from inside the wall reached my nostrils, memories assaulted me. Okay, I clearly hadn't been thinking straight when I'd been ready to traipse into the narrow, windowless, suffocatingly stuffy stairwell that led to the attic's hidden room.

Now that I'd come to my senses, I stepped back to let the SWAT team do their thing. I slipped outside to grab a breath of fresh air and escape the memories.

In the driveway, the drug dealer's 1960s Corvette had been ruthlessly disassembled by agents who'd slapped the search

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warrant in his hand within minutes of his return from a Kansas car show. They'd recovered thirty kilos of cocaine hidden inside the body.

A good haul, but they'd been hoping for a lot more—drugs and cash.

Itching to know if they'd found anything in the attic, I headed back inside.

Tanner whistled from the secret passage's opening. "Look what we found." He held up a painting of a ballerina. "A Degas and enough cash to put you in Agent Dunn's good books for a long time."

I chuckled. Special Agent Dunn was with the drug task force and in charge of today's search. "Good, never know when I might need a favor."

Tanner set the painting down beside the forged Renoir I'd propped against the wall. "What are you doing?"

I accessed the FBI's database of stolen art on my smartphone. "Combing through descriptions of missing Degases."

Tanner peered at the forged Renoir. "How could you tell this was fake? I didn't see you use a black light on it or anything."

"We used to use black light to look for the fluorescing given off by new signatures added to old paintings. It makes them look like they float off the page."

"Yeah, I knew it was something like that."

I bit back a smile. "But nowadays, a good forger would use non-fluorescing paint or a masking varnish to counter the effect."

"Okay, so how did you figure out it was fake?"

"The cracks. As canvas ages, the paint cracks."

Tanner frowned at the forgery. "It has cracks."

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"Sure, but a naturally aged piece has random cracks. See these?" I pointed to the predominantly vertical cracks on the forgery. "Forgers, trying to duplicate the cracks, bake the finished piece, then roll it in various directions. But the deepest cracks inevitably show up in the first direction the canvas is rolled."

Tanner peered more closely. "Huh."

A member of the evidence recovery team handed me Bubble-Wrap for the paintings, then slapped Tanner on the back with a chuckle. "He thought we'd scored a major coup."

"You find anything on the Degas?" Tanner asked, ignoring the friendly goading.

"Not yet." I quickly wrapped and labeled the paintings for transport. "I'll have to follow up on it tomorrow. I need to get to the drop-in center."

Tanner scooped up the leftover wrapping materials and followed me outside.

Yvonne, an agent working the search warrant and fellow movie buff, flagged me down. "I got that movie you wanted to borrow in my car." She hurried off.

"You should watch *Top Gun*," Tanner said.

"*Ha!* For the record, you look nothing like Tom Cruise. You have black hair and have got to be four inches taller than him."

"But good-looking, right?"

I rolled my eyes.

"What? You don't think Cruise is good-looking?"

I restrained a grin.

Yvonne returned with the movie before I'd finished loading the paintings.

Tanner took the DVD from her. "*How to Steal a Mil-*

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lion," he read aloud and chuckled. "The bureau not paying you enough?"

I plucked it from his hands. "I'll take that. Thank you, Yvonne!"

She waved, already heading back inside. "Anytime. Enjoy."

"A romantic comedy heist, huh?" Tanner went on. "At least it's not in black and white like the one you subjected me to when I was sick. I could probably endure it if we watched it over pizza."

"No need. I hadn't planned on subjecting you to it. Nate *wants* to watch it with me."

"Nate? Your *building superintendent* Nate?"

"That's right."

"He likes old movies?"

"Yes."

"That explains a lot," Tanner muttered under his breath.

"You have a problem with Nate?" If either of them should have a problem with the other, it should be Nate with Tanner, considering Tanner had mistaken him for a prowler and practically dangled him off the landing outside my door at gunpoint.

Tanner raised his hands and backed away. "No, no problem. You can watch movies with whoever you like."

My heart reenacted the crazy flip it had pulled when Tanner refused to leave my side during the bomb scare.

And men wish women came with a manual.

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