

THE SIEGE

by Hilary Davidson

The red thong in my bed wasn't mine. It was curled up like a newborn rodent at the foot of the mattress, a lump with a tawdry tale to tell waiting for me when I came home from the Canyon Ranch spa in Arizona. When I found it, my six-month-old daughter, Sammie, was wailing from her crib. A cry threatened to burst out of my chest. I'd been away from home for a week, battling baby weight that wouldn't budge, and my husband was already having an affair.

I picked up the thong, holding it at arm's length for examination. The label was Victoria's Secret, and the size was extra small. My husband always liked his girls

petite. I knew that before I met him, back when I'd targeted him and plotted to meet him. Tony Salazar had that reputation. Everyone knew it.

Without thinking, I reached for a pair of scissors in my dresser and snipped the cheap lace into tiny bits. That little creature who'd crawled into my bed when I was away wasn't coming back, not if she wanted to live.

"Genie!" I shouted.

My maid appeared in the doorway a minute later. "Yes, Mrs. Salazar?" She gasped and her hand went to her chest. "Did you cut yourself?"

I looked down. The crimson dots of fabric looked like blood splatter on my white carpet.

"No!" I dropped the scissors on the bed. "Who's been in the house while I was away?"

Genie paled a little. "I don't think . . ."

"Who's been in here?"

Genie gulped. "No one I know of, Mrs. Salazar."

"I know someone else has been here!"

Her eyes were wide and fearful. "Not while I've been here, Mrs. Salazar."

That was the maid's way around it, of course. She was in the house from early in the morning until late at night, and she had a room in the house

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because she sometimes stayed overnight, but she didn't actually live with us. She shared an apartment with her elderly mother miles away in downtown Los Angeles. I knew from Genie's reaction that something was wrong, but I wouldn't be able to get it out of her at that moment. She'd worked for my husband for years, and her loyalty was to Tony.

"Clean up this mess," I said.

"Yes, Mrs. Salazar."

I brushed past her and walked down the hall. There was no point questioning Genie about the thong. It wasn't likely that Tony brought a girl over during the day. Whatever assignation he'd had had been at night, after the maid was gone. But there was someone else in the house who'd know if there'd been a secret guest.

I knocked on the door of my stepson's room. Jared opened it a moment later, his round, owlish eyes peering at me without blinking. He was small for an eleven-year-old, with a puny, sickly build that came from his mother's side of the family. She was another sparrow-boned creature who effortlessly maintained a size-zero figure. I hated women like that.

"Hey, Jared." I gave him my brightest smile. It had won me a toothpaste commercial once, but it got no reaction from Jared.

"Hello, Cressida," he answered dutifully. "You're home."

He was an odd duck, an awkward, formal child who'd never been rude to me. Even so, he gave me the creeps. His head was always stuck in a book, and his cool, appraising gaze left me ill at ease. I was positive his scrawny mother was pouring poison into his ear about me. But I knew he didn't particularly care for her either, since he'd asked to move into his father's house instead. Tony had his son during the week and his ex took the boy on weekends.

I was nervous about quizzing Jared, and I was well aware that I needed to win him over. "I brought you back something you'll like," I said. "I found it in this super-cute shop. It's still in my luggage, but Genie's unpacking that."

He blinked at me. Behind his glasses, his eyes looked huge. "Oh?"

"Toy soldiers. A set about the Alamo. I got you the church facade and everything."

Jared's thin mouth tightened in disapproval. "Did you know Sam Houston only sent Colonel Bowie to the Alamo to remove the artillery and destroy it? It was Colonel Neill who convinced him to defend it. The Battle of the Alamo never should have happened." He shook his head, making his mop of straw-colored hair fly around. "It is easier to find men who will volunteer to die, than to find those who are willing to endure pain with patience." He fixed his eyes on me again. "That's Julius Caesar."

"You really need a haircut, Jared." I looked inside his room. "Can I come in?"

He frowned, considering the question. I was dealing with the world's tiniest, most serious, sentry.

"I need to ask you something in private."

He nodded, then pulled the door back. "Okay."

Jared's room was at the back of the house, with a view of our gazebo and koi pond, but I doubted that he ever looked at them. The focal point was a giant table in the center of the room, which was covered with toy soldiers. My stepson might have been the only eleven-year-old in the world with a photo of General Patton hanging on his wall. There were busts of ancient Romans and

Greeks on his desk, and more history books and maps than I could count. Jared was a nerd's nerd. All he cared about was ancient history.

"Wow, that looks cool," I lied, looking at the scene he'd set up on the big table. Armored toy soldiers were carefully planted over a molded landscape with a fort on a hill in the center and a pair of rivers painted on either side. "Are those Greek soldiers?"

"No, Roman. This is the siege of Alesia."

"I don't remember that from history class."

Jared raised his eyes to look at me. They were grey, like my husband's, with blue rimming the irises. "Did you ever read Julius Caesar's reports from Gaul? When you were in school, I mean."

"I was never a big reader," I admitted.

"Alesia was one of his greatest victories."

"Huh," I said. "It's so great you're into this stuff." I tried to figure how to approach the subject of his father's overnight guest. Obviously Jared's loyalty would be to his father, and I'd have to phrase my questions carefully to worm anything out of him.

"Caesar knew he could never win a full-frontal assault on Vercingetorix's fort," Jared said. "So he laid siege to it by building a wall so he could starve them out." He pointed at a ring of soldiers facing the fort, with a tall wall in front of them.

"They couldn't get past that wall, obviously," I said.

"No. Caesar built that wall. That's the circumvallation. It was to keep the troops in the fort stuck inside." He pointed at another ring of soldiers, farther back and facing out. "That's the contravallation. It was another wall to keep the Gallic cavalry out, so they couldn't rescue the people inside." He gazed at it with a wonder that spanned the centuries. "It was genius."

"Look, Jared, I need to ask you something." I sat on the edge of his bed. It was neatly made, with corners folded with military precision. I didn't particularly like having him in the house, but at least he wasn't a slob. "How was everything last week, while I was gone?"

He frowned slightly. "Okay."

"Did you have any friends over?"

"No."

"What about your dad?"

Jared cocked his head to one side, like a bird. "What about him?"

"Did your dad have any friends over?"

Jared's eyes went cartoonishly wide, but he quickly turned away and started fussing with the toy soldiers. "Of course not." The words tumbled out of his mouth. It was painfully obvious to me that he was lying.

"It's okay, Jared. I don't mind. I was just curious because your dad's friend might've left something here."

Jared hunched his skinny shoulders in the biggest shrug he could manage. "Nobody visited." He paused, as if going through a mental register. "Nobody."

I smiled at him, even though I felt forlorn. I remembered the days when Tony and I met up while he was supposed to be working. He was a casting director with a full schedule that could open up at a minute's notice, if the mood struck him. That usually led to a hotel visit, but I wound up in his marital bed more than once, when his wife was away.

"Don't worry about it. It's okay," I told Jared.

He stared at me with his protruding, round eyes. I stood. "I'll see you at dinner."

"See you, Cressida."

I closed the door behind me. The kid knew more than he was telling. In a way, it didn't matter. Whatever bitch had been in the house wouldn't be coming back now that I was home. But if Tony was reverting to his old tricks, I needed to put up my guard. Maybe Jared had been trying to tell me something with those Roman walls. But I doubted that Julius Caesar could've built a wall that would keep Tony from straying.

I spent two hours combing my walk-in closet, searching for something to wear. Six months after giving birth was more than enough time to get into pre-baby shape, if you believed the Kardashians and the tabloids, but my thirty-five-year-old body hadn't bounced back the way I'd hoped. It was my own fault for snacking on anything other than ice cubes, but it wasn't easy trying to balance everything I had to do. I tried on several dresses and had to admit I looked a little lumpy. No wonder my husband was trawling for pint-sized flesh. By the time he arrived home, I'd poured myself into a wraparound number that showed off my breasts, the only part of my body that motherhood had improved.

"Hello, gorgeous," Tony said, sweeping me into his arms. "Sorry I couldn't get away sooner today. I missed you like crazy."

I'm sure you did, you lying, cheating creep, I thought. But what I said was, "I missed you too, baby."

He let go of me quickly. "Where's the little cutie?" he asked. For whatever reason, Sammie didn't wail when Daddy was around. That was a special torment she reserved for Mommy.

Tony played with Sammie, cooing at her and telling her how perfect she was, until I got sick of listening to him and told Genie to give Sammie a bath and put her to bed. When I went into the dining room, Tony was deep in conversation with Jared. So much for my hopes of a romantic dinner.

"Life is a warfare and a stranger's sojourn, and after fame is oblivion," Jared recited.

"Marcus Aurelius." Tony nodded approvingly. "What else have they been teaching you?"

"We learned about Herostratus."

"Who's that?" I asked. I couldn't have cared less, but there was no other way to break into the conversation.

"He burned down the Temple of Artemis. It was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, and he destroyed it," Jared answered. "Herostratus was sentenced to death, but he didn't care. He wanted everyone to know his name."

"Well, that's a stupid way to get famous," I said.

"It's easier to become famous for destroying something than for creating something," Tony said to me, like I was his kid instead of his wife. He turned to his son. "Did they teach you what else happened the night the Temple of Artemis was burned to the ground?"

"Alexander the Great was born." Jared didn't smile, but his face glowed with triumph. "It became part of the legend around him."

They went on like that through dinner, and I started to realize what was going on. Tony was avoiding me. I'd been away for a week, and he didn't seem

to care. That brought me to the edge of panic. Whoever this chick was, she'd already gotten her claws into him. I'd assumed it was a one-time roll in the hay. But maybe there was more going on.

After dinner, I tried to talk to Tony. "I missed you so much when I was away," I said. "Did you miss me?"

"Of course I did, sweetheart."

He didn't sound very convincing. "Let's go upstairs," I suggested.

"Soon, baby. I've got some work to do first."

"Work? What kind of work do you have to do at . . ." I looked at my watch. "Ten-thirty at night?"

"Just a couple of e-mails. The director's in Europe right now and I've got to give her an update on a couple situations."

He vanished into his den. When he finally came upstairs, I was eating chocolate and watching a Lifetime movie.

"I thought you might be asleep by now," he said.

"I've been waiting for you." My voice was sullen.

"I figured you'd be exhausted after traveling."

The truth hit me: He really had been deliberately avoiding me. His guilt must've been getting to him. That wasn't the Tony I knew, the one who could have breakfast in bed with a girlfriend and then turn up at a family brunch with his wife and son.

"You're the best," he said, kissing the top of my head. But he didn't reach for me when he got into bed. Instead, he rolled over and went to sleep.

After that, things went back to normal for a few days, and I pushed my insecurities aside. No one knew better than I did that a casting director had women falling at his feet, day in and day out. I'd been one of those desperate actresses once, sending topless and naked "artistic" shots of myself around in the hope of landing a commercial or a bit part in a movie. I knew how the business worked, warts and all.

I knew I had to step up my post-pregnancy game, and I booked some sessions with a laser clinic that promised to drop you two dress sizes in a month. It sounded too good to be true, but I was desperate. I came home one day to find Genie standing in front of the house, staring at something she was holding. She didn't notice me until I slammed my car door.

"Hello, Mrs. Salazar." Her expression was guilty. "I'll put Mr. Salazar's mail in his study."

"Give it to me. I'll sort it."

Her expression showed me what she thought of that idea, but she handed the bundle of letters and catalogs over. What stood out was a fiery red envelope that matched the thong that had been hiding in my bed when I'd come home. *Antonio Salazar* was scrawled on the outside, with a tiny, incongruous heart dotting the *i*.

I didn't say anything to Genie. Instead, I stormed into the house and tore open the envelope. Printed on the front of the card were the words *You are my everything*, in elaborate gold calligraphy, with a pair of red-and-gold intertwined hearts underneath. Inside, a shaky hand had scrawled, *Love is composed of a single soul inhabiting two bodies*.

Each of the *i*'s was dotted with a little heart.

My legs wobbled and I sank down onto the piled white carpet. What a fool

I'd been. I'd believed Tony would be different with me than he'd been with his first wife. She'd let herself go completely after she'd had Jared, so it hadn't been hard to justify his waning interest in her. I knew I hadn't been his only girl on the side, not by a long shot. But then I'd gotten pregnant and made him leave his wife.

I stared at the remains of the red envelope. There was no return address, of course. There was a "forever" stamp, and the post office's mark canceling it was a black smudge.

There was a gentle cough, and I looked up to see Genie gazing at me with a concerned expression.

"Genie, have you ever seen an envelope like this before?"

"No, Mrs. Salazar."

She sounded sincere, but I didn't quite believe her.

"What is it?" I narrowed my eyes at her. "You know something, don't you?"

"No. I don't."

"Just spit it out."

"It's that . . . well, there are always ladies throwing themselves at Mr. Salazar, aren't there?" Her round face was earnest.

"Have you noticed anyone in particular?"

"No, Mrs. Salazar."

If Genie had been younger or more attractive, I would have suspected her. But she had a face that was more pleasant than pretty. She was very petite, but she was also six years older than me. It was hard to picture her throwing herself at Tony, and Tony not running away.

Calm down, I told myself. *It's a stupid card. It doesn't mean anything. It's not like anyone was in the house while I was out.* I felt a little better until I went upstairs to get an aspirin. In the bathroom of the master suite was a tube of lipstick that wasn't mine. It was inside the medicine cabinet, hanging out with the Advil and Claritin and Ambien and other pills we had. None of my makeup was in there. I picked the tube up. It was red. When I turned it over, I saw it was made by Rimmel. Who was this woman who was shopping at mall stores and coming on to my husband? I balanced the tube in my palm. Had it been in the medicine cabinet since I'd returned? I tried to remember if I'd opened the medicine cabinet, and I couldn't.

Either it had been sitting there for days, or Tony's new mistress had been inside the house while I was out.

That thought made me panic. I wouldn't go out again, I decided. Whoever this woman was, she was staking out her territory. It was a mind game she was playing with me. I was certain that Tony had no idea what she was doing. He'd probably be horrified to learn what she was up to.

What a man will do with you, he'll do to you, my grandmother liked to say. It was Texas folk wisdom, but it had a ring of undeniable truth to it. My husband was cheating on me. I was going to have to put an end to it somehow. I didn't want to, but I knew I had to confront this problem head-on.

That night, when Tony got home, I dragged him upstairs to our bedroom and closed the door. Then I picked up the lipstick and presented it to him.

"What's this?" he asked, smiling. "It's not my color."

"It's not my color either."

I stared at him until the mirth drained out of his face.

"I don't get it. Why are you showing me lipstick?"

"Why don't you tell me, Tony? Whose lipstick is it?"

His brow knit together. "Yours?"

"Wrong answer!"

He shrugged. "Come on, Cressida. You shop so much, you probably bought it last week and forgot about it."

My hand curled over the tube in a fist. "It's from a drugstore. Anyway, I'd never buy something this ugly."

"Maybe it was a gift with purchase?"

Something in me snapped at the mockery in his tone, and I threw the lipstick at him. It hit just under his left eye and he yelped.

"Who are you sleeping with?" I shouted.

"What is wrong with you?" he yelled back. "Are you a psycho? Knock it off."

My breath caught in my chest. *Georgina is such a psycho*, he always used to say when he was talking about his wife, before he left her. He never saw his own role in any of it, how he could drive a woman crazy with his obsessive womanizing. It would always be the woman's fault, and her responsibility. Tony saw himself as blameless. He was just playing around, after all. I hated him at that moment.

Sammie started crying, as if on cue. It was a welcome distraction, to go to her and try to comfort her, but my insides were roiling. For the rest of the evening, I managed to keep up a pretense that everything was fine, and Tony didn't say a word about our fight. But he hid out in his den for hours after dinner, so long that I lay down in bed and turned out the light. When I tried to sleep, acid crawled up my throat.

When he finally came to bed, I pretended to be unconscious. After a couple of minutes, he was snoring. The sound was too ridiculous to be faked. I got up and headed downstairs. The door of his den was locked, which only increased my suspicions. Where were his keys? I prowled through his jackets and came up empty. Returning to the bedroom, I crept around in the darkness, finally finding the keys in the pocket of his jeans.

I let myself into Tony's den, feeling like a defiant thief. What man locked up his home office from his wife? One so cautious that he'd built wall upon wall of defenses. It turned out that the lock on the door wasn't the only one. His computer was password protected, and nothing I typed in unlocked it. His file cabinets were locked too, and the keys weren't on the keychain. What kind of man hid puzzles inside puzzles? What was he so worried I'd find?

"What are you doing, Cressida?"

I turned and saw Jared. "Why aren't you in bed?" I demanded, angry that he'd snuck up on me.

"I heard someone downstairs and I thought . . ." His voice trailed off, and I realized he was holding a cell phone. He glanced down and pressed a single button. "I dialed nine-one-one just in case it was a burglar, but I didn't press Send."

"That was smart," I said, feeling bad for scaring the kid. "Good thinking."

He gave me a slightly reproachful glance. "What are you doing in Dad's office?"

"I was just being silly, looking for something I gave him."

"Oh." He didn't look entirely convinced. "I'm going back to bed."

"Hey, Jared, will you do me a favor? Don't mention I was in here, okay?"

He nodded solemnly. "It's okay. Mom went through this too."

"What do you mean?" I asked, suddenly alarmed.

"Mom says Dad can't be trusted," Jared whispered. "She hated that about him. She says he's always got somebody on the side."

That made me gulp. I'd been Tony's somebody-on-the-side for a while, but another woman had preceded me in that role, and another before her. Scratch the surface and you'd find a long line of women auditioning as Tony's love interest. The casting couch was a notorious cliché in the industry, but with good reason.

"Mom said it happened lots of times when they were married. Before I was born, even." Jared made one of his impassive shrugs. "She used to really hate him."

"Used to?"

"She's dating some guy now. Actually, she's engaged to him." The way he said *engaged* made it sound a step below murder. He rolled his owl eyes for emphasis. "Yuck."

"You don't like him?" I'd had no idea Georgina was involved with anyone else, let alone planning to get married. It was a relief, not least because I could mentally cross her off my list of suspects. Georgina would hardly be sleeping with the ex-husband she hated when she was planning a wedding, now would she?

"He's stupid," Jared said bluntly. "He thinks that Russell Crowe movie *Gladiator* was real history."

"Wow, he's even dumber than me," I joked. But Jared nodded.

"He is."

Part of me wanted to throw something at the little jerk's retreating back as he padded up the stairs. But another part of me was crestfallen. Even Jared knew his father was cheating on me.

The next day was quiet, until the phone rang in the early evening. "Hello, is Tony there?" drawled a sweet, high-pitched voice.

"No, he isn't." Hairs rose up on the back of my neck. "Who is this?" I demanded.

She didn't answer my question. "Well, when will Tony be back?"

I hated the way she said *Toe-neeee*. She sounded young and kittenish, honey dripping from her stretched-out vowels.

"Listen to me, you little witch. Stay away from my husband."

She giggled then, long and loud like a small child. "I don't think so," she said, before hanging up.

Her number was blocked, of course. I screamed and threw the phone against the wall. Only it didn't hit the wall, but a mirror, which shattered into a thousand pieces. Sammie started bawling.

I wasn't sure how much more I could take. Then I caught sight of Tony in the doorway. He was carrying a bouquet of roses, but he was frowning. "What happened in here?"

"Nothing," I said.

He took in the broken mirror, and his mouth opened slightly but snapped shut again, as if he were about to speak but thought better of it. Instead, he gave me a thin smile. "These are for you, baby."

All I could see when I gazed at the flowers was that the roses were pink, not red. Comfortable affection, not consuming passion. I didn't take them from

him. "Give them to Genie. She can put them in a vase."

"Okay." He backed away from me. "It sounds like Sammie needs some attention. I'll get her."

He dropped the flowers on a sofa and backed out of the room. After he'd gone upstairs and Sammie's cries had subsided, I picked up the bouquet.

"He loves me, he loves me not," I recited, pulling petals off a rose and letting them fall to the carpet. Impatient, I started pulling off the heads of the roses. "He loves me, he loves me not, he loves me . . . he loves me not." The last of them was decapitated on the *not*. I dropped the empty stems back on the sofa and looked at my feet. Covered in rose petals, I might've been at a luxurious spa, following a trail of petals into a treatment room.

When Tony finally came back downstairs, his face was grim. "We need to talk, Cressida."

"It's dinnertime and Jared will be there," I pointed out.

"He's at a friend's house, working on a project for school." He paused. "You didn't know that?"

I shook my head. "He didn't tell me."

"It's on the kitchen calendar, Cressida." He pointed to the whiteboard. "See? You're not paying attention. It's like you're sleepwalking through life right now."

"I just had a baby! You can't . . ."

"You ignore Sammie." There was heat under his voice now. "I didn't think it was a great idea for you to go away for a week without her, but I held my tongue. But now I see you're a terrible mother."

"How dare you!" I shouted back. "You're a horrible husband! You're a cheat and a liar."

"What is wrong with you?"

"I'm married to a creep who starts cheating on me the second I turn around!"

"We're not having this conversation," Tony said. "Not with you like this."

"You're a monster. You ruined my life."

He put his hands up. "I know I'm not perfect. I never pretended I was. But I love my kids. I think you need help, Cressida. Professional help."

"You mean a psychiatrist?"

"Well, if the shoe fits . . ." He cleared his throat. "Maybe a shrink would do you good. You've been erratic and irritable and . . . I don't know exactly, but you haven't been yourself."

"What does that even mean?"

"You're suspicious of everything, and you're angry all the time. Don't you remember when we used to have fun together?"

"Oh, I remember all right." What I remembered was this: When I'd met Tony, I was a model auditioning for a commercial his company was putting together. And after the standard audition, there was another, more private one, in a hotel room. "You're cheating on me."

"Cressida, I'm determined to be a good husband and a good father. I made a lot of mistakes with my first marriage, and I don't want to make them again. But you're making it impossible for me. You're kind of a lunatic."

"You're a fine one to talk," I shot back. "If I'm crazy, it's because you're making me crazy. You can't be trusted."

"You know what? I don't need to listen to this," Tony said. He turned on his heel and walked out of the house.



I lay awake for a long time that night, wondering what a psychiatrist would make of my brain. Then I wondered what one would make of my husband's. I slipped out of bed around five in the morning and went down to his den. I opened the file cabinet under the desk and my heart broke. It wasn't the manila folders stuffed with glossy photographs of stunning women, many of whom were topless, nude, or posed provocatively. It was the card that was pinned to his corkboard. I'd seen it before, but I'd never really noticed it. There was a photograph of a waterfall on the front. Handwritten on the inside were the words "It is not death that a man should fear, but he should fear never beginning to live."

The i's weren't dotted with hearts, but the shaky handwriting was the same.

How long has this been going on? I wondered. I'd figured it was something that had come up while I'd been away at the spa. But that card had been there for ages. Whoever Tony was playing around with, it wasn't a new girl.

I grabbed a bunch of folders and stormed back upstairs to our bedroom. "Who is she?" I shouted at him, slamming the door and turning on the light.

Tony was a deep sleeper, so he was confused. He turned over and put his hand over his eyes. "What?"

I threw the folders in the air, so that photographs of nubile young women rained down around him. "What's her name?"

"Who?"

"The woman you're sleeping with now."

"We are not having this conversation. Especially not at . . ." He peeked at the digital clock. "Five-thirty in the morning. Have you lost your mind?"

"Is it her?" I picked up a glossy eight-by-ten photo of a blonde with an over-inflated chest.

"Stop it, Cressida."

I tried to rip the picture in half, but it was a heavy stock with a glossy coating that wouldn't tear. I grabbed the scissors from my dresser and hacked the blonde's head off.

"What about her?" I demanded, holding up a shot of a redhead with cascading hair like an old painting.

"Stop it."

"This one?" I didn't even look at the image, I just hacked another head off. "How about her?" Chop, chop.

"Okay, that's it." Tony sprinted out of bed. "I'm not going to put up with this. We need a break from each other." He grabbed his gym bag, dumped its contents onto the bed, and opened his closet. He grabbed a couple of shirts, but I wasn't really watching him. All I saw was a red envelope that had spilled out of the bag. I picked it up. On the front of the card was a cartoon drawing of a man and a woman. Inside, there was a single line of handwritten text. "What makes men indifferent to their wives is that they can see them when they please."

My hands shook. "What is this?"

He barely glanced at it, and he went right back to packing. "That's just a joke."

"A joke?"

"Not that you'd understand it," he said. "Because it's Ovid . . ."

He was still trying to explain it to me when I jammed the scissors into his neck. But I'd heard enough.



Jared came to see me in jail. The visitors' room wasn't much, just colorful plastic tables and chairs and hawk-eyed guards who hovered close by to listen in.

"You wanted to see me?" Jared asked.

"How's your dad?"

He perked up at that. "The doctors say he'll pull through. He'll be in the hospital for a couple of weeks, though. He almost died."

"If he'd died, Jared, it would've been your fault."

For the first time, he blinked. "Why do you say that?"

"You set this up." I swallowed hard. "From the start, it was all you. You played with your father and me as if we were those stupid toy soldiers of yours. You planted the thong, and the lipstick. You wrote those cards. I don't know who you got to call the house, but that was set up by you too."

"Interesting theory," Jared said. "To be honest, I'm surprised you came up with it. What made you suspect me?"

"It was your dad. Right before I stabbed him, he said, *Because's it's Ovid*. At that moment, I didn't get it. Actually, I thought he might've said *Olive*. But no, the LAPD has the card in evidence, and it's Ovid. Which means it was you. No one but you goes around quoting old Greek guys."

"Ovid was a Roman, but I take your point." Jared nodded his head in a slow-motion bow at me. It felt like a sign of remote respect. "You're smarter than I thought, Cressida."

"But I still don't get it. Why would you do it?"

His eyes got rounder. "It's not clear?"

"I want to know why. Do you really hate me that much?"

Jared shook his head. "No. I don't hate you. It's my mom's fault."

"Georgina put you up to this?"

"No, of course not. My mom doesn't know. But she got engaged to that . . . ugh, that creep." For a second, Jared seemed like the eleven-year-old boy he was, instead of the ancient soul he normally channeled. "I hate him so much. He wants me to play baseball. He's nagging my mother about me all the time. I thought if . . . if you and my dad broke up, then my parents could get back together."

It was an eleven-year-old's logic, even if he'd taken inspiration from ancient warriors to accomplish his aim. "They're never getting back together, Jared."

His head drooped, and he took a deep breath. If I didn't know better, I thought he might be crying. "I know. Mom wouldn't even go to see Dad in the hospital. She told me . . ." He snuffled a bit. "She said she wished he'd died."

"I'm sorry, Jared." I meant it, too. "You can't manipulate people into wanting to be together."

"My dad won't press charges against you. I'll make sure of that." Jared took a handkerchief out of his pocket and blew his nose.

"Great. My life is a total disaster, but at least I won't spend it in jail."

"Who knows what will happen?" Jared stood up. "Do you know who Terence was?"

"No clue."

"He was a Roman playwright. He wrote, *Where there's life, there's hope*. Good luck, Cressida."

I sat there as a guard let him out, turning the words over in my head. I'd lost the battle, that was true, but it was still too early to call the war. ●