

FAMILY *Jewels*

A Dix Dodd Mystery

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Chapter 1

THINGS WERE LOOKING up.

Since solving the case of the Flashing Fashion Queen, business had been booming for this PI. Though I'm not one to rest on my laurels, no matter how enticing laurel-resting may seem, every once in a while I just had to put my feet up on my desk, link my hands behind my head and lean back in my chair to savor the feeling. And I only fell over the first time. Damn chair.

The publicity generated from that infamous case had drawn so much business our way, Dylan Foreman (PI apprentice extraordinaire and hot as hell to boot) and I were extremely busy. Crazy busy. Stagette-with-a-host-bar busy.

True, most of our work still involved digging up dirt on cheating spouses, but we'd been handed some other work in the last few months. We'd found missing relatives and missing poodles. Deadbeat dads and surprised beneficiaries. We'd been hired a few times to do background checks on potential employees for big corporations. Oh, and I got one call from a B-list celebrity client who had us chasing all over Southern Ontario looking for his 19-year-old son who'd gone AWOL with his dad's credit cards. Naturally, the client had wanted the kid found yesterday, but he wanted it done on the QT. Dear old Dad hadn't wanted to involve the police, nor his estranged wife, or her new hubby, or the kid's current girlfriend or last girlfriend, and holy hell, not the last girlfriend's older brother, and especially not the media. So we had to track the son of celebrity down the old fashioned way — knocking on doors, asking the right, carefully-put questions of the right people. And, of course, by tapping into my trusty intuition. (Okay, granted, when chasing a 19-year-old male, maybe hitting the strip clubs didn't exactly take a lot of intuition, but we still had to pick the *right* clubs.)

Also, Dylan and I had done a fair amount of business locating lost

loves for those who still pined away for them. Apparently, in some cases, absence *does* make the heart grow fonder. Or stupider. Lost loves are lost for a reason, in my humble opinion.

“You’re too cynical, Dix,” Dylan would tell me whenever one of those lost sweetheart cases came our way and I voiced this sentiment.

Maybe he was right. Maybe I do have a little bit of a chip on my shoulder when it comes to men. Or a big bit of a chip. Or a great big chunk of firewood. But, once burned . . .

Suffice it to say that while Dylan still had a streak of the hopeless romantic in him, I did not. Nada. And at the agency, I was still the bearer of bad news to the clients on the way in the door, and Dylan was still the sympathetic ear and shoulder to cry on on their way out. But that was one of the things that made us so perfect together.

I mean, so perfect *working* together.

And the best part of our growing business since the case of the Flashing Fashion Queen — we moved the Dix Dodd PI Agency! Nothing fancy, nothing too pricey — just a step up from the bottom-of-the-barrel rental we had before. Fewer broken bottles in the parking lot. And a few blocks closer to my mother’s condo where I lived while she was in Florida. (I still didn’t have a condo of my own; things weren’t booming quite that well yet.) We were still in Marport City, of course, with no plans to relocate to a bigger center. There was enough under-the-covers action for undercover work in this burg. We were just doing it from a better address now.

We’d bought ourselves some new equipment and furniture. Cozier seats in the waiting room, and my personal favorite, a high-tech honey of a coffee machine. That puppy not only ground the coffee beans and delivered the coffee into an insulated carafe that kept it fresh and hot for hours, but — oh, bliss! — it also delivered frothed milk in 10 seconds flat.

Dylan’s indulgence? A voice changer. We spent the better part of an afternoon working the kinks out of that machine — calling people up and saying “Luke, this is your father” in our best Darth Vader voices. But who knows? A voice changer might come in handy some day for more than just freaking out the guy at the comic shop (especially with the caller ID we spoofed!).

We also got newer phones and computer telephone-call recording software, which we run on our newly upgraded computers. And I had to place a whole new order for business cards. The ones that read

Dix Dodd, Private Investigator.

There's power in the truth. Let Dix Dodd empower you.

The business card had been Dylan's design. Dylan's words. I still get a little choked up when I think of it. His pursuit of the perfect motto for the agency had, by turns, driven me crazy and kept me sane during the Flashing Fashion Queen case when it looked like my future might involve stamping out license plates in a federal correctional facility for women. But enough of that.

We also bought a fancy copier/printer/fax machine that sounded like a tweety-bird when a fax came in, replacing a slow-as-death desktop printer, a perpetually moody copier, and an ancient fax machine that squealed like a cat in its death throes. I hated that old fax machine, and no matter where I was in the former office (hell, if I was in the bathroom down the hall) that squealing sound would make me cringe. I'm talking nails-on-a-chalkboard cringe. This new machine was top-of-the-line! It had all the bells and whistles — and a gigantic paper tray I wouldn't have to fill again for six months. Not to mention virtually unlimited fax capability. No more 50-page memory limit.

Not that I'd ever gotten a fax that long. But if such a monster did come in — hell, if ten of them came in — I was now ready for it.

So it was a bit of a thrill when the fax tweeted these days and started punching out the pages faster than the speed of ... well, the speed of my old fax machine.

Usually I got that little thrill. But not always.

And definitely not the day I got the fax from Sheriff's Deputy Noel Almond of the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office. I groaned. "What is it this time, Mother? Skinny-dipping in the seniors' pool again? Prank calls to the local radio station saying you're the original Bat Girl?" Probably not the latter; Mom had already done that twice. For Pete's sake, she was seventy-one! Couldn't she knit something? And would it kill her to sit in a rocking chair once in a freakin' while?

I leaned back in my chair, blowing out an exasperated sigh. But as I looked over the pages, I sucked that sigh right back in on a gasp.

My mother, Katt Dodd, was under suspicion in the matter of the theft of stolen jewels. Lots of them. Tens of thousands of dollars' worth. That was bad. But it wasn't the worst of it. That first paragraph was just the opening jab. The second paragraph of Deputy Noel Almond's letter delivered the punch: mother was a person of interest in a man's disappearance.

That was the second time I fell over in my chair.

Which is exactly where I was when Dylan walked into the office — flat on my back, shoes up in the air, eyes pointed toward the ceiling, head sunk to the ears in the plush carpeting.

“Trying a new yoga position, Dix?”

My gaze shifted from the ceiling to Dylan’s grinning face.

“No,” I said. “I’m trying to figure out just what we should pack for Florida.”

I accepted a hand up from Dylan, righted my chair, and handed him the faxed pages I still clutched. And watched his laughing eyes go serious.

Thus began the first time I’d ever pressed my PI skills into service for family. And not just any relative. My mother. My MOTHER!

Of course, I dubbed it the Case of the Family Jewels.



“What’s a seven-letter word for *fire-rising bird*?” Mrs. Presley asked from the back seat.

“Phoenix, Mrs. P.” Dylan answered, not missing a beat.

But I could have gotten that one. Not that it was a competition between Dylan and me. Much. Not that we were keeping score. Out loud.

“OE or EO for phoenix?” asked Mrs. Presley.

“OE,” I shouted. That should count for something.

Dylan gave me a grinning sideways glance.

I bit down on a grin of my own.

A few months ago when we worked the Weatherby case, we’d fallen into bed together, literally. Not that we’d had sex. Well, not *sex* sex. Still, there’d been a little tension between us for a while after that. We were getting back to normal now, though. Well, as normal as it got when your male apprentice-slash-assistant is smart, sexy, tall and handsome, incredibly good-smelling and funny. Oh, and young. Did I mention young? All of 29.

“And a six-letter word for *highest point*? Fourth letter’s an M.”

“*Climax*,” I shouted, half turning in the seat and oh-so-proud of myself.

“No,” she said. “No, starts with an S . . .”

“No fair. You didn’t say —”

“*Summit*!” Dylan didn’t turn in the seat. Which was good considering he was driving at the moment. He did, however, cast me a wicked grin.

“But I like your word, too.”

“Try this one.” The seat squeaked as Mrs. P shifted her position.

I heard the tapping of the pencil on the seat behind us. This time, I’d be ready. Dylan tightened his hands on the steering wheel beside me.

“Eight letters. *Close and often passionate relationship ...*”

“*Cybersex!*”

Dylan snorted a laugh. “Could it be *intimate*, Mrs. P?” he said.

She looked down at the paper. “Why, yes ... yes it could be *intimate*. Thanks, kids. I think I’m good for now.”

“Anytime, Mrs. P.”

For the record, I liked my answer better.

I sank back in my seat. The moment silence prevailed again, my mind drifted right back to that fateful fax from Deputy Almond that started this odyssey.

The fax had come in late yesterday afternoon, and we’d left early this morning, grabbing a drive-thru breakfast and supersizing our coffees. We’d swung by the office and picked up all the fancy new PI equipment we might need. Then we’d picked up Mrs. Jane Presley.

Of course, driving wasn’t my first choice. I’d wanted to jump on the first flight. But Dylan, in that damnable voice of reason of his, had persuaded me we’d be better off driving. Mother wasn’t in custody, so we didn’t have to be in a hair-on-fire hurry. Plus it would give me the chance to return my mother’s BMW, or Bimmer, as she called it. And as I, too, quickly learned to call it. She refused to let me drive the thing until I stopped calling it a *Beemer*, which apparently is reserved for BMW motorcycles.

Not that I was aching for a chance to lose the luxury ride, which had fallen into my possession the last time mother had been to Marport City. She’d hooked up with Frankie Morrell and decided to return to Florida with him, leaving me the use of the car.

At this point I should say I never liked Frankie. And I liked him even less now. Because Frankie was the one who’d gone missing — the one the police suspected Mother of ... um ... disappearing. (The letter hadn’t said murder, but I could read between the lines.)

Anyway, Dylan had pointed out that: a) we needed our equipment, which would be easier to transport by car; b) we’d need wheels in Florida anyway; and c) we needed the think time.

He’d been right, of course.

So how’d we gather up Mrs. P? All too easily.

I'd swung by the Underhill Motel to ask if Cal or Craig — Mrs. Presley's hulking sons who helped her run the motel — could stop by the condo while I was away, just to check on things. Not that there was a cat to feed or plants to water. Cats didn't like me and only the hardiest of plants could survive my inattention. Hardy being plastic. Preferably self-dusting. But there had been a couple break-ins lately in my neighborhood. Mrs. P was all too happy to offer up her sons to watch the place. Plus I knew that Cal was still seeing Elizabeth Bee, now that she'd broken up with Craig, and I thought maybe they could use some alone time.

"Gee, I've never been to Florida, Dix," Mrs. P had said. "And I haven't had a vacation in years." She pulled a pen from her shirt pocket and a small notepad from the pocket of her skirt, and began making a list.

Leave meat pies for the boys.

Tell Cal none of that spicy pepperoni till I get back.

Pack the sunscreen.

"Well, it's going to be pretty hectic, Mrs. P and —"

She kept writing.

Get new underwear.

Pack the summer pajamas — not the footies.

"I've always wanted to go, but never got the chance. But you know, I might get there someday. Someday someone might do me a favor. You know, like I do favors for other folks. Especially friends in trouble. Not that I'd ever expect anything in return, no matter how much jeopardy I'd put myself in for their sakes."

"Okay, okay," I said. "You had me at 'jeopardy'. Would you like to come to Florida, Mrs. P?"

"Why how nice of you to ask!"

"See you at seven a.m.," I'd said, backing out of the Underhill, pushing the door open with my ass as I did.

"Make it six, Dix. I'm a morning person, you know. I'll be ready."

"Six it is, Mrs. P."

"Oh, and Dix..."

I stopped with one butt cheek out the door. "Yeah?"

"I had you at 'Gee'."

When Dylan and I had pulled in the next morning at *quarter* to six, Mrs. Presley was standing outside the motel, her long-faced sons at her side, red suitcase at her feet, and tasseled sombrero in hand. She had four big pillows with her, and a blanket — not a bad idea really. Mrs. P liked her comforts. She wore sunglasses that covered half her face, the very

same Roberto Cavallis she'd loaned me once for a disguise. Bermuda shorts floated below her knees, and the wildest Hawaiian shirt I'd ever seen covered her top half. And in the front pocket of that shirt, tucked in a pocket protector — pencil-pen-pencil. She always wore that at the front desk of the hotel.

"Thinking of doing some work, Mrs. P?" I'd asked, nodding to the shirt pocket.

She pulled a rolled-up magazine from her armpit and waved it at me. "I love crossword puzzles, Dix. Don't you?"

Actually, I hated crossword puzzles.

Craig looked like he was going to cry as he opened the door for his mother. Cal wasn't far from snuffing back a few wet ones himself. I looked at him.

"Allergies," he said. "Damn lilacs."

"It's October, Craig." I said. "Lilacs are long gone."

"Goddamn *super* lilacs then ... they're the worst."

The boys were 28, but still very much their mother's sons. They were a close-knit family, and in its own way, I thought that was pretty cool.

"Now, you call as soon as you get there," Craig said.

"Yeah, collect," Cal added. "And it doesn't matter how late you get in. You know we'll be waiting up for you."

She kissed them both goodbye, and we loaded up the car.

"Now if either of you two need me to navigate," she offered. "Just say so. I never sleep in a car."

"You know I'm on business, eh, Mrs. Presley?" I'd said as we started on the highway. "Dylan and I are going to be pretty busy with my mother's ... er ... trouble."

"Ah, Dix, we all got troubles," she said. "But don't worry, you won't even know you've brought me along."

That had been a few hundred miles and a few dozen crossword clues back.

It turned quiet in the back seat, and when I looked back, sombrero over face, head on pillow and blanket pulled up to her chin, Mrs. Presley was sound asleep.

Good. I needed some time to talk this over with Dylan.

It was still Dylan's turn at the wheel, so I put the faxed pages before me to look things over one more time. Not that I needed to look them over again. Pretty hard *not* to commit the words 'a person of interest in the disappearance of one Francis Morell' to memory, and the whole

stealing jewels things didn't exactly escape my mind either.

But no way. No way in hell would my mother do any such thing. Okay, she wasn't a model citizen. But any trouble she'd gotten into had been 'fun trouble' and usually dealt with by a not-so-stiff warning from some cop trying to hide a smile. No one could be all that stern with Mrs. Katt Dodd, 71-year-old resident of the Wildoh Retirement Village, Complex B.

Dylan glanced over at me. "So what do you think?"

"Well, for starters, what I *know* is that my mother is innocent of all charges."

"And you know this because ...?"

"Because she's my mother!" I snapped.

"Good. That's out of the way." Dylan nodded to affirm. "Now, you know she's innocent because ...?"

With anyone else, I might have been offended. But with Dylan, not a chance. I knew his legally trained mind was doing just what it should be. Helping me build my case, helping me order my facts.

I sighed. "Well, let's look at this piece by piece, starting with the thefts. Mother's not what you'd call rich, but she's comfortable enough. The condo in Marport City, the Bimmer, the condo in Florida — she owns it all outright."

"Right, and all in use. Would she sell if she had to?"

I thought so. Didn't I? Mother owned the condo I lived in. She insisted on keeping it, wanted me to live there, and wouldn't take a cent of rent. Would she tell me if she needed me to move out so she could sell it? *Dammit, Mother.*

I dug my fingernails into my palm. "If she was having money trouble, she would come to me or Peaches Marie."

"You sure?"

Was I? My sister, Peaches Marie, was currently vacationing in Europe with her college professor girlfriend. She was certainly closer to Mom. They lived closer to each other and they were more alike. Peaches was just as carefree as Mother, just as irresponsible. I was the steady one. The serious one. Peaches was well-educated, with that coveted PhD in Philosophy, but I was the one doing better in business. I was the take-charge older sister. Surely if Mom was having financial problems, she'd tell me. We weren't close, but were we really so far away?

I must have drifted too long into my thoughts for when Dylan spoke again, he startled me from them.

“What did your mother do, Dix? For a living?”

I shrugged. “She was our mother. Things were different in my day.” Yes, as soon as I said the words I caught myself. *My day*. As if he needed a reminder of the age difference between us. As if *I* did. I pressed on, before he could dwell on that too much. “When my mother was in her mid-twenties, she married my father, Peter Dodd. He was a musician and toured North America. So she quit her own job and followed him. Until I came along, that is. And Peaches two years later. Then we all followed him on tours when we were very young. I can remember some of it — the lights, the instruments, the other musicians. Me and Peaches running around the tables and playing under them while the band set up in empty clubs, preparing to play gigs that we would never see. But that didn’t last. Dad took sick. All those smoky nightclubs finally got to him, and he had to quit touring. But music was all he knew.”

“Bummer. How’d your family survive?”

“Dad knew music, and . . . well, music knew him. Peter Dodd was famous in the club scene in Ontario and parts of Quebec. So if he didn’t have the lungs to sing the songs, he still had the mind to write them. Eventually, his work got some attention. I can remember the first time one of his songs played on the radio. Then the first time that one topped the R&B charts. And I remember the first thing Dad did was call the jewelers and order my mother a honking big diamond ring. God, she loved that diamond. Not the most practical expenditure, but Dad always said it was worth it. He was in a wheelchair then, but looked ten feet tall as he put that rock on Mother’s hand. Mom saw that too. She dubbed it our lucky diamond. She said that nothing bad would ever happen to us because of that rock. She said it was magic. Things got better then. More secure. More songs on the radio. Big-name stars calling the house. It was pretty wild. Before Dad died, he’d tucked a bit away I know. Probably thinking it would last our mother a lifetime.”

“But times changed,” Dylan said. “Age isn’t what it used to be. Lifetime isn’t what it once was.”

“No, but I’m sure Mother is doing fine. But even if she were having difficulties, Katt Dodd would not steal.” I bit my lip. Of course she wouldn’t steal. Not in a million years.

“Dix?”

“Yeah?”

“What did your mother do before she married your dad?”

I looked half hopefully at the approaching sign indicating food,

gas and lodging available at the next exit. A fresh coffee sure would be nice. Of course, if we stopped, Mrs. P would wake up and restart our crossword contest. It was a long drive to Florida. Abandoning the idea of coffee, I shifted in my seat. "Mom was an entertainer, too."

"A singer?"

"Ahhh, no. But she did spend a lot of time on stage."

"Oh, you mean she was a dancer. I guess that's where you got those great get-away sticks, huh? Dancer's legs."

Okay, that shut me up. Since when had Dylan Foreman been checking out my legs? And how? I wasn't exactly a high-heels-and-miniskirt kind of girl, although there had been a few times undercover ...

I cleared my throat. "No, not quite that kind of an entertainer, either. Mom was more of a ... well ... more of a show girl, if you know what I mean." When Dylan still looked in the dark, I continued. "She went on stage ... skimpy costumes ... feather boas ... applauding gentlemen ..."

I could practically see the wheels spinning in Dylan's mind. Just about there ...

"Holy shit!" His eyes saucered wide. "She was a peeler!"

"Dylan!" I clapped a shocked hand to my chest. "That's my *mother* you're talking about."

"Oh, shit. I'm sorry. But you said —" He relaxed when he saw my 'gotcha' smile. "Okay, you got me. So, what was she?"

"Magician's assistant," I supplied. "And from what I've heard, a damn good one. She worked mainly with this Lazlo Von Hootzeberger fellow. I gather more than a few other magicians tried to lure her away, but she stuck it out with Lazlo. She toured with him all over Europe and North America before she met and married my father."

"Did she ever teach you and your sister any magic tricks?"

I shifted back in my seat. That was a tricky question. And I wanted to answer slowly and get this right. And I really didn't want to try to explain it again. "You have to understand my mother. She doesn't do tricks. She does magic. That's what she always told us."

"Like the Harry Potter stuff?"

"Not quite. But somewhere along the line, she convinced herself that she really had the ability to do magic and not just sleight of hand. Don't get me wrong: she's perfectly sane. But she's ..."

"Fun?"

I had to smile. If I ever had the privilege of picking out business cards for Dylan Foreman, they'd read *Dylan Foreman — Diplomat*.

“That’s a nice way to put it,” I said dryly. “Mother always told us she despised tricks. But she loved the *real* magic in the world. We believed her as kids. And you know, I think she believed it too.” I shook my head.

In the back seat, Mrs. P snorted in her sleep. (Well, it was loud and ripping so we’ll go with ‘snort’. I rolled down the window.)

I looked at Dylan, and unfastened my seatbelt. “Now’s my chance.”

“Dix, what the —”

I turned, leaned over the back of the seat and gently took the magazine from Mrs. Presley’s sleep-loosened grip. I plunked myself back down in the seat beside Dylan. “Let’s copy all the answers from the back for the next few puzzles.” I began flipping through the pages. “That way, when she asks for a clue we can — wait a minute!”

“What?” Dylan flicked a glance at the book on my lap, then back to the road.

“These aren’t crosswords.” I snapped it closed. “It’s a circle-a-word book. Mrs. Presley was just trying to get us to talk dirty.”

From the back seat I thought I heard another sound. I turned around quickly to see a sweetly-sleeping, angelic Mrs. Presley.