



# NEVER MISS

MELISSA KOSLIN

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In honor of Uncle Robert Vaile Artman  
and Aunt Aurel Jeane May.

# ONE

**“SARAH JEANE ROGERS,”** she muttered. “Elizabeth Jeane Jones.” Which ID to use this time? “Eenie meenie minie moe . . .” She held up the license in her right hand. “Sarah Jeane Rogers it is.”

She took the license with the name Mary Jeane Smith out of her wallet and replaced it with a license with the name Sarah Jeane Rogers. She finished cleaning out her wallet and put Mary Jeane Smith away in the safe, closed the door, and checked that it was securely locked.

She walked out of the shadowed storage space, empty except for the small but heavy safe bolted to the concrete floor. The space was a little bigger than her last storage unit, but it’d been the smallest available and she didn’t want to go searching all over LA in this heat and traffic for a better deal. She’d enjoyed Montana much more, but she knew better than to stick around anywhere too long. And they wouldn’t likely spend much time looking for her in a place like this—crowded and hot, two of her least favorite things.

She pulled the overhead storage unit door closed with a clatter and locked it.

Inside the car, Mac had his paws up on the window and was watching her. She made a shooing motion, and he scooted back

over to the passenger seat, still watching her as she unlocked the car with her spare key and got in.

“What?” she said. “I left the car running. You were fine.”

He sat down on his seat and curled his fluffy tail around himself.

She tossed her drill on the back seat floor next to the case for her McMillan TAC-50 rifle, took a drink from the water bottle in the console, opened the apartment guide she’d picked up, and started scanning for studio apartments.

Mac got up on his hind legs and pawed the passenger window.

“You want to hear and smell what’s going on? All right, just a few inches.” She pressed the button to lower the passenger window. She kept waiting for that button to stop working too, like most of the buttons in this old Chevy Blazer. Mac stretched his long body to stuff his nose out the window. She smiled as he sashayed his tail contentedly.

People were gathering at the end of the block of blue roll-up doors. She’d seen a poster in the office about abandoned storage unit auctions today. She decided to stay a little longer until she figured out which apartments she would look at and allow Mac to enjoy watching the people.

She caught a glimpse in her rearview mirror just as Mac’s tail stopped and his fur went up. There was a man walking up from behind the car. The man walked around the passenger side of the car, surely headed toward the auction.

A low growl sounded from Mac’s throat.

The man stopped and looked at Mac, less in a shocked way but more like he was intellectually curious. “Is that a dog or a cat?”

“He’s a Maine coon. He won’t hurt you.” *Unless you do something stupid.*

“A what?”

“It’s a kind of cat.”

He looked from Mac to her, made eye contact.

She started to think he was going to say something, do something. She felt his focused attention on her like the weight of a

piano. Then his expression cooled, kind of detached, and he walked away.

She turned back to her apartment guide, not sure what to make of him. Mac purred, and she stroked his fluffy orange fur.

Then she looked out the windshield at the man, now standing at the back of a small crowd. He stood straight with his arms crossed and interacted with no one. There was something there, something a little different about him somehow, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it. Or was it just that he stayed back away from the other people that made him stand out to her? He was pretty standard-looking—tall, dark hair, jeans and T-shirt. Well, *standard* wasn't the right word . . . Around here, the lack of man bun made him seem unique. She laughed and went back to her apartment guide.

She started making calls to a few of the apartments to ask some key questions, the ones she didn't like to ask in person because people looked at her like she was a crazy paranoid.

Then the group of people moved down the row of storage units, closer to her. Mac changed to paws on the dash so he could look out the windshield at the people.

"Just a few more minutes, buddy." She dialed the next number. She wasn't having much luck so far finding a place that met her requirements.

A man wearing work pants and a T-shirt with the name of the storage facility on it cut the lock on the unit where the crowd was gathered. He lifted, and the roll-up door rumbled up on its track. An older man, surely the auctioneer, started giving statistics about the unit while all the people craned to get a look inside. Once everyone had taken a look, the auction started.

The man from before remained behind the rest of the crowd. He made a bid a hundred dollars higher than what the auctioneer called for, and several people turned and glared at him. He adjusted his rectangular glasses, re-crossed his arms, and remained focused straight ahead.

She realized she'd stopped apartment hunting and was just watching him. She didn't like to admit to herself when she found a man attractive, but that wasn't what really had her attention. She narrowed her eyes. *He knows something—he knows there's something of value in that unit that the others don't see.* Or was he just stupid?

No . . . he definitely wasn't stupid.

She crossed her arms and studied him.

A few seconds later, the auctioneer announced that the man had won the auction. The crowd started to disperse, except the man who'd won. He walked up to the auctioneer, surely to finish the transaction.

A glint from across the way caught her eye.

She turned back to the man. The auctioneer shifted around to the other side of him and drew him a couple of feet over.

She put her Blazer in gear, in reverse, and eased on the gas, wondering if the man had any idea he was about to die.

### **"CASH ONLY."**

"Of course," Lyndon said. As if he didn't know the auction had to be paid in cash.

The beat-up Blazer that he'd walked past earlier started backing up. He'd wondered why she'd sat there for so long.

The auctioneer—Walter—thumbed through his papers. "And there is the matter of the auction fee."

"Yes, of course." Lyndon had his hand on his cash in his pocket. "How much is the total?" He already knew the answer, of course, but thought it might be rude not to wait for Walter to calculate the simple figure.

The Blazer drove forward now, slowly around them, rather close to the line of storage units on the opposite side of the drive lane.

"And you'll need to have the unit emptied within forty-eight hours," Walter said.

Lyndon did his best to keep annoyance out of his tone. “What was the total?”

The door to the Blazer opened, and the young woman with the odd cat got out and opened the back door as well. Then she jogged toward him, and her long dark braid bounced on her shoulder. “Hey, can I ask you something?”

Lyndon watched her approach—though he knew he shouldn’t—even while Walter talked to him. She looked like she had Native American blood in her veins. He saw it mostly in her eyes—large and dark, framed with long lashes.

“You bought that unit, right? Can I buy something from there off you?”

Walter rested a hand on her arm and attempted to guide her to the side. “We’re almost done here. Then you can talk business all you like.”

But she didn’t move. Rather, she appeared to brace herself, which seemed at odds with her casual tone.

Walter gave up on her and put his arm around Lyndon’s shoulders to guide him away. While Lyndon didn’t particularly care for being touched, he moved with Walter. He was curious to know what she wanted, curious about her in general if he was being honest with himself, but he would not let himself feel this kind of intense interest.

The woman pushed him to the side.

Before he could get angry, he heard something hit the wall behind him. He looked over and saw a . . . Was that a bullet hole in the block?

The woman had taken his hand and was already dragging him toward her vehicle. He followed.

“Get in,” she ordered.

He obeyed, and almost tripped on the long case that was on her back seat floor. She jumped in the driver’s seat and tore down the narrow drive lane.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“Someone just tried to kill you. A sniper on the building opposite.”

“What?” He paused to allow his thoughts to catch up to reality. “No, they had to have been aiming at something else.”

“You mean the auctioneer who was nudging you into position? Don’t think so.” She turned out of the storage facility and merged with traffic, driving at the same speed as the other cars. Her voice didn’t waver, her hands didn’t shake, she didn’t even appear to be sweating. And that odd cat lay on the front seat, curled up as if nothing out of the ordinary had just happened.

“Who in the world are you?” he asked.

“No one important.” She made another turn.

“How did you know what was going to happen?”

She said nothing.

“Okay,” he said. “Then let’s go with, who are you and why did you do that?”

Again nothing.

“Are you going to tell me anything?”

“I don’t know anything to tell you. Other than you really got on someone’s bad side. You need to figure out what you did and remedy the situation.”

“I haven’t done anything that could possibly warrant being shot at.” Unless . . . his theory had some merit. But no one else even knew about it.

“I don’t know what to tell you other than figure it out.” She stopped the car.

“You’re not even going to tell me who you are?”

“This is where you exit the car.”

He didn’t move.

She shifted and took something out of her waistband, and she turned and aimed a semiautomatic handgun at him. “Out.”

He hesitated for a second, confused, a feeling to which he was not at all accustomed. Then he looked more closely at the gun—a Glock 19. “There’s no magazine in that gun.”

“You wanna bet I don’t have a bullet in the chamber?”

He lifted his chin. “You won’t pull the trigger anyway.”

She raised an eyebrow, and as he looked into her dark eyes, he considered changing his opinion about her killer instincts. Her eyes were deep, but not in a romantic way—more like she’d seen terrible things no one should have seen, carried memories she longed to forget.

He focused on a calm voice, and it came out almost gentle, which he hadn’t heard in his own voice in years. “Please tell me who you are and how you knew that was going to happen.”

Some of the cold in her eyes faded, and she lowered the gun. “Please just go. Trust me—it’s for your own good.”

“What do you mean ‘for my own good’? Someone just shot at me, and you put yourself in the way of the bullet.”

“They weren’t going to shoot until they had a good line of sight.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because that’s how it’s done. You lie in wait until you have a clean shot. If not, it gets messy real fast.”

He felt his expression twist in frustration. “Who are you?”

She sighed, and he heard years of wariness in that quiet exhale, more years than her smooth skin seemed to hint at. All the cold finally melted out of her eyes, and he saw kindness looking back at him.

He could do nothing but stare back at her, at those dark eyes that now looked like the night sky, vast and beautiful, and so far away.

Her voice came out in a murmur. “Please.”

He felt a strange instinct to stay. “You just put yourself in the middle of this. Whatever this is. Maybe we shouldn’t separate.”

“I’m sorry I can’t explain, but no.”

“I don’t want you being hurt because of me.”

“Trust me, you’re better off alone.”

“I’m worried about you, not—”

Her voice was still soft. “Please trust me.”

He hesitated, still staring back at her.

Then he opened the car door and stepped out. He’d barely shut the door when she punched the gas and left him standing there. He watched her car disappear around a corner, irrationally unable to look away.

**LYNDON CLIMBED THE STAIRS TO HIS APARTMENT.** His heart had stopped pounding, but his mind continued to race, which made his head feel like it was splitting in half with pain. He couldn’t quite believe that she was right—that someone wanted him dead. And instead of focusing on the immediate issue, his mind kept turning back to her . . .

Lyndon rubbed his hands over his face. *I’m losing my mind.*

His neighbor’s door opened, and a middle-aged man with a dark mustache stepped into the hall. “You’re home early,” Mr. Porchesky said to Lyndon with a smirk.

Lyndon felt his patience running thin. He continued walking.

“When are you going to get a real job?” Mr. Porchesky muttered.

“When my endeavors stop providing the income I need.”

“*Endeavors*,” Porchesky scoffed.

Lyndon suspected his neighbors thought he did something illegal. He’d never bothered telling any of them that he had three PhDs plus a master’s in cybersecurity.

“Good afternoon.” Lyndon unlocked his apartment door, walked inside, and locked the door.

He looked around, making sure he didn’t see something different from what he’d left this morning, but everything was the same as always—his desk and other makeshift work surfaces took up most of the living room, with one little corner reserved for his business of reselling items of value from abandoned storage units, the one armchair in the corner, and bookshelves covering

every other wall. Everything appeared to be in the same order in which he'd left it.

And yet something felt very different.

He headed to the kitchen and filled a glass with water. That just made him think of the water bottle in her console, which made him think of the way she'd turned and aimed a gun at him.

Then he thought about how she'd looked at him in the end, the kindness.

He sighed.

He was accustomed to being able to see angles others could not, but just now he couldn't see any of the angles—neither that shooter firing at him from atop a building nor the woman who'd first saved his life and then threatened it. Though he felt certain she wouldn't have actually fired at him. Why save his life just to take it herself?

*When did my thoughts turn to such things?*

His morning had started off so normally. He'd gotten up at his usual time of five a.m., and he'd worked on his research for several hours. He was waiting to hear back from Dr. Grant about his thoughts on his most recent email, so he'd been focusing on the one wild theory he'd developed. He wasn't one for wild theories, but this one was feeling more and more logical as he continued digging.

No one else even knew about this theory.

Something didn't fit. Maybe someone had mistaken him for someone else? Or perhaps the shooter was some lunatic. But if he was one of those shooters who stole headlines from time to time, he'd have shot up the crowd at the auction rather than wait for everyone to leave.

And the woman . . .

She'd said the auctioneer had been positioning him. As he thought back through the event, he had to admit that seemed accurate.

That was a place he could start—the auctioneer.

He walked over to his computer and sat down. He researched Walter's name and the name of his auction company.

After about an hour, Lyndon clicked on his desk lamp and set his glasses down with a clatter. He'd found nothing of great interest. Walter had what appeared to be a perfectly average family—a daughter and two grandchildren in Garden Grove. His business brought in decent money, but nothing terribly noteworthy. Lyndon found nothing that might possibly explain his behavior today. Perhaps he was nothing but a pawn? Being blackmailed? Based on the research, that seemed like the most rational explanation.

Another idea came into his mind like the slide of a gun snapping a bullet into place. She'd said to figure it out. If there was one thing he was good at, it was figuring things out. But he had nowhere to start—other than with her. He'd noticed several things during the brief time he'd been able to observe her, some things that seemed to nudge him in her direction, no matter how much he felt the need to fight against it. He put in his earbuds, blasted "Iron Man" by Black Sabbath, typed the first search—her license plate number—into the computer, and began piecing together her mystery. Or rather, discovering exactly how deep her mystery went.