

Crazy *for Loving*

A Robin Miller Mystery



Jaye Maiman

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BY JAYE MAIMAN



2010

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About the Author

Jaye Maiman was born on October 31, and so learned early on that life is a series of tricks and treats. She grew up in Coney Island, Brooklyn, not far from the rumble of the Cyclone and the tantalizing aroma of Nathan's French fries.

Jaye is the author of seven books in the Robin Miller mystery series, including the Lambda Literary Award winner *Crazy for Loving* and nominee *Someone To Watch*.

Dedicated to Sharon Cyd Gresh, for teaching me to laugh and to Vivian Roll, for teaching me that Sisyphus was a jerk. And, as always, to my clan...

Acknowledgments

Back when time began, I used to slink into New York City's gay bookstores. Furtively. Glancing over my shoulder, waiting for the fickle finger of fate to stab me between the shoulder blades. That was long before my parents barreled into *A Different Light* demanding to know why my first book was not in the front window.

Back then, almost all the books I read had the same five letters on their spine. N.A.I.A.D. When I wasn't fantasizing about being the Man from U.N.C.L.E., I was dreaming about being the Gal from N.A.I.A.D.

I'd like to thank Barbara Grier and the entire Naiad team for making my first dream come true.

Bear hugs and sloppy kisses go to my incredible friends who have passed out flyers on P-town beaches, prodded me for more Robin Miller mysteries, and most importantly, reached out and pampered me when the hard times set in. Thanks to the backbone of my life, old friends and new: Pauline, Risa, Elaine, Jill, Annie, Joan, Maureen and Victoria.

Thanks to my parents Ira Ray and Sylvia, for being down-to-earth, funny, loving, accepting, and damn good cooks. I miss you every day.

And finally, to Rhea, for teaching me the meaning of *basheert*.

This book takes place in 1991, a bit of close-in ancient history, when people relied on strange instruments such as pay phones and computers were just beginning to take over our every day lives.

Chapter 1

The air was close and dank. I took a deep breath and stretched my arm out into the darkness. My fingers curled around a crushed beer can, its edges nicking the tip of my thumbnail. I brushed it aside and shimmied forward on my stomach, my lungs burning with the stench of urine and decaying food.

I could hear him breathing, just inches away. I scoured the blackness, searching for the telltale glint of light from his eyes. Nothing. I dug my nails into the dirt and shifted to the left. Suddenly, the crawl space tightened. Panic knotted my chest and my breathing quickened. I knew he must smell my fear.

I dropped my cheek into the foul mud and tried to calm myself. Gradually, my breathing slowed. I needed to get out, smell the cool early morning air, scrape the sludge from my clothes. I started to back up. And then I heard the sound. A distinct scratching just to my left. A rumble deep in his throat. Threatening. I was in his territory and he knew it.

I bit my bottom lip and shot my hand out in front of me. His nails sliced across my forearm, lighting fire along my nerves. I lunged forward, grabbed a limb and held on for dear life as he batted my head.

Seconds later, I was outside the crawl space, holding onto the meanest looking Siamese by the scruff of his neck. I was back at the office in 20 minutes.

Wonder Woman strikes again.

“Not bad, Miller.” Tony Serra snatched the mad Siamese from my arms, tossed him into the bathroom and slammed the door. “The laborer is worthy of his hire’...Luke.” I knew Tony well enough to read the sarcasm in his Biblical compliment. Sure enough, he turned his irritating Cheshire grin on full beam. “Better put some peroxide on those scratches.”

I looked down at my arms. There were tears in my blue cotton shirt and a bloodstain that was steadily spreading. Tony was huddled over his desk. As always, he was wearing a white, heavily starched shirt and navy pinstripe slacks. The suit jacket was slung over his massive, cranberry leather chair.

The man is well over six feet, with broad shoulders, no neck, and a scattering of hair so thin you can read his scalp bumps through it. While he can be called ruggedly good-looking, his appearance always borders on unkempt—like he just completed the one-hundred-yard dash through Grand Central only to find his train was late. Even now, sweat pools formed below his armpits and his pants sagged.

“The Crawford lady’s gonna be thrilled you found Alexander,” he said, flipping through his rolodex. “Which means a fat check in my pocket and another satisfied customer. Rich customer. My favorite kind. By the way, you’re excused.” He picked up the phone to punctuate my dismissal.

I considered kicking his flat behind, then stamped out of the office instead.

Tony and I have run this Brooklyn investigative agency for almost two years, and though I’ve successfully tracked down

one murderer, two hit-and-run drivers, countless adulterers, too many runaway teenagers, and the occasional corporate criminal, he still delights in throwing me the Bozo jobs. Like the case of the missing Alexander Ming, a blue-ribbon Siamese who had the good sense to escape from a silver-haired bitch who calls his one-ounce servings of cheap caviar “wages.”

I threw open the outer door, muttering under my breath, wondering why I ever decided to get into this business. I sure as hell don't need the job. I'm a successful romance writer. By churning out two books a year for the past seven years, I've earned three feet of shelf space at Doubleday's. Two of them have even earned the dubious honor of being produced as television movies. So why was I chasing after cats and taking orders from a Bible-quoting ex-cop who smells like gorgonzola cheese whenever the temperature tops seventy?

Before I could answer my own question I spun around the corner, colliding with a slightly underweight woman with short Farrah Fawcett hair and rose-scented skin. Her chin trembled as our eyes caught.

The hair on the back of my neck bristled. I was developing a taste for trouble, and I had a feeling I was in for a feast.

“Sorry...” she said, fumbling to secure her purse under one elbow. “I'm looking for Mr. Serra. Is this the right place?”

I took two steps back, glanced over my shoulder and saw Tony slide into his leather chair like a snake settling into a coil. I flashed my dandiest smile and swiftly escorted the woman into my office, a walk-in closet that had been stripped bare and crammed with a metal desk, chair, file cabinet, and trash can. Tony's office, by contrast, was palatial.

“I'm Robin Miller, Mr. Serra's associate. How can I help you?”

“Well...” Her eyes skimmed over my bloody sleeve and muddy jeans, then darted in the direction of Tony's office. A piercing cat howl emanated from behind the walls.

I stepped around her and closed the door. “Mr. Serra is

involved with a priority client right now, but I'd be happy to present your case to him. Why don't you have a seat." I pointed to the slightly faded red director's seat wedged into a corner near my desk.

"I really came to see Mr. Serra," she said uneasily. "A friend of mine recommended him very highly. I believe he used to be a detective with the New York Police Department?"

I nodded and did a quick once-over. The woman was rich. Born rich. She wore an Armani suit I had seen advertised in last week's *New York Times* magazine section. Her makeup was carefully applied, her fingernails manicured and painted a shade of mauve that matched her silk blouse perfectly. Her shoes were probably Italian. Not a single scuff mark. I avoided looking at my Nike sneakers and lifted my eyes to her face. She was probably in her late thirties, just a few years older than me. But she looked tired. And ready to bolt.

"Why don't we start with your name?"

Her ice-blue eyes flickered with fear. "Marion Ross," she said uncertainly.

I smiled. "Like the mother in 'Happy Days?'"

"Not exactly," she replied, stone-faced.

Suddenly my small joke seemed cruel. I leaned forward, a whiff of her heavy rose perfume tickling my nostrils. Given the choice between everyday body odors and cloying sweet perfume, I'd go for the B.O. every time. Unfortunately, the choice usually isn't mine. I stifled a sneeze and somewhat nasally asked, "What can we do for you?"

She lowered her eyes to her lap and began twisting a tissue into a tight braid. On closer look, her fingernails were the type you could buy at Upper East Side beauty salons. One cuticle was brutally gnawed, but the nails themselves were perfect ovals.

"I don't know where to begin," she said, her right foot breaking into a frantic tap. "My husband...David...he's in some kind of trouble. But I don't know what it is. Lately, he's been so jumpy. Last week, he disappeared for two days. No explanation.

Nothing.”

She stared at the trash can with an intensity usually reserved for Rembrandts or Van Goghs. I figured she didn't want to make eye contact, so I swung around the desk, leaned close to her, and asked, “You want us to follow him?”

Her eyes were bloodshot. Up close, you could tell that plastic surgery had attempted to smooth the crow's feet around her eyes. But it had been a waste of money. Worry was etching even deeper lines into her skin. Parallel furrows marked the space between her eyebrows. It was like gazing at a plowed field from thirty thousand feet.

All at once, her eyes filled with tears. “I want you to find out what's wrong. Please.”

I've never been able to resist a woman pleading for my help. This time was no different. I took out my notebook. “Why don't we start at the beginning?”

Thirty minutes later, I didn't know much more about my new client or her husband. Marion was curiously evasive about describing David's behavior over the past few weeks. The only straight answers I got pertained to David's age, his physical description, the make of his car, and his occupation. The more I heard, the more intrigued I became.

David Ross taught elementary school in a crime-plagued district in Brooklyn. When I casually commented on the discrepancy in social status that apparently existed between my socialite client and her husband, her eyes flashed. “Love doesn't recognize such distinctions,” she snapped indignantly.

I didn't buy the Hallmark sentiment. I figured either the sex was great, or Marion had a thick rebellious streak. Maybe both. I was just about to pump her for more information when my door opened.

Tony looked at my client and did a double-take. “Marion Ross...what an unexpected pleasure.” He pumped her hand like a politician. “I'm sure you don't remember me. I did some work for your father a few years ago.”

Marion stood up and the two of them made some small talk. If I didn't step in soon, Tony would have Marion's case and I'd be out chasing after some rich lady's Pekinese. "I didn't know you two knew each other," I interjected.

"We don't. Not really," Marion said quickly. "Tony helped my father out a few years ago. We met once. At a cocktail party. Mr. Serra was quite enchanting that evening. We had both just stopped smoking and he was my compeer that night. To be honest, I wouldn't have recognized him." She smiled at Tony. "You've lost so much weight. You look terrific."

Tony beamed at the flattery. Not many people had good things to say about him these days. Especially about his weight loss.

"Well, then, I'm sure Tony will be thrilled that I've agreed to take your case," I added with a dare in my voice.

Tony shot me an irritated look, then turned his charm on Marion. "Robin's pretty new at this business, but she's good. And I give you my personal assurance, I'll be tracking every step of her progress."

"Thank you." She squeezed his hand meaningfully, as if they both understood I was the underling. Then she snapped her purse open, pulled out a prewritten check and handed it to him. "I hope this will serve as a retainer," she said.

His eyes were riveted to the numbers, but mine were glued to her purse. Peeking out from underneath an unopened box of Gray's toffees was the handle of a pistol.

My blood pressure picked up a notch or two. I raised an eyebrow at Marion, who flushed under my gaze. With an agility that I wouldn't have expected from her, she swept her purse strap over her shoulder and linked arms with Tony. "Would you mind escorting me to my car?" she asked too brightly.

"My pleasure. Miller, you wait here. I'd like to discuss your caseload when I get back."

I was still pondering the significance of the pistol when Tony barreled back into my office. "Okay Miller, what's this about? You

know all cases go through me.” He used that “me Tarzan, you Jane” voice that always makes me want to tear out the seventeen strands of hair he still has left on his head.

“Tony, we’ve been working together for almost two years. When you took me on, you said you needed a business partner, someone you could train to take over the agency...”

His eyes glazed over. “Better is the end of a thing than the beginning....and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.’ Ecclesiastes.”

“Don’t pull that shit on me again. I didn’t come to you for Bible lessons.”

The glaze cracked and the anger flooded in. “That’s right,” he shouted. “You came to me when you thought your publisher was going to drop you over that dyke business. I let you work with me as a favor to a friend. As a favor to you.”

I knew exactly what Tony was talking about. And I didn’t like it one bit.

Two years ago, while looking into the death of my ex-lover, Mary Oswell, I earned the wrath of a San Francisco politician. He decided to pay me back by announcing that Laurel Carter, author of the famous Harbor Romance series, was actually Robin Miller, *Notorious Lesbian*.

The fact is I wasn’t notorious at all until the story hit the newspapers and television entertainment shows. The initial publicity resulted in a flurry of curiosity and a spurt of higher sales. But just two months later my books were sticking to the shelves like Crazy Glue. My publisher had an obligation to release my last book, *Love’s Lost Flame*, but he made it clear that it was time for me to take a break from Harbor Romance.

To tell the truth, I was sick to death of writing about torn bodices and swarthy men with rippling muscles, but the royalty checks came in mighty handy.

I was financially and emotionally prepared to fall back on my travel writing. But Detective Thomas Ryan—a San Francisco cop who had helped me search for Mary’s killer and, in the process,

became one of my unlikeliest friends—had other ideas.

“Stop playing ‘Fantasy Island,’ Miller,” he had bellowed long-distance. On my dime, too. “You’re a born dick.”

Ryan has a way with words.

Two weeks later, Ryan’s old friend Tony Serra called me up and made me an offer I was too dumb to refuse. I made a commitment back then to the Serra Investigative Agency, a commitment I decided to keep even after *Love’s Lost Flame* unexpectedly jumped to the top of the best-seller list.

I still remember the day my publisher appeared at my doorstep with a dozen roses in his hand and desperation carved into the wrinkles around his mouth. I stood on the stoop of my brownstone plucking the petals off the roses, one by one. Samuel G. Taylor the Third flinched with each pluck as he pleaded with me to forgive his error in judgment and return to the fold. When the last petal landed at our feet, I looked him in the eye and slammed the door. That was almost eighteen months ago.

My life has changed a lot since then. Detective work is in my blood now and has come to mean more to me than my fourteen Harbor Romance titles—for reasons I still don’t entirely understand.

I stood up to my full 5’9” and stared into Tony’s narrowed eyes. “I want this case, Tony.”

His eyes stayed flat, but his mouth curled into a sardonic smile. Something green was tucked in between his front teeth. “It doesn’t matter what you want, Miller. Remember that. You’re my *apprentice*.”

I watched him retreat, the anger swelling in me. “You need me as much as I need you,” I shouted at his back. “Don’t you forget that. When you promised me a partnership...”

He spun around, his hand slicing the air, cutting off my words. “I was sick then...”

“You still are.”

The words popped out of my mouth like a pebble from a slingshot.

Six years ago, Tony walked into a Brooklyn bodega at the wrong time. He had gone in to buy a pack of Marlboros but bought a twenty five caliber bullet in his shoulder instead. The bullet shattered his clavicle. The subsequent operation left him HIV-positive.

Contracting the disease was bad enough, but Tony soon made the mistake of confiding in his partner. The next thing he knew, his partner had transferred to another precinct. A few months later, he was strongly “advised” to take an early retirement. For his sake, of course. He opened SIA almost immediately. Its success was his revenge. And his life.

When Tony hired me in the summer of 1989, he had been recovering from his first bout of pneumonia and driven by fear. The kind of fear that squeezes the intestines and makes you ready to take chances.

Tony likes to say he hired me as a favor to Ryan, but the truth is no one else had been willing to work with him. And he was determined that someone would take over SIA when he died.

Reluctantly, he had settled for me. After almost two years, Tony and I still don’t like each other very much, but we need each other—a fact neither of us cares to admit.

Now I watched his face reassemble itself as my words sunk in.

He leaned against the doorjamb. “So what’s the story with Marion?” he asked wearily.

“She wants us to investigate her husband. For the last couple of months, he’s been acting strange. Running out of the house in the middle of the night. Waking up with sweats...” I glanced down at my notes. “The phone rings and whoever’s on the other end hangs up if Marion answers. That type of thing.” I omitted mention of her gun on purpose. If Tony knew Marion was toting a handgun, he’d pull me off the case in a flash.

“Sounds like an affair to me. Did you ask her about that?”

“Come on, Tony. Of course I did. She said it wasn’t possible.” We looked at each other knowingly.

“Right,” he said with a tight grin. “It’s a shame. She’s a nice lady. I’d hate to see her get hurt.” He headed out of the office.

“So the case is mine, right?”

He turned to face me. The fluorescent light in the reception area painted his skin yellow. “Sure. You need the experience. But stay focused. If the guy’s cheating, find out who she is and get out. I may need your help with the investigation at Torstar Brands.” He paused. “By the way, I’ve got a doctor’s appointment later today. Maybe you can deliver Mr. Ming to Crawford for me?”

Just what I needed. Another battle with the demented Siamese. But Tony rarely asked for favors. And I rarely acquiesce. “No problem, Tony.”

He brightened unexpectedly. “Have a nice day. Partner.” His sarcasm was thinly disguised. Just as he reached his office, he looked back and grinned. “Meee-ow.”

Unamused, I slumped into my chair and started to type up my notes. I had the distinct impression that there was more to this case than just another philandering husband. I picked up the photograph Marion had left on the corner of my desk. David Ross stared at me with laughing eyes. A chill swept down my spine as I dropped the photograph into my file drawer.

The next morning, I sat in my car polishing off an Egg McMuffin as David Ross’s battered Nissan Sentra pulled up to the corner of Atkins and Washington in the East New York section of Brooklyn—a neighborhood famous for its contribution to New York City’s burgeoning crime statistics. I checked the clock on my dashboard. It was five to eight, just as Marion had predicted.

David was pounding on his steering wheel in time to some unheard song. From the looks of it, he was tuned to heavy metal. After an especially dramatic riff, he snapped open his car door and scrambled across the street to P.S. 189, where he worked as an elementary schoolteacher. Looking far younger than forty-one years old, David was wearing stone-washed jeans, a gray striped shirt, and a tie that looked suspiciously like a flounder. A couple of kids, no older than ten, shouted something at him as

he approached. I think it had something to do with eating fish. Another youth, wearing a black leather jacket with metal studs spelling out the name “Tito,” ran up behind him and spat at his back. David slowed his pace and pushed past them with a studied calm. I noticed he had a slight limp.

I waited until he had climbed the steps before I reached for the latch on my door. The damn lock was stuck again. I owned a 1976 mustard-yellow Plymouth Duster nicknamed Bella. The chassis was shot to hell, but the engine made mechanics cluck their tongues with admiration. Normally, I have an unnatural attachment to Bella. But right then, I wanted to twist her steering column. It took me a good five minutes to get out of the car. By the time I ran up the school steps past the chaos of students, David was long gone.

I stepped inside, overwhelmed by a severe case of *déjà vu*. There’s a particular smell associated with public schools, one that I remembered all too well. Stale and chalky. But the sounds were different. Rap music pounded through the hallway, mingled with the high-pitched shouts of kids who hadn’t yet reached puberty. A dull roar, like the sound of an airplane revving for take-off, shook the walls. And over it all, the clang of hundreds of Reeboks and Nike pump sneakers stamping up metal stairs. My nerves were immediately on edge.

Just then a thigh-high demon barreled into my side. “Outta my way!” He maneuvered down the hall like a running back, knocking over a small Hispanic girl wearing a Bart Simpson T-shirt, and careening into another kid who looked like he wanted to run outside. I couldn’t blame him. It was like being trapped in a bumper car at Coney Island without a steering wheel.

I started to weave my way down the hall, when a female security guard tapped my shoulder. “Can I help you?” The woman was in her fifties with smooth skin, the color of toasted almonds. Her name tag read Juanita Morales. She was thin and wiry, her eyes alert and ready for trouble. I had a feeling she was rarely disappointed.

“I have an appointment with the school psychologist,” I ad-libbed.

All at once, she shouted over my shoulder. “Yo Jermaine! Get your ass back upstairs! Now!” I jumped back involuntarily. “Sorry,” she said. “You gotta be mean or the little savages will devour you. You said you have an appointment with Virginia?”

“Virginia?”

“Savarin. The school psychologist.” She stared at me hard now.

I squared my shoulders. “Ms. Morales, my son is one of the ‘little savages.’ So, if you don’t mind...” I tried to sound like an indignant parent.

She cocked an eye at me suspiciously. “What’s his name?”

“Tito,” I said impulsively. “Actually, his real name is Theodore, but his father insists on calling him Tito. We don’t live with him anymore, but Tito is his father all the way through. Now, where can I find this Miss Savarin? I’m already late for our appointment.”

Once again, my skill at dissembling served me well. She pointed toward the end of the hall. “Second floor. Far corner.”

I circled the second and third floors twice before I found David’s classroom. He was standing in front, screeching numbers onto a cracked blackboard with a thumb-sized piece of chalk. A shiver shook me. I positioned myself at the edge of the door. There were close to forty kids packed into the room. Several of them were sitting on a window ledge playing cards. One boy was desperately trying to pay attention, despite the fact that the kid next to him was slapping a rolled-up magazine on the back of his chair.

I took a closer look at David Ross. He was slim and muscular, probably an inch or two taller than me. He had bushy black hair, parted in the center and thick eyebrows that almost met above the bridge of his nose. A wiry mustache topped well-shaped lips. All at once, he turned my way. He jutted his square chin at me, his coal-black eyes twinkling like the silver rope chain half buried

in his wiry neck hair.

Smiling seductively, he asked, “Are you lost, little girl?”

He reminded me of the boys that hang out in Bay Ridge, their jeans threadbare over strategic bulges as they strut back and forth, rating every woman that passes. The kind of kid that thinks Eau du Armpits and “Yo baby” are all the foreplay any woman ever needs. For some women, David’s dark glare and implicit threat might have been a turn-on. It left me in a deep, shuddering freeze. I shook my head and walked down the hall, his laughter running up and down my spine like a cold finger.

I passed his classroom a few more times, careful not to catch his attention again. Considering that I planned to spend the next few days tracking this guy through the congested streets of New York, I wanted to get a solid imprint of his voice, mannerisms, attitude. And there was plenty of attitude. Once, I saw him hurl an eraser at one of the kids on the window sill. Another time, he sat on the corner of the desk, staring at his hands while the students tossed wads of paper at a nearby trash can. He was clearly out of control. And he seemed too tired to care.

I spent the last half-hour before lunch sitting on a stairway window sill that overlooked a burned-out apartment building that doubled as a crack house. I watched one man enter and leave the building sixteen times. Cars pulled up, paused while merchandise and cash were exchanged through heavily tinted windows, then tore off down the block. The envoy, a black man in his early thirties, was built like a boxer. He wore orange sneakers that undoubtedly glowed in the dark. Shortly before noon, he hopped into a silver Mazda RX-7 and roared off. By then, it was time to check on David again.

I started down the hall, just in time to see him cattle-driving his class down to the lunchroom. He spoke briefly to another teacher, then jogged outside. The streets were swarming with construction workers who were demolishing a building on the next block, but David’s limp and height made him easy to track. At Washington and Scanton, he stopped at a pay phone. I crouched

down between two abandoned cars, my eyes glued to his profile.

He made three phone calls, one after the other.

By the last one, his face was twisted with rage. I had to be at least twenty feet from him, but he was yelling so loud I was able to catch a few words. Something about paying off a cruiser.

The word repeated in my head. Did he mean a police patrol car? At the thought, my calf muscles went into spasm. Why would David Ross need to pay off cops?

He crashed the phone into the cradle and stormed back to the school.

I didn't want to encounter the security guard again so I waited by a side door until someone exited. Then I snuck back upstairs. David was sitting at an undersized student desk in an empty classroom, looking an awful lot like Gulliver bracing himself for another attack of the Lilliputians.

"I'm drowning. That's what I mean," he said suddenly.

At first, I thought he was talking to me. Then I noticed a hand on his shoulder. An attractive woman stepped into view. She had shoulder-length strawberry blonde hair, wide hips and long, delicate arms. The pearl-white shell and forest green skirt clung to her curves like gift wrapping.

A bell pealed out and doors swung open all along the hallway. Within minutes, the classroom was swarming with kids again. My eyes settled on one boy, who was standing in the doorway. He was almost my height, with an angry burn mark across his cheek. His eyes were bloodshot and his knuckles had thick scabs. He took off a black dungaree jacket and bent to lace up his sneakers. From beneath his torn jeans, the edge of a rusted pipe showed. Our eyes caught. For a second, he glared at me with an unnatural fury. Then the anger collapsed, as if he were too tired to carry the emotion. In that instant, I glimpsed a frightened boy who must have given up his childhood a long time ago. I knew the scenario too well. My stomach knotted.

When David came back into view, I backed off. According to Marion, he would be teaching the rest of the afternoon. I figured

it was an ideal time for me to take a break and check in with Tony.

Bad move. Tony is always in a foul mood the day after a doctor's appointment.

"What the hell have you been doing all day?" he barked at me.

"I just told you. Keeping tabs on David Ross."

"In a school, for God's sake! The man's working. What do you expect to find there?"

I rolled my eyes. "I'll know when I find it."

"Great. In the meantime, I need you to go down to the DMV and ask Pete to find out who belongs to a tan Mercedes, license QDP-7891. If it's who I think it is, we may have cornered the guy who's trying to make the Atheneum Group go belly up."

"If we had a computer..."

"But we don't Miller. So we do it the old-fashioned way. Talk to Pete."

I was in no mood to spend the rest of the afternoon in the motor vehicle jungle with a Barney Fife look-alike with bad breath, but Tony was in his commando mode. And since Jill Zimmerman, our part-time assistant, was honeymooning in Bermuda, I was the only foot soldier available.

"Miller, you still there?"

I grunted.

"It's the DMV or another all-night stint at Pathmark, trying to eyeball the cash register junkie."

I caved in. Five minutes later, I was in my car and headed toward the DMV. Little did I know then how much that move would cost me.

*We hope you enjoyed this
Bella Appetizer.*

