

Maybelline Takes a Powder

A Rod Axell-Janine Zimmer Caper

by Robert H. Rufa and Leila M. Willett



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Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co.
12620 FM 1960, Suite A4-507
Houston, TX 77065
www.sbpra.com

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Dedication

Leila—To my daughter Nickie and my new grandbabies, triplets Danielle, Brogan, and Ryan.

Robert—To my son Eric.

Preface

It's probably not unusual for two writers to collaborate over the Internet, but *Maybelline Takes a Powder* was written that way from beginning to end—sending the MS back and forth via email, and usually brainstorming on Skype. We have never met—in person, that is—but we did meet online (in 2001), and we did become fast friends (and have been friends since). We agree that writing it was a lot of fun, and finally publishing it is a bonus.

Chapter 1

Rod

It was a crappy day and I was depressed. Outside my office window, pigeon shit dripped from the ledge above. I knew the pigeons were up there laughing, hanging their ugly feather-covered butts over the ledge, taking potshots at my window. It was almost as if they'd conspired to remind me about how my life was going. I wouldn't put it past the little bastards. Ask anyone on the street. They'll tell you how devious pigeons can be.

A sweet voice floated in from the outer office. "Quit brooding. They're pigeons. They eat, they shit. It's not a conspiracy."

"I'm not brooding!" I yelled in denial. Of course I was brooding. I'm a private eye. Private eyes brood.

And don't let the sweet voice fool you. It belongs to a witch named Janine Zimmer. She's been the smiling face of Rod Axell Private Investigations for a little over two years. She occupies the receptionist's desk out front because she looks a lot better than I do. When she's not reading my mind, she keeps the office from plunging into chaos, and she works some of my cases with me. She's also the love of my life.

Don't get me wrong about the witch thing. I don't mean witch as in *bitch*. I mean witch as in *it drives me nuts when she knows what I'm thinking*. A guy should be able to brood in private. I'm just saying that being in love with a witch can be a bitch sometimes.

To the rest of the world she projects a cute little down-to-earth-country girl, uncomplicated. But I knew better. She's mysterious, enigmatic, and brilliant. She reads tarot cards. She reads minds. She reads me like a book. She has powers she doesn't realize she has—including an inexplicable power over me. And it's not just her cute little ass.

The phone rang, snapping me out of my brood. I was about to reach for it when it quit. I heard Janine say, "Axell-Zimmer Investigations." Cute.

"Rod, phone," she yelled a few moments later. She paused, then added, "It's for you."

Janine's been after me to get an intercom. Why do women always want to change things? Not that I have a problem with change. An intercom just isn't in the budget.

Her sweet voice floated in again. "We don't have a budget, we have a survival fund."

I sighed. "Who is it?"

"How should I know?" Janine replied. "I'm not psychic." Right—now *she's* in denial. "It's a woman," she added.

A woman—great. She's probably a hottie.

"She sounds like a hottie."

And me hopelessly faithful. Ah, well. Private detectives always got calls from hot women. Weren't Sam Spade's clients always hot?

"Hey, *Sam*, are you going to pick up?" Janine yelled.

Jeez, I didn't need an intercom—I needed a tinfoil hat. "Yeah, sure. Wait—tell her I'm with a client," I said, thinking I should seem busy. "No, wait—tell her I'm on the other line—"

"You're *not* with a client, and we don't have another line."

I sighed again. “I know that. Okay—I’ll pick up.” I should know better than to ask Janine to fib for me—she’s frighteningly honest. It was probably another divorce case anyway. They were a pain in the ass, but they paid the bills.

I grabbed the phone, leaned back in my swivel chair, and propped my feet up on my desk. My PI pose. “Rod Axell speaking,” I said into the little holes in the phone.

“I need a private detective,” the woman said without preamble.

“Well, you called the right number,” I told her, hoping I was right.

“I’d like to make an appointment to see you,” she said. She sounded a bit unsettled.

“What’s the nature of the case?” I asked, expecting her to say something about a no-good dickhead husband who was screwing around with a bimbo.

“Not over the phone,” she said mysteriously.

Hmmm. “Okay, well,” I said, “let’s make an appointment. I’ll give you back to my secretary.” I covered the little holes in the phone with my hand and yelled for Janine to pick up.

“Can’t,” she yelled back. “I’m in the middle of a reading.”

What? On company time? I uncovered the holes and fibbed into them. “My secretary’s on the other line—let me check her appointment book.” I’m not above fibbing myself.

“All right,” said the voice.

I covered the holes again and counted to thirty. Then I said, “I seem to have an opening tomorrow at ten.”

“It can’t wait that long,” she said with some urgency.

“Okay.” I glanced at my watch. Almost noon. “How about one today? I have an appointment for lunch, but I can cancel.” Another fib. My only appointment was with the two salami sandwiches in my desk drawer.

“That will be fine,” she said.

“You didn’t tell me your name,” I said.

“I know,” she said.

I hesitated, waiting for her to give me her name. She didn’t. “Well, I need to write something in my secretary’s appointment book,” I said lamely. Hell, it would have been nice to write *anything* in the appointment book. It had a lot of blank pages, and some of Janine’s doodles.

“I’m sure you’ll think of something,” she said. “Besides, it’s only an hour from now. My confidence in you would be shaken if you’ve forgotten by then.”

Perish the thought. “All right—see you at one.”

Without replying, she hung up. I suppose it would be an understatement to say I was a little curious.

I hauled myself up out of my chair and walked to the outer office. Janine was concentrating on the tarot cards spread out on her desk. I loved looking at her. She sure didn’t look like a witch. She reminded me more of a pixie, with her huge green eyes and rage of dark curls falling over her shoulders. “Honey,” I said, leaning against her desk and slipping a finger under the strap of her sundress. Her skin was silky and warm under my fingers. “I’ve got a client coming in at one. You don’t suppose that would give us enough time—”

“No,” she said, swatting at my hand.

“What’s the deal with the tarot cards anyway? Is that a witchy secret or something?”

“Research. For my book.”

Sure. It was a witchy secret. She had a lot of those. “Are you sure we don’t—”

“No,” she said, getting up and standing on her toes to give me a kiss on the lips. “The cards

say sex on the desk isn't in my immediate future."

"Is it in mine?"

"It better not be," she said, giving me a shove back toward my office.

"Okay, but could you put tinfoil on the shopping list?" I said over my shoulder as I returned to my desk. I guess it was a small price to pay, because my office would be a cold and lonely place without her. So would my life, such as it was.

She was quiet for a few moments, then she yelled, "She had strange vibes."

"Who?"

"The gorgeous woman on the phone."

"You can really tell that over the phone?"

"She sounded gorgeous, didn't she?"

Nope—wasn't touching that one. "I mean the vibes part."

She didn't bother to respond to that. Instead she said, "I'll burn some sage after she leaves." Janine burns sage every now and then—it's supposed to keep evil away, if you believe in that sort of thing. I'm not sure I do, but evil was the last thing in the world I needed, no matter what kind of vibes the client gave off. I gotta say, you don't get that kind of service from just any old receptionist.

Janine

Tinfoil hat. Isn't he cute? Rod thinks I'm a witch. I won't disabuse him of the notion either. I couldn't if I wanted to.

The nice thing about working here is that sexual harassment isn't a problem, it's one of the fringe benefits. I get to sleep with the boss and I don't have to worry about office gossip. I don't have to worry about climbing the corporate ladder. We don't even have a step stool. There is no glass ceiling, just some peeling paint.

I'm really not Rod's receptionist, of course—I'm more like a partner, since I work some cases with him. But I do keep his books and answer the phone, and I make him coffee when he's nice. Working with Rod keeps me pretty busy, but I still have enough time to do what I want—drive him crazy, and do a little writing.

Rod also thinks I'm psychic. That might be a little closer to the truth. It's not something I've cultivated. Gram calls it my gift. My mother doesn't talk about it at all. At a young age she established, in no uncertain terms, that it was *not* a gift. I don't really read minds, and I don't know the winning lottery numbers. I can't bend spoons or levitate. I just seem to be a little more sensitive to some people's thoughts and feelings. Mostly people I'm around a lot—like Rod. But you don't have to be too gifted to know what he's thinking. He's just so easy.

Like I knew without looking that Rod was in his PI pose, leaning back in his chair, feet on his big old desk. Brooding again. Rod's really not a brooder, but his birthday is just around the corner. He's turning thirty-nine. That probably pretty much covers his dark mood.

I don't know why it bothers him so much. Rod's one of those guys who just gets better with age. If this is his midlife crisis, I hope he gets over it soon. He's beginning to make me crazy. It's becoming a little obsessive. He's started getting a few grays around the temples. The obsessive part? He's counted them. Thirty-nine. Ironic? I don't know. I told him it just made him look more distinguished. It didn't help. I told him it could be worse—he could be going bald. That didn't help either. The next night I caught him trying to see the back of his head with a hand-held mirror in the bathroom. I'm trying to be gentle with him—I really am. But if he starts talking about getting a little sports car, I'll have to choke him.

I have a feeling this new case is going to take his mind off his brood for a while, though. Maybe I'll forget the sage.

Rod

"Rod," Janine hollered. "Maybe you should put something on your desk to make it look more professional."

"I have something on my desk." *My feet.*

"Besides your feet."

"Hey."

"Yeah?"

"Could you make that heavy duty tinfoil?"

She laughed. "Sure, Boss."

Except for the pigeon shit smearing my view of the fire escape, the office looked professional. Well, semi-professional. I'd gotten a real good deal on the rent. This particular little suite had been the former landlord's office. His second wife didn't want to deal with the warped door, balky air conditioner, or the bloodstains left as a result of her husband's death. Suicide had been the official ruling. I really didn't buy the suicide thing at first. But after getting to know his wife, I figure the guy took the easy way out.

Janine's voice floated through the door again, like a song. "Did you see the paint sample I left you?"

"Yeah," I said, picking up the samples. Celestial Sea and Morning Mist. Blue. I tossed them in the garbage. "No."

"I could make it worth your while."

"Yeah?" Janine has made a lot of things worth my while in the past, but I couldn't imagine painting being fun unless you did it in the nude.

"Naked painting could be fun."

I pulled the paint chips out of the garbage and looked at them again. The thoughts of Janine's perfect little body, naked anywhere, is always appealing, but I liked my walls. Janine refers to them as a dismal gray. I told her dismal gray wasn't a color. The next day she presented me with a paint chip from the local hardware—Dismal Gray. She thinks it's a brooding, depressing color, and she's been after me for months to let her paint the place. Painting isn't on my agenda. I like dismal. Dismal is my middle name.

One of the first rules of detective work is, if it's furnished and cheap, it works. The office came cheap and furnished. So, it worked. It came complete with a couple of filing cabinets, both battleship gray. They filled out the room and gave me a place for the coffeepot, a few mismatched mugs, and the occasional flowers Janine brought in "to dispel the gloom," as she put it. Both are still pretty much empty, but they go nice with the dismal gray walls.

My desk was a heavy oak job that must have been built during the First World War. I'm pretty sure the office was built around it because without a chain saw and sledge hammer, there's no way of getting it out of here. Except for some scratches and etched-in graffiti, it was in great shape. Once I'd scrubbed off the blood, it was the perfect place to rest my feet.

Anyway, painting's really not in the budget. Besides, I'm still dealing with the mental anguish of the area rug she'd picked up at a flea market a year ago. Getting it up the stairs was bad. Getting it under the desk was a day in hell. And, everyone knows a private detective's office was supposed to be dark, brooding and mysterious. She didn't get it—the office had a hard-boiled kinda ambiance. I *liked* it.

Still, I had a feeling she'd talk me into it one of these days. The naked thing sure sounded appealing. I knew she had me under some kind of spell, and she probably knew it too. The thing is, I really didn't mind.

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