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SPITFIRE

Arianna Hart

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my second family, my writing buddies who support me, cajole me, make me laugh and keep me sane. I couldn't survive without you. Thanks for everything: Lori Armstrong, Kathy Love, Leigh Wyndfield, Ashleigh Raine (both of you!), Jewell Mason, Beth Ciotta, Mary Stella, Kate Rothwell, the ladies at Sizzling Scribes, and all my friends from Romantic Times. I'm blessed to have you in my life. Thanks also to Crissy who gave my "baby" a chance to be read and to Angie who made it readable.

CHAPTER ONE

The unmistakable sound of bone meeting flesh stopped Shana Quinn dead in her tracks. She'd been hustling along the back alley shortcut in an effort to get to her job interview on time when the noise made her scamper to the concealment of a nearby dumpster.

Peering from around her hiding place, Shana saw two thugs beating up some guy in a suit. One thug held the suit while the other systematically rained punches where they would cause the most damage. This didn't look like the usual mugging. What was going on? She slipped her cell phone out and quickly dialed 9-1-1. As quietly as possible, she told the dispatcher the situation and her location.

Now what? The suit wasn't going to last very long if they kept pummeling him. Fingering the small pistol she carried in her purse, Shana thought about taking it out but reconsidered. She knew better than to point a weapon she had no intention of firing—and shooting two unarmed men in an alley probably wouldn't do wonders for her reputation. Especially not when she had other options available to her.

The crunch of something breaking brought her attention back to the scene in front of her. Blood poured out of the suit's nose in a torrent. Mugging or no, she needed to do something fast before this guy ended up dead.

Slinging her heavy leather purse over her shoulder, Shana fluffed her hair and walked towards the men like she hadn't had a thought in her head for days. She clattered closer to the trio, waiting for them to notice

her. What, did she have to start whistling the theme from *Gunsmoke* to get their attention?

She was five feet from the thug doing the punching when he finally looked up from his work and saw her.

“Lady, you picked the wrong place to take a walk. I suggest you turn around and forget everything you saw here.”

“Oh, is this, like, a movie or something?” Shana wished she had some gum to chew to perfect the image.

“Yeah, something like that.”

“Oh, you know my ex-boyfriend said I should be in movies. Said I had real talent. Look, I have some pictures here he took for me to show an agent.” She reached for the strap on her purse and took a few clattering steps closer to him.

“I don’t want to see any stupid pic—” his words cut off as Shana swung her purse into his midsection, knocking his breath out of him for a few critical seconds.

“Tony! You okay?” The other thug let the bleeding man drop and stepped over him towards his fallen comrade. He took two steps before Shana let loose with a snapping kick to his knee.

Keeping her hands up at a guard, Shana stepped in between the thugs and their victim and tried to keep her eyes on both men at once. The suit groaned and stumbled to his feet, holding his hand to his nose to stem the blood.

“Run! Look for the police.” Shana ordered him. If he could stand, he could get her some help. She didn’t dare take her eyes off the brutes to see if he was following her directions but after a second or two, she heard the heavy slapping of his feet against the pavement. Now it was just the thugs and her. Maybe that wasn’t such a smart move after all.

The one called Tony had gotten his wind back and circled her, trying to trap her between his partner and himself. Fine, if that's how they wanted to play it, she'd let them trap her. *Come into my parlor, boys.*

She faced Tony and tried to gauge his timing. The other one would do what Tony did. "Now really, two against one isn't fair."

"Lady, you should have minded your own business. Now it's two against you." They were moving closer, suckered into thinking they had her where they wanted. Tony looked at his partner and gave a slight nod of his head.

Shana dropped into a squat as they charged her, then sprung into the air, whipping out the best scissor-kick of her entire life. The toe of her boot caught Tony under his chin, sinking deep into the soft tissue there and snapping his head back with enough force to slam him against the building behind him.

Her back-kick nailed the other stooge in the chest with the heel of her boot, dropping him flat without a sound. That was going to leave one heck of a bruise.

Pushing her hair out of her eyes, Shana turned with her hands on guard, looking for any more assailants hiding amongst the refuse. No one lurked or even moved, including her two sparring partners.

Good. Now where were the police? She couldn't wait around here for them all day. She'd been running late for the interview as it was.

Shana picked up her purse from where it had fallen and contemplated her options. There was nothing she could do with these guys anyway and with her luck, if she were still here when the police arrived, she'd get arrested for assault and battery. That was all she needed, her father would just love that. She could see it now, "Daughter of retired police officer arrested in back alley brawl. Film at eleven."

She'd done her duty as a Good Samaritan; she could leave with a clear conscience. The suit wasn't lying on the ground beaten to a pulp, and that was all that mattered.

Maybe this was a good omen for her interview as a security guard. Shana jogged out of the alley and headed towards the Renault building. If she could get a job on the security staff there it would be only a matter of time before she had enough experience to open her own detective agency. She was too damn short to get on the police force but as far as she knew there were no height restrictions on being a security guard.

That didn't mean it was going to be any easier getting the job. Renault Industries was world renowned for their cutting edge technology, as well as top-secret research and development contracts with the government. From what she'd heard from her father's police buddies, it sounded like the stuff they developed was so secret they had to pipe in daylight to see it. It was because of those contracts that their security division was the most elite force not under the command of a general.

Even her hard to please father was impressed with Renault's reputation. If it was good enough for Padraic Quinn then it was good enough for Shana. Now all she had to do was get the job.

The tinted, glass doors to the building opened with a silent hiss, admitting her to a foyer where a stern-looking security guard stood behind a black marble desk. Shana squared her shoulders and walked confidently up to the desk.

"Hi, I'm here for an interview with Mr. Horton."

"You applying for a job with security?" The guard looked her up and down, an eyebrow raised.

"Yes I am." She looked him squarely in the eye, daring him to mention her height or her gender. At least he wasn't laughing outright.

“Take these and change in the locker room. You’ll have a timed target practice in the testing room and then meet Mr. Horton in the gym before you have an interview.” The guard handed her a plastic bag with a sweat suit and eye-goggles in it.

“What are these for?” She had blown her grocery money on an outfit for this interview and now she was being asked to change into sweats? “What gives?”

“Before anyone is even considered for a position on the security force, they have to prove their proficiency with a weapon as well as demonstrate their ability to overcome an attack.” He sounded like he was reading a cue card.

“And how do you do that?”

“You have a sparring match with Mr. Horton, the Director of Security. If you survive him, you get an interview with Mr. Renault.”

“The president of the company?” Since when did presidents interview prospective security guards?

“We take security very seriously here. Mr. Renault needs to know he can rely on every member of the force to do their job without fail.”

That was fine by her. Weird, but fine. It made sense to test an applicant out before going through all the trouble of interviewing them but how many places had their own target ranges on the property and required sparring matches before an interview? No wonder Renault had the best reputation in the country for their security.

Royce Renault was well known for doing things his own way. A guy didn’t become a millionaire in his thirties by following someone else’s lead. If the newspapers were to be believed, Renault was one of the best stocks on the market, so the guy obviously had something on the ball. If he wanted to interview his security staff personally instead of doing whatever it was computer geniuses did, that was no skin off her nose.

Shana followed the guard's convoluted directions to the women's locker room and changed into the overlarge sweat suit. Kicking off her boots, Shana sighed as she lost the extra two inches of height the chunky heels gave her. She could use all the help she could get.

This certainly wasn't going as planned. All that time spent doing her hair and, ugh, makeup, just to sweat it off before she even got to her interview. Oh well, fancy clothes and makeup weren't her style anyway. And if this was what it took to get the job, so be it. She'd have to do a lot more to get into the police academy.

Securing her purse in the locker, Shana made sure it was locked tight. The last thing she needed was for someone to walk off with her gun. She probably should have left it at home, but she felt naked without it. At least she hadn't worn it in her shoulder holster.

Padding in stocking feet, she followed the signs to the shooting gallery. Twirling the safety goggles around her finger she checked out the place as she went. This was some set up. There were cameras everywhere, and she had no doubt that her every move was watched.

The door to the range opened before she got there and a tall skinny man waited on the other side.

"You Quinn?"

"Yes, I'm here for the job with security."

"I'm Joe Peterson, Deputy Director of Security. I'll be grading your proficiency with a weapon. If you score high enough at this stage, you'll move to the next test with Mr. Horton. You can step into the clogs over there since you don't have shoes."

Shana opened her mouth to explain to him that no one told her she'd be having target practice or she wouldn't have worn heels, but he talked over her before she could get a word out.

“There’s a revolver, ammunition and ear protection waiting in stall two. You get ten minutes to warm up then the test begins.”

“Why type of test is it?”

“Basic accuracy, moving objects, still objects, and surprise attack.”

Peterson walked behind a glass-walled enclosure and crossed his arms over his chest. If he thought he was intimidating her he was in for a surprise. She’d faced tougher challenges when she was a teenager. *Thanks, Dad.*

After stepping into the clogs, she clomped over to the stall and put on the goggles and ear protection. She picked up the revolver and checked it out. It was a standard issue service revolver like her father had. More kick than her Walther semi-automatic carried, but nothing she couldn’t handle.

She checked to make sure the safety was on before inspecting the chambers and loading it. It was heavier than her gun too. Taking some practice shots probably wouldn’t be a bad idea.

Clicking the safety off with her thumb, Shana widened her stance and took a deep breath. Keeping both eyes open she sighted down the gun and squeezed the trigger slowly.

Firing off six quick shots, Shana put the gun down and flicked the switch that would bring the target back to her. She’d hit the bull’s eye five times, and missed the center by an inch with one of them.

“I think I’m ready to start,” Shana said, turning towards Peterson. She had to bite her lip to keep the smile of her face.

“Not bad,” Peterson grunted. “But let’s see how you do at a hundred feet.” He put a smaller target onto the hanger and moved it back to the hundred-foot mark, then waited behind her.

Reloading the gun, Shana ignored his presence and focused on the task at hand. During the shooting contests she’d competed in as a kid

the judges did the same thing, trying to throw her out of the zone before the contest even began. Didn't work then, and she didn't plan on letting it work now.

Bracing her feet and concentrating on the task at hand, Shana raised the gun and took her time lining up her shot. She'd spent most of her life at the shooting range; she was more comfortable in goggles than she was in eye shadow. Relaxing her shoulders a bit, she fired off her next rounds one after the other, putting the gun down and stepping back when she was done.

Peterson stepped by her without a word and brought the target back. His face showed little expression when he saw the tight circle she'd made in the center of the target, but she detected a twitch at the corner of his mouth.

The next test was a man-shaped target. When she hit three head and three chest shots in rapid succession, Peterson actually grunted.

"You can put that down and take off the goggles. You won't need them for the next round."

She was moved to another alley and given a laser gun.

"This is the surprise attack portion. You'll have to identify friend or foe and act accordingly. Raise your hand when you're ready to begin." Peterson moved to a control panel and waited for her signal.

Smiling to herself, Shana made sure she knew where all the obstacles were before raising her hand. She'd done this type of drill before, and the biggest danger was tripping over something in the heat of the moment.

At her signal, the lights turned off and targets jumped out at her immediately. Shana had only seconds to identify whether the targets were enemies or innocent by-standers before she fired.

A strobe light flashed out around her, making the targets look eerily alive, and a smoke machine made visibility even more difficult. Sweat

dripped into her eyes as she dodged return “fire” but she didn’t slow down. She was determined to show her stuff. She’d been training for a challenge like this her whole life, and wasn’t about to back down now.

Finally taking out the last target, Shana blinked as the overhead lights came on and the strobe light and smoke machine shut off. Peterson had a half smile on his craggy face as he came out of the other room.

“You earned the second highest score ever given out on that test.”

“Second? Who got first?” She only got second?

“Me, and I helped design it. Your father was right, you can outshoot anyone in this place.”

Oh hell, her father. “How do you know my father?”

“Worked with him for years. I got this job when I retired from the force. Your father told me you were coming in and said you’d clean house. Thought he was full of hot air. Looks like I owe him a beer.”

Well, that wasn’t too bad. Her father had a way of interfering in her life, but if all he did was brag a bit she could live with that. She gave Peterson a polite smile and handed him the laser gun.

“Where to now?”

“Go back to the locker room and have some water. You’re not due in the gym for half an hour.”

“Thanks.” Shana turned to go back the way she came. She’d have to have a talk with her dad after this and find out exactly what he said to his old buddy.

* * *

Shana let out a low whistle when she walked into the gym. *Nice*. As a self-proclaimed gym rat she appreciated the well-appointed facility.

Thick mats formed a square in the middle of the room, and floor to ceiling mirrors made up two of the four walls. Weight equipment and toning machines were lined up in shining rows around the perimeter of the room like a silent audience. There were some pretty pricey pieces of machinery here. If this was what employees got to use on a regular basis, she definitely wanted in. As if eating and keeping a roof over her head weren't reasons enough.

Shana jogged around the room a little bit to warm up her muscles. She didn't know what sparring with Mr. Horton would entail, but it only made sense to be prepared. Her legs were a little sore from her activities with two thugs in the alley, and her shoulder ached a bit from the unaccustomed kick of the revolver.

The gym door slammed open as she was stretching out her hamstring muscles. A bull necked man came rolling in, not even attempting to hide his amusement.

"You Shana Quinn?" he asked, holding a folder in his ham-sized hand.

"Yes I am. Are you Mr. Horton?"

"Yup. Director of Security. I see you passed the weapons test. This test is a little more hands-on. Sure you can handle it?"

"I'm sure." He had a smirk on his face that just begged to be wiped off. *Bring it on, buddy.*

"If it gets too rough for you just say the word and I'll stop. You can always back out now if you want to."

"Nope. When do we begin?" He hadn't even put down the folder and or changed out of his dress pants and polo shirt.

"Right now. No sense wasting time, I've got things to do." He tossed the folder onto a weight bench.

Shana moved to the center of the mats and brought her hands up to a guard. She watched him closely as he walked to meet her. With no signal he rushed forward with his arms outstretched to grab her.

Not expecting that type of attack, Shana let him get much closer than she wanted to. He was so close she could smell his stale coffee breath. If his muscles didn't flatten her, his halitosis would.

Grabbing his wrist, she used his own momentum against him and flung him across the mat. He took three giant steps before catching his balance and turning towards her.

"Pretty cute, but you can't dance your way into this job."

"I'm just getting warmed up." She skirted him carefully, watching his hands.

"You know, we had a name for girls like you when I was in the Academy."

"Oh yeah?" He was trying to distract her with conversation.

"Yeah, cheerleaders." He feinted right then came in with a left hook towards her head.

This was more of what she expected. Turning into the punch, Shana blocked it with both forearms. Man, he was strong and he wasn't pulling his punches either. She'd have bruises from that block for sure. Before he could recover his balance, Shana snapped a side kick to his stomach, it was a big enough target. The kick barely fazed him, but it did back him off.

"Rah, rah, rah. Go team." Score one for her.

"Good one, but we're not done yet."

This time he was more cautious. He eyed her warily; moving in quickly and jumping back out again, but didn't throw any more punches.

Debating whether or not she should go on the attack, she almost missed his next sudden rush forward. Shana snapped a kick at the nerve bundle behind his knee, stunning him and dropping him to the ground.

Before she could pat herself on the back, Horton lumbered to his feet. Sweat dripped off his forehead, and anger glittered in his eyes. He obviously didn't like getting beaten by a girl half his size.

"You may have gotten lucky so far, but that ain't gonna last all day."

"What's wrong? Am I blowing your office pool? Did you bet that you could have me down and out in under five minutes?" The shock that flickered across his face told her she was right. Damn it, why was she always right about male chauvinists? Just once couldn't they be open minded and decent?

"Oh, look at that, time's up. You lose." She probably shouldn't bait someone who would be her boss, but his attitude annoyed her. Just because she was a girl, a short girl, didn't mean she was weak.

"You're the one who's gonna lose." Again he rushed her, arms open to crush her frame.

Shana had been expecting just such a move and did a side kick to his diaphragm, which knocked the wind out of him and doubled him over. She used the heel of her hand to smack his chin, and his head snapped back.

Horton wasn't done yet, and with a roar he reached out to club her alongside her head. Shana grabbed the fleshy part of his hand and twisted as she pulled him towards her. The pain of her grip dropped him to his knees.

Before he could take another swipe at her, Shana trapped his arm between her legs and locked his elbow in place. All it would take was one move to snap his arm like a twig.

"I think we're done now. I wouldn't want to hurt your arm too much."

“Why?”

“Because I want both your arms in working order so you can cheer for me.” Shana dropped his arm with a thump and moved out of the way quickly. When she was far enough away to feel safe from Horton she turned and smiled, “I’ll be ready for my interview in a few minutes.”

She hurried back to the locker room, her oversized sweats almost sliding off her hips. What did a girl have to go through to get a job these days?

* * *

Fifteen minutes later she was cooling her heels in a plush reception area. She’d wiped off the sweat as best she could with paper towels in the locker room. Hopefully she looked professional and didn’t smell like old gym socks. She’d wished she’d packed some of her makeup in her purse to repair the damage, but it had never occurred to her.

Shana tapped her foot until the secretary craned her head around her computer to stare at her. She stopped mid-tap.

The phone on the desk buzzed and grabbed Shana’s immediate attention. The secretary answered it with another glance in her direction.

“Ms. Quinn? You may go in now.”

She rose and smoothed down her hair. Taking a deep breath she crossed to the office door. This was the opportunity she’d been waiting for her entire life, and she’d do her damndest not to blow it now. Raising her chin, she walked through the double doors with her back ramrod straight.

With a quick glance around Shana took in her surroundings. Nice digs. Oak bookshelves lined the room around a picture window that was

bigger than half the walls in her cottage. The desk was an acre wide and flanked by leather chairs that could swallow up a body.

Sitting in the chair behind the desk, however, was by far the most impressive thing in the room.

The man watching her cross the room had looks that would put a cover model to shame. Thick black hair was clipped close with just a little bit of a flip in front. Blue eyes the color of sapphires smiled at her with amusement, and the body that strained the seams of the tailor-made suit would look far more appropriate on a construction site than in a boardroom.

“Have a seat Ms. Quinn. I’m Royce Renault, President and CEO of Renault Technologies.” His rich voice flowed over her like melted chocolate. *Smart, good looking, and a killer voice. Talk about your triple threats.*

“Thank you.” Shana forced herself to walk confidently to the chair and sit down like she was used to talking to millionaires. She could handle this. Cool, confident, that’s the image she wanted to present.

“You have a very impressive resume.”

“Thank you.” She’d worked her butt off for it.

“It says here that you’ve earned a black belt in karate, plus the rank of marksman with both rifles and handguns. That’s very unusual.”

“My father was a police officer and taught me a healthy respect for firearms at a very young age.” And her need to be the son he wanted made sure that she practiced every spare second. She still wasn’t the son he’d wanted, but she was damn good with a gun.

“I see. And the martial arts?” He raised an eyebrow at her.

“I began studying karate at the age of ten. I earned my black belt by the time I was sixteen.” By ten she’d figured out she wasn’t ever going to

be the tallest kid in the class and if she didn't do something she'd be the class punching bag for the rest of her life.

"And you hold a bachelor's degree in criminal science and graduated from the Borski Private Detective College."

"With honors, sir."

"Again, impressive. So tell me, why do you want a job as a security guard with Renault Technologies?"

"Renault Technologies' Security Division has one of the best reputations in the country, sir. I'd like to apply my skills and I think I can be an asset to your team." *And it's the closest thing to the police force I can get.*

"Joe Peterson waxed poetic about your shooting abilities. I don't think I've ever heard him say a good thing about another applicant since I hired him."

"He was tough to impress, but I'm used to it." Her father was even tougher.

"You also handled Mr. Horton with an amazing degree of efficiency." His eyes twinkled in amusement.

"I had an advantage."

"Really?"

"I've sparred with men like him before. I doubt Mr. Horton has ever fought a woman, never mind one of my size."

"And you think your size gave you an advantage over a man like Horton?"

Be careful here Quinn, remember this is going to be your boss. "Men like Mr. Horton tend to think their size is enough to overcome any training or skill I may have. I've learned to play on their preconceived notions." There, that didn't sound like she thought he was an ignorant ass who thought with his muscles instead of his head.

“And beat them at their own game.”

“Sometimes.” *Most of the time.*

“I see.” Renault shuffled the papers on his desk and examined her again.

Shana forced herself to remain outwardly calm as he continued to look at her. His blue eyes seemed to stare right through her and she had the unconscious urge to check to see if her bra was showing through her shirt.

“Your training is impeccable and you’ve come highly recommended. Head downstairs to the clinic. If you pass your background check and drug screening you’ll be hired on a probationary period. Welcome to Renault, Ms. Quinn.”

He held out his hand to shake hers and she had to bite her tongue to keep from shouting in glee. Shana clasped his hand in a firm shake and shivered from the contact. His warmth surrounded her and she felt the connection clear down to her toes.

She pulled her hand away as casually as possible. God, it tingled even without his touch. “Thank you very much Mr. Renault, I look forward to working for you.”

Shana hoped she smiled politely, but her mind was so dazzled she wasn’t sure what she looked like. She walked as calmly as she could until she got into the elevator, then behind the privacy of mirrored chrome she let out a whoop of success. The job was as good as hers.

CHAPTER TWO

Two Weeks Later

Wasn't being on an elite security force supposed to be...well...interesting? Not that she wanted Renault to get attacked by swarms of white collar criminals, but would a simple trespasser every once in a while be too much to ask for?

Doing night shift at Renault was about as exciting as watching grass grow. The most action she'd seen since she started training was when a raccoon set off the motion detectors near the garbage bin outside the computer lab. The only thing more boring than this was door duty, and she'd already done a week of that.

Shana looked up from her position outside the building. It was her first night solo, and so far it'd been a real yawn. How was this going to help her prepare for hunting down criminals?

Renault Technologies' headquarters was a humongous building that had thousands of workers in it during the daytime. At night it closed up on itself like a hedgehog and didn't make a peep until the programmers started to come in around seven.

The evening shift had the most to do, checking to make sure no one smuggled anything out of the building. The hardest thing the night shift had to do was stay alert during the long, boring hours until morning. What was the point of all the rigorous training she had to go through if all she did was check and recheck locks?

Playing mind games to keep alert, Shana caught a motion out of the corner of her eye. What was that? Was someone coming out of the lab?

Shana moved closer to check it out. It could be one of the workers leaving late. Occasionally a programmer stayed until after midnight if there was a problem, but she'd already checked the lab twice before and no one was there.

Pulling her radio off her belt she contacted dispatch. "This is Unit Seventeen, I've noticed some suspicious activity outside lab two, going to investigate. Over."

"You want back up?" The dispatcher didn't sound very interested in her report.

"Nope, it's probably just another raccoon."

"Probably. I don't have any alerts flashing."

"I'll keep you posted." She clipped her radio back onto her utility belt before she headed out.

Shana moved as quietly as she could towards the spot she'd last seen movement. A flash near the door caught her eye and she hustled towards it.

There was a person fooling with the door of the lab.

"Hold it! Security." Shana couldn't tell if the person was armed or not, but she wasn't taking any chances. She unsnapped the holster on her company issued revolver, but didn't take it out.

The intruder started to run towards the parking lot. Shana took off after him, taking a diagonal path to cut him off. Reaching for her radio she struggled to get it off the clip on her belt while running.

"Unit seventeen to dispatch. We have an intruder, repeat, intruder heading towards the parking lot in sector twelve." Shana didn't know if anyone responded or not because the blood was rushing so loudly in her

ears she couldn't hear a thing. Hot damn. Something had finally happened.

Gaining on the intruder, Shana dove for him and grabbed him around the legs. Her chin hit the sidewalk hard as the guy fell forward. She quickly pulled her handcuffs off her belt and snapped them on his wrists. Dad would be so proud of her.

Now, to get a look at her first collar. Shana flipped the perp over into the pool of light from one of the overhead floodlights.

"You!"

It was the guy from the alley. The same one she'd saved from getting the snot beat out of him.

"What are you doing here?"

Before she managed to get a single answer out of him Horton came running up to her. Instead of congratulating her for a job well done, he totally by-passed her and helped the guy up. Horton uncuffed him with the keys he had on his belt and brushed the debris off the guy's suit jacket.

"I'm so sorry Mr. Renault. She's new on the job and didn't recognize you. It won't happen again. I'll take care of it immediately."

Mr. Renault? Oh man, that couldn't be good.

"It wasn't her fault. She was doing her job. When she called out it startled me and I ran. Really, there's no problem. I just, ah, forgot some papers in the lab and came back for them. No harm done."

"I'm so sorry Mr. Renault. I'll take care of this immediately." Horton practically kissed the guy's hand. What a suck up.

"There's nothing to take care of, really. I'm fine, and next time I come back for papers I'll be sure to stop by the security desk first and let you know. Good work. Glad to know that Renault's secrets are so well protected."

The guy was babbling. Maybe he was uncomfortable because she saw him getting beat up a few weeks ago?

“You have a right to go into your own lab any time of the day or night without being tackled, sir. I’ll walk you to your car.” Horton scowled at Shana, “In my office. Now.”

“That’s not necessary. And don’t get Miss—?”

“Quinn, Shana Quinn,” she answered absently. Why would he sneak out of his own lab?

“Miss Quinn, yes. Don’t get Miss Quinn into trouble. No harm was done. I’ll just be on my way.” Mr. Renault dusted himself off and scurried to the parking lot with Horton following behind him like a puppy. Her boss shot her a glare and nodded his head towards the security office.

So much for her lack of excitement.

* * *

“Do you have any idea who you knocked over?”

“Ah, Mr. Renault I assume?”

“Yes. David Renault, the Vice President of Research and Development and the president’s brother.”

Damn. Not exactly a good career move on her part.

“I identified myself and told him to stop. You heard him, he ran anyway.”

“I don’t care if he flashed his wink at you. You don’t take out the VP of the company, You’re back on door duty as of eight o’clock tomorrow morning. You can go home now and get some sleep. I’ll be writing this incident up and putting it in your permanent folder.”

Shana didn’t bother to defend herself even though the words practically choked her. He was just looking for an excuse to fire her, and

unfortunately she just gave him one. Her temper was brewing at the unfairness of it all, but if she said something he'd probably write her up for insubordination. Nodding her chin at him, she walked as calmly out of his office as she could under the circumstances.

Once out of the building, she marched off to her car, fuming at the thought of having to come back in less than eight hours to stand at the door all day. *Bet Cagney and Lacey never had to do door duty.* Her father sure as hell never had to stand at a door like a stupid decoration all day.

Her father, oh no. She'd have to explain to him why she couldn't meet him for lunch tomorrow. *Okay, okay, think.* There had to be a spin she could put on this so that she wouldn't get the "hurumph" and the eye roll.

Shana had the urge to punch something, but knew better than to lose her temper. It wouldn't solve anything, and with her luck she'd break her hand. Climbing into her car she started it up and pulled out of her parking space. As she drove by the front of the building, she noticed a car in the spot reserved for the VP.

That was odd. Either Renault hadn't gone home or someone was using his spot. Maybe one of the janitors parked there figuring no one would mind. Driving her car a little closer she made note of the make and model.

If it was the janitor's, he was getting paid a heck of a lot more than she was. She'd never met a janitor who drove a late model Mercedes before. It had to be Mr. Renault's, but didn't he say he was heading home?

That was going to be a mystery left for another day. It was after two already and she had to get some sleep before she came back to stand at the door and pretend to look for weapons or God only knew what.

Shana hated it when things didn't add up, and David Renault's behavior was definitely odd. She'd put it on the back burner and let it stew a bit; eventually she'd figure it out. Her father always said she had a talent for putting things together.

Traffic was light on the drive home, and Shana got to her cottage in record time. Walking in, she dropped her keys on the kitchen counter and hit the answering machine. Hopefully there wouldn't be anything she had to do in the morning.

"Shana Mae, I'm going to have to cancel our lunch tomorrow. Billy and some of the boys are taking me to the off-track betting place. I'll make it up to you later. Take care, baby."

"Thanks Dad, you too." Shana stabbed the erase button on the machine a little harder than absolutely necessary and headed for the bedroom.

She should be grateful she didn't have to explain to her father that she'd screwed up at work, but the old irritation kicked in anyway. Just once couldn't he say no to one of his friends? Sorry Billy, I have plans with my daughter. Was that too much to ask?

At least it gave her a little more time to think up an explanation for why she was back on days.

CHAPTER THREE

“Thank you sir, unfortunately I’m on duty all day. Enjoy your meeting.” If one more old man asked her out she was going to scream. Between getting hit on and patted on the head like a four-year-old, Shana had about had enough of door duty. It had been a month already, how long could Horton hold a grudge anyway?

Today was worse than most because of the annual shareholder’s meeting. Over a hundred people gathered to hear the company’s latest financial report. And ninety percent of them were old men. Dirty old men.

She’d been at the door since eight making sure none of the senior citizens who came to the meeting carried guns. She had to force herself to stay alert and not let the monotony of the job dull her wits. It wasn’t easy.

A palpable energy filled the air as Royce Renault strode through the door. Shana had to keep her mouth from dropping open as he passed her with a wink and a nod. It probably wasn’t very professional to stand at the door with her tongue hanging out.

Man, he sure did fill out a suit in ways Seville Row had never imagined. And she’d love to find out what cologne he wore. It filled her nostrils and seemed to melt her insides into puddles.

She’d seen him briefly during her training period. He was everywhere in the building, night and day. The first time he’d called her by name she’d been flattered, but he seemed to know everyone from the janitors to

the programmers by name. No wonder his company was so successful. He obviously didn't believe in hands-off management.

As Royce walked into the boardroom he gave her another look over his shoulder and Shana felt a liquid tug in her center. His blue eyes seemed to dance in his face as if he knew what she'd been thinking. Dear God she hoped not. A flush crept up her face at his continued gaze and he laughed out loud before he shut the door behind him.

Whew. The air conditioning might be on, but her uniform was stifling. Good thing she didn't see him that often if all it took was one look to turn her into a mindless idiot. Too bad he was the head honcho, she wouldn't mind going one-on-one with *him*.

Her attention was wrenched back to the present when the door flew open and David Renault rushed through. His eyes were wild and he looked panicked.

"Mr. Renault, slow down. The meeting just started."

"I have to get Royce. They've got her. I need Royce!" He ran frantically down the hall.

"Calm down. Who has her?" Shana raced to keep up with him.

"I need Royce." He shouted now, his voice echoing down the hallway. "Royce!"

Royce poked his head out of the doorway, his eyebrow raised in their direction. "Dave, what's going on?"

"They've got her. They've taken Allison and they'll kill her."

Royce's face paled and he stepped all the way out of the room, shutting the door behind him.

"Who has her? The guys that were beating you up?" Shana asked.

"What are you talking about?" The look Royce shot her had nothing to do with flirting, but loads to do with fury. *Uh oh*.

“Ah, I, ah came across your brother in the alley and he was getting mugged. I helped out.”

“David? What’s she talking about?” He stared at his brother then ran a hand through his hair. “Wait for me in my office. I’m going to have to do some quick talking for the shareholders. Try to stay calm until I get back.”

As he turned to go back into the meeting room, he looked over his shoulder at the two of them with enough force to give her the shivers. “Don’t either of you even think about leaving until I know what the hell is going on.”

* * *

Shana sat in one of the leather chairs and watched David pace back and forth across the expanse of the room. His hands were never still, running through his hair, jingling the change in his pockets, and cracking his knuckles in agitation. If he didn’t calm down soon she was going to start to twitch.

She was wondering why Royce wanted her there when he walked into the room. David turned to him like he held the answer to world peace. Little brother must be in deep doo-doo.

“Okay, David, tell me everything from the beginning, and I don’t want to hear about how you fell down the stairs again. Don’t lie to me. Ms. Quinn, I’ll be relying on you to confirm his story.”

So that was why she was here. She suppressed another shiver as she met his eyes. An angry Royce was formidable indeed.

“I don’t even know where to start.” David pulled at his hair again and looked pleadingly at his brother. Royce didn’t show a hint of softness.

“Try the part where you got beat up and felt the need to lie to me about it.”

“I didn’t want you to bail me out, again.”

“You’re my brother. I’ll always be here for you.” Royce’s face softened a fraction.

“That’s the problem. You always pull me out every time I get in over my head. I wanted to solve this on my own.” He snorted and looked away. “Guess I didn’t do to great a job of it. I’m going to need your help.”

“If I can help you I will. But I have to know what is going on. Everything.”

David collapsed into a chair, his face crumbled and he held it in his hands for a minute.

“I’ve been gambling. A lot.” He looked out the window behind the desk as he told his story.

“It started after Mary died, as a way to pass the time. I’d wait until Allison and the nanny were asleep then I’d go to the casino and play a few hands of blackjack. I couldn’t sleep anyway, and God knows I tried just about everything else.”

I see.” Royce’s face was inscrutable.

“After a while I started losing more than I was winning, so I borrowed money against the house. I just needed one win and I’d be able to make it all back. At least that’s what I thought.” He shook his head and looked at Royce for the first time. His watery blue eyes held pain and frustration.

“I kept going back for that one win, except I kept losing, and the amounts got bigger and bigger. When I ran out of money from the bank I had to go to a loan shark.”

A muscle ticked in Royce’s cheek but he didn’t say anything.

“I was paying him off, even though the interest was ridiculous, but then I got a tip about a horse.”

“And you lost.”

“And I lost. I missed a few payments and the loan shark’s enforcers were giving me a late payment penalty when Miss Quinn came along and stopped them.”

“You stopped someone who was beating up my brother?”

“Two someones.”

“I see.”

She realized Royce used “I see” as a way of hiding what he really felt. Considering how mad he probably was, she was kind of glad he held himself in check.

David continued with his narrative. “I knew I had to pay the shark off fast or he’d kill me next time. I was in a bar, trying to drink up enough courage to ask you for money, when I met a guy who introduced me to someone who could solve my financial problems.”

“And how was this generous benefactor going to do that?” Royce’s sarcasm could have drawn blood.

“All I had to do was give him one section of code we were working on.”

Royce stood up and walked around the desk, tapping a pen against his leg. “Which section of code?”

“The Helen project code.”

“Son of a bitch. Do you know what you’ve done?”

Shana wracked her mind, trying to remember if she had heard anything about any Helen project. Renault technologies had many different projects going on at varying levels of security. The Helen one must be really top secret because she’d never even heard a whisper of it.

“I had to Royce. They were going to kill me. ” David flopped back in the chair and looked ready to weep.

“Why didn’t you come to me? I would have paid it off. How much did you owe?”

“Three quarters of a million,” he mumbled.

“You gambled away almost a million dollars.”

“I couldn’t help myself.”

Royce clenched his jaw tightly. “Tell me what happened next.”

“I went into the lab one night and accessed the code. I copied it down by hand and dropped it off at a seedy bar downtown. The loan shark called to tell me my debt was paid, and that was the end of it. I haven’t bet since then. I-I’m getting help.”

“Better late than never.” Royce’s eyes were cold as ice.

Shana shivered at the palpable anger in the air. How many times had he bailed his little brother out before?

“What happened with Allison?” Royce barked.

“I’m getting to that.” David got up to pace again, giving Royce a wide berth.

It felt like she was in a cage with two tigers pacing back and forth.

“I guess the code I got for them wasn’t good enough because they wanted more. This time I refused. I couldn’t do it again. I told them no and if they ever called again I’d go to you and tell you everything.”

“When was this?”

“Yesterday. This morning two men in a dark sedan grabbed Allison from the bus stop. I got the call on my cell phone that if I ever wanted to see her again I had to give them the complete code or she’d be killed.”

“I can’t give you the complete code. I don’t have it.” The frustration on Royce’s face almost masked the anger in his eyes.

“What do you mean? This is my daughter’s life! She’s more important than any damn code.”

"I know that. Better than you I think. I don't have the complete code. It's a top-secret project; the codes are broken up into three different sections split among three different facilities. I don't even know where the other two are." Royce moved behind his desk and looked out the window.

"Then she's dead." David collapsed again.

Royce turned and faced his brother. "We need to notify the police, the FBI or something. This project can't get into the wrong hands." He shot a glance at Shana, then gave David a meaningful look.

"We can't tell anyone." David shot to his feet. "He said he had people on the inside and he'd know if I contacted the authorities. He has power, lots of power. If we don't do exactly what he says he'll kill her."

The muscle in Royce's jaw continued to tick.

Shana took a deep breath and broke the silence. "Can I say something?"

Royce looked at her for a second, then nodded. "Go ahead, you got dragged into the middle of this mess you might as well say your piece."

"My father was a cop and I've had a lot of experience with the law. You have to contact the FBI. They have the tools to find your niece safely."

"Didn't you hear me? The kidnapper said he has people on the inside. If I call them she's dead. No cops. Just give them the damn code."

"If you give it to them, they might kill her anyway. Isn't it better to contact the people who have a chance at saving her?"

"She's right. We should contact the authorities."

"No. I won't make the call. I won't be responsible for my daughter's death." David shot a glance full of acid at Royce, who paled visibly.

"Don't we have any other options?" Royce asked, backing down.

Something brewed between the two brothers. She could feel the anger bubbling under the surface. They may play nice, but there was a lot more

going on here than met the eye. Enough that Royce was willing to back down even though he knew he was right.

She took a deep breath before offering her next suggestion. This wasn't the way she wanted to play it, but it was better than letting the assholes kill an innocent kid.

"I want to go on the record as saying you should call the FBI, but if you're dead set against it, I might have another idea."

"Anything. I'll do anything to get my daughter back safely."

Here goes nothing. "As you might remember, I have some investigative training. If you can stall these guys for a week, I might be able to find your daughter for you."

"Might? This is my niece's life we're talking about."

"I can't guarantee anything, no one can. But, if you don't want to go to the police or the FBI, I'm all you've got. There is no doubt in my mind they'll kill her whether you give them the code or not. They can't afford to leave witnesses on something this big."

Shana's palms felt clammy but she resisted the urge to wipe them on her uniform pants. This went against everything her father stood for, against everything she was raised to believe in. David should go to the authorities, and quickly before the trail got cold.

One look at his face told her he wasn't going to budge from his position though. And for whatever reason, Royce wasn't going to make him change his mind. That left her. If anyone could find this girl without using the police she could. This was no different than the cases she and her father used to solve. It was what she'd trained for all her life.

"I'll stall them, you find her."

CHAPTER FOUR

Shana hid the nervousness that went through her system at Royce's decision. She'd find this girl and prove she was the best damn detective that never got admitted to the police academy.

"Okay, first I'm going to need to get off door duty."

"I'll call Horton right now." Royce moved to pick up the phone.

"No. We don't want to alert anyone. The fewer people who know I'm involved the better. We don't want to make anyone suspicious."

"Then what do you want me to do, fire you?"

"No, I'll quit. Say I can't handle it or something. Horton will believe it because he can't see past my gender."

"Whatever you think is best. Then what?"

"Follow the money. David, I need to find out from you everyone you had contact with from the teller at the bank to the guy who took your weekly payments for the loan shark. I need to know what bookies you used, and who your runners were."

"I'll dig on this end and see who would be interested in the code. Give me a number where I can reach you so we can discuss your progress." Royce pulled a handheld computer out of his jacket pocket.

She didn't really want a desk jockey involved, but he was certainly more competent on a computer than she was, and she'd need whatever help she could get on that front. "I'll give you my cell phone number. Use it only on your cell phone so it'll be more secure."

"I have the best security in the business, I'm sure my phone will be safe to use." Royce lifted an eyebrow.

"Are you willing to bet your niece's life on it? Someone obviously knows about this Helen project or they wouldn't have targeted your brother."

Shana was not going to let him start pushing her around before they even started.

"How do you know they targeted him?"

"The same way you know how to put zeros and ones together to make things run. It's my area of expertise and I'm damn good at it."

"Then dazzle me with your knowledge." He sat back down behind his desk and put his hands on his chest waiting to be impressed.

Fine, he wanted to test her, she'd show him what she knew. "First of all, you can't gamble away close to a million dollars without doing it illegally. David had to have someone who introduced him to a bookie and ran his bets."

"Is that true?" he addressed David, who had a vacant look on his face.

"Yeah. I got kicked out of the casino so I went to the off-track betting place near the airport. I was on a roll and betting at the limit, trying to make back my losses. While I was there a guy came up to me and asked if I wanted to try off-line betting, no limit. And I could bet on sports too, something I know more about than horses or cards."

"And you didn't question why this guy came up to you?" Royce did not seem thrilled with his brother's ignorance.

"No, not really. There are guys like that around all the time. I thought I'd have better luck with sports than I did with the horses. I did do a little better."

Shaking his head, Royce turned back to Shana. "Okay, all that says is that he's an easy mark, not specifically targeted."

"You're partly right. Any average bookie could figure out that he came from money, and with a little digging could see that he had deep pockets that could be easily plucked. The thing that screams conspiracy to me is the timing."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. It was only two weeks from when I found David getting pummeled to when I caught him sneaking out of the lab. I assume that was when he snagged the code."

David nodded his head.

"So in a two week time we go from getting the first beating to a guy just happening to offer David a way out. Now loan sharks don't normally kill their clients. It's hard to get money from dead men. They usually send progressively more brutal beatings and raise the interest rate. The fact that this shark threatened his life so quickly is a clue."

"Okay, I'll believe you. What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to find out who the shark is and who he's working for. Loan sharks are pretty straightforward businessmen, they don't deal in code. This guy is taking orders from someone, if we find out who then we'll know who has your niece."

"It's a start. Do you need a retainer?"

A retainer. Holy shit, this was like a real client. "Ah, yeah. Five hundred should do it for now."

"Five hundred? I give the firm that does my background checks a thousand."

"Then you're getting ripped off. When this is all over we'll talk." Maybe she'd start her firm that much quicker.

“Just find my niece without getting her killed or destroying my company in the process and we’ll do more than talk.”

You bet your sweet bippy we’ll do more than talk. “Okay, time for me to make Horton’s day. I’ll update you as I have information.”

Shana walked out of the office and forced her face into a scowl. Stomping up the stairs to Horton’s office she made sure the security cameras caught her every mutter. It would be all over the building how the new guard left in a tizzy.

Slamming open the door to the security office Shana marched in and slapped her badge on the desk.

“I’ve had enough of being treated like a kewpie doll. I joined the security division to be a guard not a doorman. I quit!”

“What’s wrong Quinn? Can’t hack it?”

“There’s nothing to hack, this is a joke.”

“The only joke is you thinking you can be a guard. Face it sweetie, the only reason you got this job is because your father has connections and the boss was afraid of getting hit with a lawsuit. Go back home and play with your dollies, little girl.”

Shana had to bite her tongue to keep from telling him she’d be a better guard than he ever could be. Even though she was acting, Horton wasn’t and his words pushed buttons she’d thought she’d been immune too. When this was all over she’d shove his words down his throat.

Spinning on her heel she stormed out of the office fighting her temper. She couldn’t afford to let her mouth blow this for her. This was all part of the act. Anyone watching would think she was heartbroken. But she wasn’t. Just because some jerk like Horton said she got the job because of her father didn’t mean it was true.

For the second time in her brief employment, Shana stomped to her car and headed home.

* * *

“What do you mean you quit your job? I didn’t raise a quitter.” Padraic Quinn didn’t believe in pulling any punches, especially when it came to his one and only child.

“Dad, it’s okay.” She knew it was a mistake to see her father in this mood. Lunch with him was generally a test of her patience, today was even worse. Having him over to her cottage wasn’t the smartest decision on her part, but she was afraid if they went to a restaurant he’d make a scene.

“No it’s not ‘okay’. What am I supposed to tell my buddies? Shana quit because she didn’t like it any more. Do you know what strings I had to pull to get you that job?”

“No, Dad, why don’t you tell me?” Shana crossed her hands on the table to keep from strangling her father. “Did you think I was so unqualified that I needed a word from one of your friends to get a job?” Pain and anger stabbed through her. Why couldn’t she ever please him?

“Don’t get that snotty attitude with me missy. You aren’t too old to be put over my knee you know. There’s nothing wrong with a man putting a good word in for his kid. Happens all the time.”

“Didn’t you think I could get the job by myself?”

“Renault is the cream of the crop, I just wanted to pave the way a little.”

“Well your ‘paving’ made me the laughing stock of the security division.”

“So that’s why you quit? Because you didn’t want to get laughed at?”

Shana clamped down on her tongue. A good detective knew how to control her temper. "I quit because I was a glorified doorman. The next time you want to help me out, don't."

"Well that's a fine how do you do. My own flesh and blood thinks she's too good to accept a little help. I'll just take my help and go then." He turned towards the door and started walking.

"Dad. Stop it. Don't pull the Irish guilt trip on me. I just want to do things on my own. Is that so bad?"

"Why do you have to be so stubborn Shan? Why can't you accept any help?"

"If I was a boy, would you be asking me that?"

"Not that again. If you were a boy it would be different, but you're not, you're my little girl and you need more help than a son."

Shana sighed, it was the same old argument. He'd never see her as anything but his little girl no matter what she did. Maybe after this case he'd at least see her as an adult. Even if she'd never be the son he wanted.

"It's okay, Dad, but next time could you let me try on my own?"

"We'll see."

That was the best she'd get from him. "Will I see you next week for lunch?"

"Not next week, I'm going back to the track again. Made a killing last time. Must be some of that horse sense from your grandfather came down to me after all."

"Oh, okay. Have fun." Shana walked her father to the door. "Hey Dad, if you were down on your luck, would you know how to find a loan shark?"

"I'm only betting five and ten dollar bets, I'm not going to go broke."

"I know, I'm just asking, hypothetically."

“Do you need money?”

“No, I’m fine. I’m just curious. Trying to solve a case I read about.”

Padraic’s eyes lit up at the word case. “Oh that’s different then. Yeah, if I needed a loan shark there are plenty of them around. You don’t need to look far to find a leg breaker willing to give you a loan.”

“That’s what I thought. Do you approach them or do they come to you?”

“You go to them. Trust me honey, they aren’t hurting for business. Usually there is a go-between that handles the money, you don’t actually see the shark unless you’re talking big bucks.”

“How big?”

“Anything over a hundred thou I’d imagine. I don’t know those details.”

“That’s okay, thanks. That helps.”

“You sure you don’t need any money? Maybe you should move back in with me.”

“No! Uh, thanks Dad, but I’m fine. My rent isn’t that bad here, but I promise if I need help I’ll let you know.” She’d turn in soda cans before she moved back in with her father. Shana had realized by her twenty-first birthday that she and her father couldn’t live together. If she moved back in with him at twenty-five one of them wouldn’t come out alive.

“Take care of yourself sweetie. I worry about you.” He kissed her on the forehead and opened the door.

“I know, Dad, I know. Have fun at the races.”

She watched her father walk down the drive whistling. He may have gone gray and been forced kicking and screaming into retirement, but he was still as lively as she remembered. And as stubborn.

With a heartfelt sigh, she cleared the remains of soup and sandwiches off the table. She ran through the information she had so far.

After she did the dishes she'd boot up the computer and put everything down in black and white.

She'd need an invoice of some type too, and a record of how she spent the retainer. Shana's stomach fluttered at the thought of being an honest to goodness detective. So she only had one client and no one could know about it, she knew she was on the case and that's all that mattered.

As she finished the last of the dishes, a knock rattled the door. Who could that be? Did her father forget something?

Drying her hands haphazardly on a dishtowel, Shana peeked through the window to see who decided to pay a visit in the middle of the afternoon on a weekday. Royce's tall figure loomed in her doorway. What was he doing here? Didn't she say she wanted to keep their association secret?

Shana yanked open the door, "Are you trying to blow my cover?" Grabbing him by the sleeve, she hauled him inside the cottage. "What part of 'the fewer people who know I'm involved the better' didn't you get?"

"Good afternoon to you too, Ms. Quinn. And why thank you I'd love to come in for a drink." Royce brushed right by her like she was an enraged flea and sat at her kitchen table.

"This isn't a joke. The people who are after that code obviously know you and your habits. You showing up on my doorstep is like taking out an ad in the *New York Times* saying 'Look who's investigating the case.'"

"I'm not an idiot. I didn't take my car, I didn't come straight from work, and I was careful to make sure I wasn't tailed. Not only that, I covered my butt by having Joe Peterson ride around the city in my limo for a while. We're close enough in height and build that he could pass for me from a distance."

Maybe to Ray Charles. “It’s still a risk I’d like to avoid. From now on if we have to meet we’ll do it at a neutral location.”

“Yes ma’am.”

She didn’t buy his meek act for a minute. He’d do as he damn well pleased regardless of the consequences. “So, what was so important that you had to risk blowing my cover to come here?”

“I wanted to bring you all of David’s information, the names of the people he dealt with, the casinos he frequented, and the other information you requested. I’m searching around for the owners of the bar and people who would have the connections to profit from the information David stole.”

“You couldn’t have emailed it to me?”

“Tsk, tsk, Ms. Quinn, you know the Internet isn’t secure. Any hacker could get that information in seconds.”

He was right about that. “What can you tell me about the Helen project? I hadn’t heard word one about it before today.”

Royce pushed away from the table a bit and tipped the chair back on two legs. He gave her an appraising look before dropping the chair back down.

“The Helen Project is a top-secret government project that has been going on for almost five years. Three different software companies are building the different sections of the project. No one knows who the other companies are or what their part in all of it is.”

“Sounds like something out of a James Bond movie.” Shana got a soda out of the fridge and offered it to Royce.

He took the can and popped the top before continuing. “I can’t tell you what exactly we are doing, but I can say we had to get approved by the Senate to do it, and it has to do with the Department of Defense.”

“So the bad guy could possibly have a line into other suckers like David in other companies.” Shana needed to pace, but the kitchen was too narrow and she brushed against Royce with every northbound turn.

His presence made her cottage seem smaller than it already was. He seemed to take all the oxygen out of the room, making her feel lightheaded in the process. The butterflies she had in her stomach before had turned into seven-forty-sevens the minute he walked in the door. Shana forced herself to pay attention to what he was saying.

“It’s a thought. I could check out other software companies that would be big enough to handle a project like this.”

“Can you do it without sending up flags? We really don’t want these guys knowing we are doing anything but following their directions.”

Royce grabbed her arm and pulled her to him. He was so tall that even sitting down he was only barely shorter than her. “I’m neither an idiot nor a novice. I can get as much information using my computer as you can running around to bars and casinos.”

“Is that so?” Shana tried to ignore the way her stomach jumped at the touch of his hand.

“Yes, as a matter of fact it is. I guess you could say we’re partners in this.”

“I work alone.” Shana pulled her hand away and moved to the other side of the table. There was no way she was letting him take over her very first case.

“Don’t worry, I won’t ask for the retainer back.” He had the nerve to look amused.

“That isn’t what I’m talking about. I don’t want some trust fund baby bumbling along and screwing up any leads I find.”

Royce stood, his frame filled the room as he loomed over her. “I’m not a trust fund baby, I made Renault Technologies by brains and sweat. It’s

my niece who's in danger, and my reputation on the line, so you better get over your issues cause I'm going to be involved."

"Fine." She gritted her teeth, "You're the boss, but don't get in my way. When it comes to investigating I'm the one with the experience and I neither need nor want your interference. If you want to help by searching on your computer, have at it buddy, but I'm calling the shots."

"Anyone ever tell you you have a Napoleon complex?"

"Just because I'm not a giant doesn't mean I don't know what I'm doing."

"I didn't say it did. Thanks for the soda, if not the hospitality. I'll be in touch." The scrape of his chair against her faded linoleum was the only sound in the place.

Shana followed him to the door, trying to think of something witty but not offensive. He was the one writing the checks after all.

"I'll call you with a status report in a few days. I'm going to hit the casinos tomorrow."

Royce nodded his head once and walked out the door without a word. Shana watched him as he crossed the street in front of her house and went to the strip mall across from her. He must have parked his car there.

She closed the door and peeked through the window to see what he was driving. What was his idea of a non-descript vehicle? He disappeared behind a huge SUV and she snorted. *Figures*. The bigger the truck the smaller the—

What the...? Shana almost choked on her sarcasm as she watched him wheel a gleaming black and chrome Harley out of the parking place and climb on, kick starting it with a flourish.

Was he insane? The man owned a multi-million dollar company and he was driving around on a donor-cycle? He didn't peel out of the

parking lot like she expected him too, and the small, female part of her brain appreciated the sight he made on the back of the powerful motorcycle. Even in his high-priced suit he looked like he belonged there.

A picture of herself on the back of the bike, arms wrapped around his waist, chest pressed up against his back as they tore down the street popped into her mind. Shana's body reacted to the image with a fierce kick of desire that made her lightheaded.

"You can stop that train at the station, girlie!" Shana shook off the provocative thoughts and forced herself to move away from the window and over to the computer. She had a lot of work to do and it wasn't going to get done mooning over someone she could never have, and didn't even want.

Yeah, right.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Nope, haven’t seen him in here in a while.” The blackjack dealer sipped at her soda then lit up a cigarette.

“But you recognize him?” Shana had decided to start with the casino and see what she could dig up there.

“Sure do. He used to come in almost every night, until management booted him. Too bad, he was a good tipper, never swore or got upset if he lost, didn’t start trouble with the other players.”

“If he was such a good customer, why did management kick him out?” Shana knew the story from David, but she wasn’t opposed to a little confirmation.

“Cause he was losing too much too often. I mean, the guy was dropping thousands every single night.”

“Isn’t that good for the casino? Don’t they cater to the high rollers?”

“Not every night.” She took a drag off her cigarette then crushed it in the ashtray on the table. “Look, some folks come in and you know they’re big spenders. They have a limo and make a big show of going to the private rooms to gamble. They may come for a few days, play around then leave. The casino hooks them up with a complimentary room, meals, you know, makes them feel good even though they lost a ton.”

“So how was this guy any different?”

“He came in every single night, without fail. Always came to the same table, always played the same thing. He had all the signs of a problem

gambler, so management cut him off. Told him where to get help, offered to help him find counseling, you know, Gamblers Anonymous.”

“That’s pretty decent of them.”

The dealer snorted and pulled a tube of lipstick out of her purse. “They’re covering their butts, nothing more. They don’t want to get sued because some guy can’t tell the difference between having fun and having an addiction.” She dropped the lipstick back in her purse and looked at her watch. “My break’s over, I have to get back to my table. Thanks for the drink and the twenty. Easiest money I’ve made all night.” She fluffed her hair a little and unbuttoned her blouse a notch.

“Thanks for the information. I appreciate it.” Shana offered her hand to the dealer.

“Any time. Hey, this guy, he’s not in any trouble is he?” She appeared concerned for the first time.

“Nothing he can’t get out of. He’s getting help, by the way. I doubt you’ll see him here again.” Especially if Royce had anything to say about it.

“That’s good for him. I’ll miss his tips, but I’m glad he’s getting help. Tell him Tina said hi.”

“I will. Thanks again.”

Shana walked past the flashing lights and clanking machines towards the exit of the casino. The place was huge, with more ways to spend money than she could count. Spas, restaurants, and stores competed with slot machines and roulette wheels for the patrons’ bucks. And there were plenty of people willing to hand it over as fast as they could.

A few quarters jingled in the pocket of Shana’s jacket, and she gave into the urge to plink them into one of the blinking machines. She pressed the button and watched the wheels spin and dance. Holding her

breath as they stopped one by one, Shana waited to see if she would strike it rich.

Nothing. Figures. Laughing at herself, Shana got out before she could give in to the urge to try again. She should have known better; she'd make her own luck the hard way.

Walking back to the garage where her car was parked she thought about what she'd learned today. David had told the truth, at least about getting kicked out of the casino. The place seemed pretty clean. She didn't notice anyone hanging around looking to offer high interest loans. There was plenty of security there, and cameras everywhere so any leg breakers would have to be pretty darn discreet to find new customers.

Shana climbed into her car after checking the backseat and slammed the door closed a few times to get it to stick. She pulled her revolver out of the glove compartment and put it back into the holster she wore under her jacket.

It was a good thing she had thought to stash it in the car before going into the place. She hadn't been searched, but she had seen security patting down others. Somehow she didn't think they'd care if she had a permit to carry a gun or not.

The road leading to the off-track betting facility was practically empty this time of day. She needed a plan for getting information there. It wasn't like she could just go in and ask questions about David. "Excuse me, did you give an illegal loan to this man?" She was going to have to use a little bit more subtlety this time around.

Her father had said the guys were easy enough to find. Maybe she could fake being desperate? Okay, think. She didn't want to act too desperate or they'd smell a rat.

Parking the car in the half empty lot, Shana composed herself, and tried to act like she needed to gamble but didn't want to look like she

needed to gamble. Maybe she should invest in some acting lessons when this was over.

As she walked through the doors to the betting lobby she grabbed a booklet and checked over the horses and their odds. The higher the odds the more money she would make if her horse came in first or even placed.

Shana took a pen that doubled as a digital camera out of her purse. Circling the ten to one choice, Secret Lady, Shana fumbled in her purse for her bogus credit card, sticking the pen in her braid. She'd want easy access to it when it came time to take some pictures.

Biting her lip and looking anxiously around, she clutched the credit card in her hand and walked up to the betting window.

"I'd like to use my credit card to place a bet."

"I'm sorry miss, this is cash only. You can use your credit or debit card to make a cash advance at that machine over there." The teller pointed to a small ATM machine near a bank of pay phones.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I've never done this before. At the casino I can buy chips with my credit card." Which wasn't true, but she hoped her statement put a big bull's eye on her head for anyone listening.

Shana walked over to the machine hesitantly and put her card in. Wiping her hands on her pants and fidgeting a bit, she tried to look like she was waiting anxiously for the machine to give her money. How long did it take this thing to figure out that it wasn't a real credit card anyway?

"It can't be rejected. I know I have some room on it." She shoved the card back in and thumped the machine. Out of the corner of her eye she saw two guys watching her casually. That looked promising.

One of the guys walked into a bathroom, the other headed her way. Shana blinked her eyes as fast as she could to get them to fill with tears.

"I can't believe it's maxed. I know I paid the bill this month." Her voice wavered a little.

"You seem to be having some trouble with the machine, can I help?"

Bingo!

"I don't know what's wrong. The man at the window told me I could get a cash advance from this machine, but it won't take my card, and I know I should have some money left on it. I'm sure I paid the bill this month." She sniffed a bit as she clicked the pen to mask the sound of the camera.

"Sometimes it takes a little while for the credit card companies to post the payment. If you come back next week it should work."

"I can't wait a week. I have to make back some of the money I lost at the casino, but they won't let me back in. They know my luck is bound to change and I'll get my money back. All their talk about me needing help is just a load of bull. They just don't want to lose money on me."

Jeez would anyone really tell a perfect stranger a sob story like this? Maybe she should ratchet it back a bit? No, he didn't seem suspicious. In fact he appeared relaxed. He must be buying it.

What an idiot.

"Hey, they're in it for themselves. Don't worry, it's not like that here." Her new friend moved closer to her, giving her a smile worthy of a snake oil salesman.

"That's what my friend told me, but I've never been here before, and now I can't get my stupid card to work." Should she sniff again? No, a little pout.

"Let me tell you what, I know someone who can loan you enough money to cover your bet, and you can pay him back next week when your payment gets posted. How does that sound?"

“You know someone who’d do that?” Watery smile. “And you’d introduce me to them? You don’t even know me.”

“I can tell you’re an honest person who’s just down on your luck a bit. I know what it’s like to need a hand every once in a while.” His smile was downright angelic.

Yeah, I’m sure. “It won’t be for long. Really. I know my luck is going to change, I can feel it.”

“I’m sure it will. Why don’t we go to the bar and I’ll give my friend a call?”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. I mean, I don’t normally drink with men I’ve just met.” *Yeah, right, but she’d take money from them. If he believed that line then he was a fool.*

“Hey, it’s only a place to sit until my friend can come. But if you don’t want the money, you don’t have to come. I’m trying to help you out here. It makes no difference to me if you don’t want a drink with me.”

“No, no. I do, really.” She had to bite her lip to keep from sneering. “I guess it’s okay. But your friend will come today, won’t he?”

He put his arm around her in a one-arm hug and moved her towards the bar. “Sure he will. In fact, I think I saw him around here earlier. I’ll just give him a call on his cell and he’ll be here before you know it.”

Oh, I just bet he will be.

* * *

“You did what?” Royce’s voice carried through the McDonald’s where they were meeting, causing heads to turn.

“Keep it down. I borrowed a hundred from the loan shark. How else was I supposed to find out who David was meeting up with? I need you

to show these pictures to David and see if it's the same guy. If it is I'll find out who his boss is when I go back to pay him off."

"Like hell." He didn't shout it, but the force behind his words was unmistakable.

"Excuse me? Last time I checked that was the job you were paying me for. To find out who is behind this and get your niece back. It's not like we have a lot of time to screw around."

"We have two weeks."

"What do you mean? Did David get another phone call?"

"Yes. This morning. That's why I wanted to meet with you. Dave told them he had to do it in stages or it would tip me off. They bought it."

"What about your niece?"

"The bastards gave him a website to go to. It has a webcam set up so he can see her. She's alive and in a room somewhere. I'm working on tracking it now."

"Good. I don't have the time or the patience to go chasing them down in cyberspace." Shana wrapped her trash in a ball and slid out of the booth.

"I want to go with you." Royce piled his lunch remains on the tray and stood next to her.

Man, she hated when he did that. He made her feel so damn short; she came up to his pecs for heaven's sake.

"I'm just going to the library to check out some old news stories."

"No, I mean tomorrow. I'm going with you when you pay those goons off." His blue eyes were intense, like he could will her not to fight with him.

Fat chance.

"Look, you either trust me to do the job or you don't."

“It’s not that I don’t trust you, it’s just I think you might need a little protection.”

“Oh, and you, a desk jockey, are going to provide it?”

“I’m getting a little sick and tired of hearing that. I’m not helpless.”

“Neither am I. I can take care of myself, I’ve been doing it for a long time.” She planted her hands on her hips and stared him down.

“But you’re so...little.”

“So are scorpions, but I bet you don’t try to protect them now do you?”

“That’s different.”

Shana held back a sigh. She was going to have to prove to him that she could handle herself. For some reason he completely missed the fact that she took out his Director of Security.

“You aren’t going to get over this until you see for yourself that I’m not just talking big, are you?”

“I don’t think you’re talking big, I’m sure you think you can handle anyone.”

Great, now he thought she had a false sense of immortality. “Look, just follow me.”

“Where are we going?”

“To my father’s house. If you don’t believe I can handle anything after the next hour then I’ll quit now and give you your money back. If you’re satisfied then you stop trying to protect me and let me do what I’ve been trained to do. Deal?”

“I don’t want you to quit. But if it will make you feel better, I’ll watch your demonstration.”

“You’ll do more than watch, you are going to be a big part of it.”

Shana waited for him to go to his motorcycle before she started her car. It took her two tries, several pumps of the gas pedal, and some

creative pleading before it started, but it was running by the time he pulled around the building.

Her father's house wasn't too far away. With any luck he'd still be out with the boys. If she remembered correctly he was going out to lunch with a bunch of the guys from his working days. She had an hour, maybe two before he came home. If she did it right, Royce should be satisfied in plenty of time for her to get him out of there without her father seeing him.

Pulling into her customary spot to the right of the garage, Shana waited for Royce to get off the bike. He wore faded jeans that hugged his body like a second skin, and once again that flash of awareness shot through her system.

Not now. The last thing she needed was her hormones distracting her. "Follow me," she said, a little more brusquely than necessary.

Walking quickly, as if she could run away from the heat that flowed through her body, she headed to the oversized barn in the backyard. The modest ranch she had grown up in didn't have the size or the amenities of this barn.

"What's this?" Royce asked from right behind her.

Shana managed not to jump at his nearness. Barely. "My father's pride and joy." She unlocked the doors and keyed in the secret code before throwing the doors open with a flourish.

Royce let out a low whistle as she flicked on the rows of overhead lights. The building was long and somewhat narrow, and completely soundproof. There was a full-scale gym in the front, complete with a sparring mat and mirrors. The back half of the room was shielded by bulletproof glass and contained various targets attached to wheels and pulleys.

"Impressive. Your father built this?"

“A little at a time. I spent most of my weekends in here, either helping him clean or practicing with him.”

“What did your mom think of this?”

“She died when I was a baby. My father raised me by himself.”

“Ah,” Royce said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Shana headed to a control panel shielded from the target area and flicked it on.

“Nothing. That just explains why you’re so into firearms and stuff.”

Shana shook her head and shrugged. “Whatever. Come here.”

Royce walked over and she purposely averted her eyes from his panther-like gait. It wasn’t fair that someone so big could be so damn graceful.

“See these switches? They move the targets. Press the red button if you want them to fire, the green switch works like a joystick to move them around. It’s sensitive, so play with it a minute while I get some more ammo and put my ear protection on. There are some headphones for you too.”

“This is better than the one we have at Renault, and I helped design that one.” White teeth flashed as he moved to the control panel and practiced moving the five different targets around.

“I’ll shut the lights off when I’m ready, you start firing after that. Do your worst.”

A grunt was her only answer. Royce was totally enthralled with the various controls.

Shana hustled to the ammo closet and unlocked it. Grabbing a tube of blue paintballs, she stuffed them in her jacket pocket. She grabbed more paintballs for the rifle and shoved those into the pocket of her jeans. Locking the ammo closet she went to the gun safe and retrieved her rifle.

Taking her handgun out of her holster, she put it in the safe and took out the gun that used paintballs instead of bullets. It really wouldn't be a good idea to start shooting moving targets with live ammo. She wanted to prove something to Mr. Smartypants Millionaire, not kill him.

Checking to make sure both guns were loaded, Shana put on her protective gear and killed the lights. The first target sprang out at her almost instantly, firing red paintballs at her. Shana rolled for the cover of a hay bale and shot back, taking out the head and chest of the target.

Two more targets flew at her simultaneously. Shana took one out with a headshot, and dodged the return fire of the other one before hitting it in the chest. Red paint splattered on the ground near her, but she'd avoided the stinging balls.

The room was quiet except for the blood pounding in her ears. Royce had two more targets he could throw at her, and she was ready. She waited for him to make his move.

And waited.

And waited.

He was trying to unnerve her, to get her to come out of hiding, but she wasn't going to fall for it. She'd grow old and die here before she moved another inch.

Suddenly all five targets moved in a dizzying pattern, randomly firing and swerving like mad. Shana used the handgun to take down the two closest to her, then dropped it when it ran out of ammo. Sliding the rifle over her shoulder she fired shots at the next closest ones, splattering them with blue paint. There was one left, and it came for her fast.

Shana flipped onto her back and fired up at it, then rolled to the side seconds before it fired back at her. A huge red puddle formed in the spot where her head had lain moments before.

“I’ve seen enough.” Royce hit the lights and marched over to her, pulling her up off the ground.

“Satisfied?” she asked, gasping for breath. Adrenaline pumped through her and she felt more alive than ever. Memories from times with her father drifted back to her. Even he hadn’t managed to move five targets at once.

“How did you get the dead ones to come back to life? The machine is programmed to make them stop when they’ve taken a killing or incapacitating shot.” Her heart was still racing with excitement, but at least she’d gotten her breathing under control.

“I reset the system. Why didn’t you tell me the thing was stocked with paintballs?”

“I did tell you. I even showed you how to make them fire.”

“I thought it was firing light beams or something, that’s what the ones at Renault do. I’ve been hit by those paintballs before, if that one had hit you in the face it could have broken your nose.”

“Nah. They just leave a big bruise or a black eye.”

“Oh, that’s all. Sorry I overreacted. Are we done here?” “I have to clean up first, then I’ll show you round two.”

Royce swore under his breath. “I don’t know if I can handle another round like that.”

“Look Royce, as long as there’s the slightest doubt in your mind, we’re going to keep having this discussion. You need to trust that I’m the right person for the job with no reservations. I can’t waste time explaining my every move and trying to keep you from protecting me. This should prove once and for all I can take care of myself.”

Shana wiped up the paint splotches with a spray bottle and some paper towels, then replaced the targets and restocked their ammo supplies. Out of the corner of her eye she watched Royce pace in front of

the mirrors. He didn't look pleased with her at the moment. Too bad. He shouldn't have hired her if he didn't think she could do the job.

Leaving the cleaning of the guns until later, she set them aside and crossed to the sparring mats where Royce waited for her.

"Okay, here's what we're going to do. You're going to attack me in whatever way you want, and I'm going to defend myself without breaking anything on you."

"On me? I'm a foot taller than you and probably out weigh you by a hundred pounds. I can't attack you."

"Sure you can. If I can stop Horton I can stop you."

"But..."

"What's wrong? Are you afraid I'll actually take you down? Can't handle the thought of a girl fighting her own battles? I bet you have girlfriends that cling to you and scream 'save me Royce, oh save me.'"

Shana started to circle around on the mat, trying to gauge his abilities. His eyes narrowed at her last comment and his hand twitched, giving him away.

Royce rushed at her, arms out as if to grab her. Typical. Ducking under his reach, Shana used her foot to wrap around his ankle, then gave two quick palm-heel shots to his kidneys to throw him off balance. She didn't hit him hard enough to do any damage, but the heels of her hands hitting his back wouldn't feel very good. Royce hit the floor.

"Do you want me to help you up?"

"That was a cheap shot."

"Last time I checked, no one in a bar fight ever set down rules. Come on, show me what you got."

Royce sprung up and circled around her again. "What if you weren't expecting a fight, I mean what if someone came up behind you and grabbed you."

“Go ahead, I’ll let you grab me from behind.” She turned around and waited for him. Better not do a heel kick to the groin; that probably wouldn’t go over real well.

Shana resisted the urge to look behind her, she couldn’t hear him moving, but she knew he was close. Her body felt him and heated at his nearness. She shook her head to get those thoughts out of it and was almost surprised when Royce wrapped an arm around her throat and used the other to twist her arm up behind her.

“What would you do now?” He lifted her so her toes were barely touching the ground. He wasn’t hurting her, but his grip was tight enough to keep her from breaking out easily.

“This.” Shana twisted her head so her chin could drop and weaken his grasp. She raked a foot down his shin with enough force to startle him into easing his hold. Before he could recover, she twisted her arm and pulled it out of his grasp, trapping his arm in return. Her free hand grabbed his pinky and pushed it back until he dropped to his knees.

“Okay. Uncle. I give.”

She immediately dropped his hand and stepped back. “I could do this all day, but sooner or later I’m going to end up really hurting you.”

“And that was just fake hurting me?” Royce shook his hand and looked at his little finger.

“I had control of the situation. I was trying to prove a point, not break your hand. Are you satisfied?”

“Maybe.”

“Why did you hire me at Renault if you didn’t believe anything on my resume?”

“You came well recommended, and at Renault I have more control over the situation. You’re dealing with killers and kidnappers now and I don’t have any control over that.”

Shana's gut clenched at his words. So he had hired her only because of her father. Damn it. "I don't know what I have to do to prove to you that I'm as good as any member of your security team, better even."

"I think you've proven enough, for now. You're certainly better at shooting and fighting than I'll ever be." His eyes were sincere. He wasn't just blowing sunshine up her skirt, he really did seem impressed.

"I've had lots of practice. Now if you don't mind, I need to finish cleaning up here and get out before my dad gets back. I'd rather he didn't see you here."

"Is that a not so subtle cue for me to leave?"

"Yes. I don't want my father asking questions I'm not prepared to answer, and I'm not very good at lying to him."

"Why don't you want him involved? He could be a good resource."

"Because the fewer people involved the better. That's why you hired me instead, isn't it?" She couldn't explain to Royce Renault that she didn't want her father involved with the case because he'd take over.

"Whatever you say. Just tell him I'm your new boyfriend."

Shana snorted. "Yeah, he'd buy that one. 'Hey dad, I'm dating a millionaire.' Let's get real. No one would believe that load of baloney."

"What does my financial statement have to do with finding you attractive?" Royce moved closer, closing the space between them.

"Right. A guy like you can have any woman he wants. You date super models with legs longer than my whole body." She could have bitten her tongue out. Under threat of death she wouldn't admit to having a copy of a supermarket tabloid that showed him leaving a party with some leggy blonde on his arm.

"What if a guy like me wants a smart-mouthed brunette with beautiful blue eyes? Can I still have any woman I want?"

“When I run into one I’ll ask her. Shouldn’t you be going now?” He was making her very nervous. She wasn’t beautiful. She was solid, strong.

“I’m going, but first I have something I need to prove to you.”

“You want to go another round?” Shana stepped back, more than ready to change the discussion.

“Not quite.” He closed the distance between them, and his mouth descended on hers, gentle, yet more devastating than she could have imagined. His lips caressed hers once, twice, then pulled away, leaving her breathless. He slid one finger down her cheek, trailing fire in its wake, grabbed his jacket and walked off.

And damn if she didn’t want to ask him to come back.

CHAPTER SIX

The evening was hot enough to make wearing a jacket uncomfortable, but Shana wasn't going into the bar where she was supposed to meet her benefactor unarmed. She had the original hundred she'd borrowed, plus the twenty-five more that she had to pay in interest, in an envelope ready to hand over. Royce had called her on the ride over to tell her that David hadn't recognized any of the men in the pictures she'd given him.

Shana checked to make sure the camera-pen was ready to go before she got out of the car. Hopefully she'd be able to meet with the next man up on the ladder today. If she could at least get some pictures of him maybe David would recognize someone this time.

Slipping into her nervous housewife personae, Shana checked to make sure her gun didn't show through her windbreaker and clutched her purse to her chest like she was afraid of it being snatched. She needed to look scared, but still a little desperate. Desperate enough to want to try bigger games, anyway.

The guy who had approached David probably wouldn't bother with a small fry like her, but if she could get a feel for the operation she could start digging around at the police station. She had enough contacts there to get access to the computer files and maybe unearth some connections. Maybe.

Walking into the dimly lit bar, Shana tried to act like a mouse entering a room full of hungry cats. She let her eyes dart around the

place until they settled on Jesse, her “friend” from yesterday. He was sitting at a table with two other men who smirked in her direction.

“Sarah. Over here.” He waved to her.

Shana scampered across the room, clicking her pen like mad all the while. Most of the pictures would be blurry, but maybe David would recognize someone there. As she got closer to the table she saw Jesse’s friend, Wes, the one who loaned her the money, and one other man. He didn’t look familiar. She took two quick pictures of him while pretending to fix the strap on her purse.

“Hi Jesse. I have the money for you. I would have paid you back yesterday, but when I got back from the booth you were gone.” She stood next to the table and shuffled her feet nervously.

“I’m sorry, I had some business to take care off. So I take it your luck did change?”

Shana forced her eyes to shine. “Oh yes. I knew it would. My horse won the race! It was so exciting. Forget the casino, I’m going back to the horses again. Do you know I made a thousand dollars yesterday? Oh, here’s your money, plus the interest.”

She handed him the envelope and clutched her hands nervously again, snapping more pictures.

“That’s great Sarah. I knew you were an honest person the first time I saw you. Glad to hear that you enjoyed yourself yesterday.”

“Oh I really did. I’ve never bet on anything like that before, I’ve only played cards. This was so much more exhilarating.” She wanted to ask him how to move to the next step, but didn’t want to appear obvious.

“It sure is exciting, and you managed to do well too, for a novice.”

“Thanks. Do you know if they have a limit there, like they do at the casino? I’m flush now, and I’ve always wanted to try to do one of those big stakes races, but I don’t know how.”

"I'm sure we could work something out. If you want to place a bigger bet, say a thousand dollars, my friend Ray here could take care of it. He'll place your bet with friends of his who handle high stakes games, and bring you your winnings."

"Wow. A thousand dollars, that's a really big bet." She tried to sound excited but hesitant.

"Didn't you just make over a thousand yesterday on one bet?"

"Yeah, but—"

"And didn't you say your luck was bound to change?"

"Yes, yes it is, and it did. But I mean, is this legal?"

"Is driving over the speed limit legal? No, but they don't put you in jail for it. This is the same thing. Most cops just look the other way." Jesse gave her a conspiratorial wink.

"I don't know..." She bit her lip. "How much would I get if I bet a thousand?"

Three identical grins smiled smugly up at her.

* * *

"I have some more pictures for David to look at. I just need to get home and download them onto the computer. I'll drop them off in the parking lot of Renault in an hour or so." Shana drove home from her "meeting", having just dropped a thousand dollars on a horse called Diablo's Curse on Wes's recommendation. She couldn't believe they bought her act, how gullible did they think she was?

"I'm not at Renault, I had to attend the Chamber of Commerce meeting across town. Why don't I meet you at your place in an hour?"

"Because you're not supposed to be seen with me. I'll drop them off tomorrow instead." The car behind her had his high beams shining into

her review mirror, practically blinding her. Shana flipped up the mirror and moved over a lane so he could pass her.

“I have to drive by your house on the way home anyway, I’ll park across the street again.”

“No, don’t do that. Hey, I got to go, some idiot is riding my rear bumper. I’ll call you on your cell when I get home and we can work something out.” Shana switched lanes again. She was now in the lane for slow moving vehicles, doing seventy miles an hour. Something was wrong with this picture.

“Where are you? Shana? Shana? Damn it, your phone is breaking up I’m losing—”

Royce’s voice cut off as her cell’s connection died. Dropping it on the seat next to her, she concentrated on driving. There were no streetlights on this section of highway, and it twisted and turned over hills that bordered on mountains. If she wasn’t careful she’d end up plowing into a tree.

Her gut told her something more devious was going on here than some drunk out for a joy ride. She started to pull onto the shoulder of the road when the SUV rammed into her bumper.

Shana’s body was jolted forward with the impact. “What the hell?” She stomped on the gas pedal and shot forward, trying to outrun the maniac behind her.

Her whole body thrummed with adrenaline, and she struggled to remember her defensive driving. She switched lanes again and slowed, hoping to get a better look at him. The SUV slowed as well and started to drift over into her lane.

He rammed the rear panel of her car. Shana fought to keep the car from going into a spin. Her arms ached from the struggle to keep the

steering wheel under control. Her little rust bucket was no match for the monster gunning for her. She had to think of something, and fast.

Darting out in front of him, Shana tried to throw him off. He just followed her from lane to lane. If she kept this up, eventually she'd screw up and have an accident on her own. She was flying at speeds over eighty miles an hour, and knew her poor car didn't have much left in it. Her hand fumbled around, reaching for the phone she'd tossed on the seat.

No service. Damn. She was on her own. Shana tried to picture the road ahead. There was an almost forty-five degree curve, with an exit going off to the right. If she could make it there she could take the exit and get to a more populated area.

She'd just have to make it that far. Pushing the pedal as hard as she could, Shana prayed her little car wouldn't explode from the demands she was putting on it. The RPM's were in the red zone, and her steering wheel shook like a leaf in a hurricane.

A highway sign told her the exit was in one mile. She needed to hold on that long. One more minute and she'd be close to civilization.

The SUV must have sensed her intentions because it pushed against her, trying to drive her off the road. Shana fought back the best she could, but the engine started to struggle against the pressure.

"Come on, baby, hold on a little bit longer." Sweat ran into her eyes, but she didn't dare try to wipe the sting away. Her knuckles were white on the wheel as she tried to keep her car on the road.

The sound of metal scraping against metal rang in her ears as the car rubbed against the guardrail. A quarter of a mile to go, she could see a gas station at the bottom of the exit ramp. The SUV pulled over for one final charge, and Shana hit the brakes. Her muscles screamed in pain as she fought to keep the car on the road and not go into a tailspin.

The SUV shot past her, scraping against the guardrail a few times before hurtling down the highway. Shana tried to read the license plate, but the lights around it had been knocked out. She mentally logged as much information about it as she could. Dark blue, late model Explorer, one taillight busted.

Her car started to sputter as it rumbled down the exit ramp. She rolled into the gas station without stopping; afraid it would die if she did.

She wasn't wrong.

As soon as she stopped completely the engine gave two final coughs and died, a casualty of war. Shana laid her head on the steering wheel, and attempted to get her racing heart back under control. Her legs had turned to water miles back, and she didn't know when they'd be solid again.

The sound of her phone ringing just about made her pee her pants. It took her a minute to find the darn thing since it had fallen off the seat and slid around the floorboards somewhere.

Didn't it just figure? *Now* she was back in a service area. Finally digging out the phone along with a handful of McDonald's napkins, a pen cap, and something that might have once been a chicken nugget, she pressed the answer button.

"Hello?"

"What the hell is going on? Where are you?"

"Hi Royce." How much to tell him? On one hand, he was already so damn protective this might just push him over the edge. On the other hand, it would be kind of hard to explain what happened to the car. Crap.

"I'm not going to be able to get the pictures done tonight. I'll bring them by in the morning." Her voice was shakier than she would have

liked. Not exactly confidence inspiring to a client, but there wasn't much she could do about it.

"I don't give a rat's ass about the pictures. One minute you're telling me some guy is on your tail, and the next minute the connection is cut off and I can't get in touch with you. What happened?"

Shana watched as the teenager manning the booth at the gas station peered out at her through a gap in the blinds. He seemed only mildly curious and none too eager to help.

"Shana? I'm waiting." The impatience in his voice was almost palpable.

She sighed. She was going to need a ride home anyway. Might as well give him the edited version. "The guy on my tail was trying to scare me into driving off the road. Nothing happened, but the strain it put on my car was too much for the thing and it died. I'm at a gas station at the bottom of exit twelve off Route two."

"I'll be there in half an hour." He disconnected without another word.

"Good night to you too." Grabbing her purse, Shana headed to the little booth and bought a soda and a candy bar. She hadn't had supper anyway, and she needed a little sugar to counteract the shock hitting her. What she really needed was a cocktail, but she'd stick with Diet Coke for now.

Her poor car looked ready for the junkyard. Both sides had been scraped, the rear bumper was mangled, and it looked like one of her taillights was busted too. Damn it, this was her car. It wasn't like it was a Porsche or anything, but it was hers and it was paid for. Bastards.

Digging her notebook and a pen out of the back seat of the car, Shana took some notes. First she wrote down everything she could remember about the SUV to tell the police. Next she wrote down the names of all the people she had met at the bar, the casino, and the off-

track betting place. She tried to match the names to the ones David had given her, but none of them connected.

There had to be a clue in there somewhere. An SUV didn't just try to run her off the road because they didn't have anything better to do. Someone at that bar had seen through her act, she just had to figure out who. Whoever it was didn't like her nosing around.

Good. They were going to like it a lot less as she turned over every rock to find out all their dirty little secrets. She'd not only get Allison back, she'd make sure she had enough evidence to hand deliver to the D.A.'s office to put them away for a long, long time.

It'd be kind of hard to run someone off the road when you were playing house with a two hundred-and-fifty pound roommate named Bubba.

* * *

Royce pulled into the gas station on his motorcycle, wearing a tux and a helmet. He looked like something out of a James Bond movie and Shana couldn't help but appreciate the view. How did someone who spent most of his time in boardrooms and meetings have such a hot body? She'd have to ask him what he did to work out.

Shana could hear him cursing even over the roar of the motorcycle. This was going to be fun. *Not.*

"What the hell happened? This is a little bit more than someone trying to scare you. Someone tried to kill you!"

Here we go. "Tried being the operative word. They didn't kill me, now did they?"

"That's beside the point. Look at your car. It's totaled. It was bad before, but now you'll never get that thing running again."

Feeling defensive, and a little bit prickly from the adrenaline running through her system, Shana's back went up at his words. "Well excuse me. I'm sorry if I can't afford to have a garage full of cars, a limo, and a Harley at my disposal. This was the only car I could afford at the time, and she was a good one."

Oh God, she was choking up. This was ridiculous. It was only a stupid car, no reason for tears. But still, her throat felt scratchy and she had to blink back the wetness that threatened to spill over. She would not cry in front of Royce. It was such a stupid, girly thing to do.

"Are you going to give me a ride on that crotch-rocket or not?" She hid her face by shoving her notebook and pen in her oversized purse. Sniffing back her tears she swung the bag over her shoulder and walked to the bike.

Royce straddled it, his arms crossed over his chest and the helmet dangling from his fingers. As she got closer he pulled another helmet off the back of the bike and handed it to her without a word. His face remained blank, giving her no clue as to what was going on behind those beautiful blue eyes.

Damn him, why did he have to be so freaking hot? And she had to wrap her arms around him for the ride home. This was going to be torture.

Yeah, right. The little voice in the back of her head snickered. If that was torture, sign her up for the next Spanish Inquisition.

Strapping the helmet onto her head, she tucked the long tail of her braid into her jacket and gingerly climbed onto the back of the bike. Her feet barely reached the ground. If he hadn't been balancing it with his weight she'd have tipped right over.

"Hold on tight," he called through the speaker on the helmet.

"I'll be fine, just don't drive like a maniac. I've had enough excitement for one night." Shana grabbed a handful of his jacket, and tried to avoid touching him as much as possible.

"That's not going to work. You'll throw off my balance. Wrap your arms around my waist and move with me. I promise to take it easy, but if you don't cooperate I might as well call the limo to come get us."

"Yeah, that'll be real inconspicuous." She wiggled closer to him and wrapped her arms around his body, fighting the temptation to press her chest against his broad back. Thank God the helmet blocked out his scent or she'd be in complete sensory overload.

Apparently satisfied she wouldn't kill them, Royce revved the engine and pulled slowly out of the station. This wasn't so bad. Shana had never been on the back of a motorcycle; it was kind of nice to feel the wind blowing by her. Relaxing a bit, Shana let some of the tension ease out of her body.

Then Royce hit the highway.

Her arms vised around his waist and she clung to him like she could meld her body to his.

"Damn, you're stronger than you look," Royce's amused voice came through the headphones in the helmet.

"I've been trying to tell you that. Can't you slow down a little?"

"I'm not even going the speed limit yet. If I slow down we'll get run over. Don't worry, I know what I'm doing. I'm a safe driver. Just don't fight me when we move and we'll be home before you know it."

"I'm not worried. I just don't want to be plastered all over the highway."

"Trust me, we'll be fine."

"Right."

Royce wasn't lying, he was a good driver. After a few miles Shana let go of the death grip she had on his waist and enjoyed the ride. The road was almost deserted, and it felt like they flew through the night sky.

As she relaxed she became more aware of being pressed against his broad back. Her nipples started to tingle, and she was sure they'd be standing at attention if she weren't smashed up against Royce.

Good thing she'd left the jacket on. Her thighs pressed snugly against his backside, and suddenly decided to add their input into her already heightened state. A warmth that had nothing to do with the heat of the night moved through her body, spreading from her stomach to the point between her legs that was rubbing against the hot bod in front of her.

"How much longer until we get to my place?" Please God, let it be soon.

"Not long, I'm going to take some of the back roads just in case anyone is watching."

"Good thinking." Damn it, she should have thought of that instead of thinking with her hormones. She was the trained professional here, not some teenage girl with her first crush.

Crush? Where the hell did that thought come from? This was her boss, her client for God's sake, not some dude she met in a bar. *Get yourself under control Quinn!*

"Can I ask you a question?" Royce interrupted her silent rebuke.

"Shoot." Anything to distract her from the havoc he was wreaking on her libido.

"What are you wearing under that jacket?"

"Excuse me?" That wasn't what she was expecting.

"Something hard is jabbing into me and I wondered what it was."

“Oh.” So he wasn’t trying to find out the color of her bra. “I have my gun in a shoulder holster. It’s a little uncomfortable until you get used to wearing it, but it’s a lot easier than digging it out of my purse if I need it in a hurry.”

“I should probably feel better about you packing heat going into your meeting, but somehow the fact you’re wearing a gun doesn’t reassure me.”

They pulled into her driveway and Royce killed the engine before she had a chance to respond. Whipping off the helmet, Shana took a deep breath of the cool night air and tried to get her rampaging emotions under control.

“Tell me something. If it were Horton, or any other man, on this case would you still be so damn worried about every step of the operation?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He put the kickstand down and swung off the bike, pulling his helmet off.

“What I’m talking about is that you’re worried that I’m carrying a gun, you want to come with me when I go meet these guys, which would completely blow my cover, and you freak out because I had a little trouble on the highway.”

“A little trouble? That’s what you call your car getting turned into a sardine can? I’d hate to see what you consider big trouble.”

“You’re avoiding the question.”

Royce ran his hand through his already mussed hair and looked across the street for a minute. “If you were a man, I probably wouldn’t be as worried, no.”

“I knew it.” Shana climbed off the bike, as her heart dropped to her stomach. Why was it always the same? Just because she didn’t have a damn Y chromosome, no one in her life would take her seriously.

"Thanks for the ride, I'll get the pictures to you tomorrow. If David recognizes anyone have him call my cell." She tossed him the helmet and stormed towards her cottage.

"Don't get in a snit. I didn't say I didn't think you were competent, I just said I worry about you."

"It amounts to the same thing. You're worried because you think I can't do the job. And I'm not in a snit."

Royce grabbed her arm and turned her around to face him. His eyes blazed and a muscle twitched in his jaw. "Maybe I'm worried because I don't want to see you hurt? Did you ever consider that?"

"Oh yeah, right. And I'm sure you'd act the exact same way if it was Horton out here." She jerked her arm out of his grasp and stared him down.

"If it was Horton I wouldn't be trying not to do this every time I get near you."

Shana's breath caught in her throat as Royce pulled her into his arms and planted his lips on hers. This wasn't the gentle, teasing exploration from yesterday. This was a full assault on her defenses, and he wasn't taking any prisoners.

His tongue prodded the entrance to her mouth, and almost against her will Shana allowed him access. He tasted of mints and man, a devastating combination. Shana's arms crept up around his neck and pulled him closer. Her fingers twined in the hair at the collar of his jacket, the strands felt as silky as she'd imagined.

Royce's hand drifted up from her arm to the back of her head, angling her to get a deeper connection. Shana's breasts pressed against his chest, and found the experience just as stimulating as being pressed to his back.

“We have to take this inside,” Royce murmured against her throat as his lips moved to her earlobe.

“What?”

“Let’s finish this inside.” His tongue swirled around the shell of her ear, sending flames of heat right to her core.

She had to get things under control. “No. We’re not finishing anything. I can’t do this. I won’t do this.” Shana pulled herself out of his grasp and backed a safe distance away. With trembling knees she turned towards the cottage and kept moving.

“Shana!” Royce called from his spot. “This isn’t over.”

“I’ll send the pictures to you tomorrow.” She ignored his challenge as she fumbled in her purse for her keys. The damn thing was too big and she couldn’t find anything.

“It’s not going to go away just because you ignore it.”

“Wanna bet?” she muttered to herself. Finding her keys, she jammed them into the lock and wrestled to get the door open. “Goodnight. Thanks again for the ride. I’ll have a report on your desk by noon tomorrow.” Slamming the door shut, she leaned against it with her heart pumping so loudly she was surprised it hadn’t popped out of her chest.

Shana stayed against the door until she finally heard the bike start up and tear off. Thank God. She was half afraid he’d try to barge into the house for a second round.

Afraid? Or hopeful?

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Thanks for meeting me here. My car’s in the shop for a few days so I couldn’t drop these off.” Shana sat across from David in the coffee shop down the street from her house. She didn’t bother to tell him why her car was in the shop. Or that Royce didn’t know she was meeting David on her own.

“Sure. I don’t have a lot of time though, I have a meeting in an hour.” David looked around nervously. His left eye twitched and he avoided meeting her eyes as much as possible.

“This shouldn’t take long. Here, these are the pictures I took last night. Look carefully and tell me if you recognize anyone, anyone at all.”

Shana took the pictures out from under her jacket, and David flinched as she did so.

“What’s wrong with you? You’re more nervous than a long tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs.”

“You’re carrying a gun.” David’s voice cracked on the word “gun”.

“Yes I am. I have a license to carry it, and I know what I’m doing with it.”

“Royce told me about your demonstration the other day. Are you really a marksman—er woman?”

“Yes. My father’s a cop, I’ve been around guns my entire life. I know how to use them, and I have a deep respect for what they can do. Now look here please, I don’t want you to be late for your meeting.”

He actually seemed afraid of her. Shana didn't know if she should be pleased or insulted. David was easily six feet tall, and he was afraid of her. How about that?

David flipped through the pictures she had taken last night. Some of them were at weird angles because she hadn't wanted to be obvious about taking them, but for the most part they were pretty clear.

"See anyone familiar?"

"Not really. None of these guys are the ones I spoke to... Wait a minute. Who's this guy right here?" He pointed to one of the patrons at the bar.

"I don't know. He wasn't involved with me. Why? Who do you think he is?"

"I'm not positive, but that looks like the guy who approached me the first time and gave me the loan." David flipped through the other pictures rapidly.

"Yeah, look. See this tattoo? It's a dollar symbol on his forearm. And look. See the guy he's talking too? That was the guy he introduced me to. The one who took the code and paid off my debt." His voice lowered, "The one who told me I needed more or I'd never see Allison again."

Shana felt a sense of elation. They were getting closer. Yes! She resisted the urge to give David a high five when she saw the anguish on his face.

"We'll get her back, I promise you that. I'm getting closer and closer all the time. We'll nail these bastards."

David looked at her, really looked her in the eye for the first time since she'd met him. "I believe you. If anyone can get her back alive, it's you. I-I'm glad you're on the case. A-And, I never said this before, but thank you for saving me. You know, from the goons in the alley."

"No sweat. Now get going. I'll be in touch." Shana collected the pictures and put them back in the envelope. "And David, thank you for your faith in me. It means a lot."

He nodded once and then hurried away from her, coffee in hand. Maybe he wasn't such a bad guy after all. A little weak and definitely not in his brother's class, but not a bad guy. She gave him some time to get on the road before she collected her trash and headed out herself.

It was a nice day; maybe later on she'd go for a jog. Funny how finally impressing someone could change her whole outlook. Not that it was all that hard to impress David Renault. Must be hard for the guy to always be in his brother's shadow.

Speaking of his brother, wasn't that Royce's Mercedes in her driveway? Couldn't he take no for an answer? Her hormones jumped to attention, reminding her they didn't want to accept no either.

"What are you doing hanging around my place?" Shana stomped to the doorway where Royce tapped his foot impatiently.

"Where the hell have you been? I stopped by on my way to work to pick up the pictures for David and you weren't here."

"I already showed him the pictures, thank you anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"I called him this morning and we met up the street so I could show him the pictures. He recognized a few people and I'll check them out later on today. No big."

"Yes, big. I'll handle David. I hired you, you report to me."

"What's your problem? Are you afraid I'll hurt your little brother?"

"Don't you think he's been hurt enough as it is? He lost his wife, he's trying to overcome an addiction, and his daughter has been kidnapped. He doesn't need you bullying him."

"I don't bully. And maybe he could use a little push now and then instead of being coddled."

"Taking care of my brother is not coddling him."

"He's a grown man, don't you think it's time he started taking care of himself?"

"Leave him out of this, you don't know what you're talking about." Royce stepped away from the door and jammed his hands in his pockets.

"Leave him out of this? He's the whole reason we're in this. Open your eyes Royce, your brother screwed up, and he could take your whole company down with him."

"Don't you think I know that? Hell, he could take half the country down."

"What do you mean?" Shana got a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. "Let's go inside, I don't think we should be screaming at each other on the front steps."

"I thought you didn't want to be seen with me?" A wry smile crossed his face.

"Yeah well, that idea's been blown to hell. I'll think of something."

"We could still go with my idea." Royce followed her into the front hallway.

"Of you being my boyfriend? Who's going to believe that?"

"Anyone who saw the way you responded to my kiss last night."

Heat filled her face at his blatant reminder. "That was an aberration."

"I'd love to prove how wrong you really are, but I don't have the time this morning." He gave her a smug grin.

"Fine. Now tell me what you mean by David could take down half the country."

Royce pushed his hand through his hair and paced the length of her tiny living room. The heels of his dress shoes hitting the wood floor

echoed loudly in the silence. He heaved a deep sigh then turned to face her.

"I didn't want to have to tell you this, but you're in as deep as I am and you deserve to know what's going on."

"That would be a help."

Royce turned away from her. "I can't ever give up the part of the code I have. Even if it means Allison's life."

"Care to explain that a little more?" The sinking feeling turned into a drowning feeling.

"The codes these bastards want would enable them to create a virus that would infiltrate the computers at the Department of Defense. Every operative in the field would be identified. Every code word would be available to the public. The locations of every weapon the army has would be public knowledge."

"Wait a minute. What the hell are you working on?"

"The program we're working on builds firewalls for computers."

"Okay, I understand what that is. I have firewalls on my computer to keep folks from hacking into it. What's the big deal? I would think the Department of Defense would have plenty of firewalls in place already."

"They do. The program we are designing creates new ones once one has been penetrated."

"Like a self-defense mechanism?"

"A major self-defense mechanism. This type of software has never been seen before. It would essentially end hacking and computer viruses because the software would adapt and change according to what attacked it."

"So if the bad guys knew program code, they could modify it so it wouldn't work."

“Exactly.” Royce stuck his hands in the pockets of his dress slacks and leaned back against the wall.

“You said there were two other labs working on this project. What are they doing?”

“The same thing, essentially. That’s what makes this so foolproof. Three different programs are put into place, if one fails the other two are going to catch it.”

“How many people know about this?”

“Only a handful. Because of the databases we’re working with, only David and I have been writing the code. I wouldn’t let anyone else in on the project.”

“Obviously someone else knows what was going on or they wouldn’t have asked David for that code.”

“No kidding.”

“So who else would know about it?”

“The government liaison who contracted us, and the senate committee who approved us.”

“Then that’s where we’ll look.” Shana moved past him to the computer in the corner of her living room.

“Correction, it’s where I’ll look. You concentrate on the loan shark end of it. That’s what I’m paying you for, right?”

Ouch. Direct hit. So much for his talk about acting like her boyfriend. “Right. I’ll find the loan shark connection, and when I do I’ll find your niece.”

“And pray to God that it isn’t too late.”

* * *

The sense of urgency Shana felt was like a monkey on her back. The very safety of the world was at stake, and she wasn't sure she was up to that kind of challenge.

If Shana didn't find out who was behind this deal and where they were holding Allison, the girl would be dead in two weeks. If David convinced Royce to give up the code to save Allison, the world would get blown to smithereens. Talk about job pressure.

Shana shook off the self-doubt and focused on the notes she had typed onto her computer. One step at a time. That was all she could do. After all the talk of firewalls and hackers she had unplugged the phone line from the computer. A little paranoia could be healthy.

Transferring the digital pictures into the document, she added what information David had given her to it as well. When she was done, she'd save everything to a disk and put it in her safe deposit box, just in case.

Blowing up the picture with the guy David had fingered, Shana stopped mid-click. Wasn't that her old buddy Tony from the alley in the background? Zeroing in on the section of the picture, Shana tried to enlarge it further. Damn. It got too blurry to see.

Her gut told her she was right though. That was Tony looking out from behind the bar, and she'd bet her last bullet that he was the one who sicced the SUV on her. Hell, he was probably driving the SUV trying to get even.

She typed in that information too and saved it. Okay, what did she have? David didn't recognize the guys that gave her the money. Maybe they were just regular loan sharks? But, they were in the same place as the guys who had approached David.

Did they have that big of an organization? Could the ones who hit up David work for the same boss as the regular ones? She was going to have

to take some of these pictures down to the cop shop and see what she could find out.

Printing off the enlarged pictures, Shana popped the disk out of the machine and put it in her back pocket. She'd drop it off at the bank on her way to the police station.

No sooner had she stepped out of her house than her father pulled into the driveway. Crap. She'd have to postpone her trip to the police station. If she told her father she was going to the station he'd want to know why, and there was no way she was going to let him get involved in this mess.

"Hi, Dad." She went up on tiptoes to give him a peck on the cheek. "What brings you over today?"

"Just thought I'd stop over and see how the job search was coming along."

"I've got a few leads, thanks." She wasn't lying. She did have a few leads job related.

"Good, good." He shoved his hands in his front pockets. "I happened to run into Jack Munson. You remember him, don't you?"

"How could I forget? I did my private detective internship with him." The sot. In order to get her PI license she'd had to spend one year under the supervision of an already established private investigator. Jack Munson was a sleazebag PI who spied on cheating couples for outrageous sums of money. He'd hit on her and threatened to withhold his recommendation if she said anything. It was the worst year of her life.

"Yeah, I remember. Well, ah, I ran into him the other day and he mentioned maybe taking on a partner soon. He's not getting any younger you know."

Not again. "Oh Dad. I know you mean well, but I can do this on my own."

"I didn't do anything, I just ran into the guy, okay?"

"And where did you just run into him? The Stew?" The Stew was a local dive where Jack spent almost every day from noon until closing.

"So what if I did."

"Dad, I know you mean well, but I don't need your help."

"Where's your car?"

Shana didn't have the energy to fight him on this one. She wasn't working for Jack again if she had to sell a kidney to make ends meet.

"I had a small accident, it's in the shop. I should get it back in a few days." She hoped.

"An accident? Why didn't you call me?"

"Because I'm okay, Dad." *Because I'm a grown woman in case you've forgotten.*

"Do you want to borrow my car?"

The dark blue Crown Victoria that sat in the driveway all but screamed, "I'm a cop!" Which is probably why her father had bought it in the first place.

"Thanks, but I think I'll get a rental."

"It's not a sin to accept help, you know. You're too stubborn for your own good sometimes."

Tamping down the urge to tell him the apple didn't fall far from the tree, Shana took a deep breath and let it go. "Could you give me a lift to the bank and to the rental agency?"

"I guess." He looked slightly mollified and ambled over to his car.

Shana climbed in and tried to remember that he loved her and only wanted to help.

"So, you still working on that case?"

That's right, she told him she was working on a case study. They'd poured over case studies together most of her life. She learned more

about investigative reporting from her dad on rainy weekends than she did from four years of college and two years of detective school.

“Uh, yeah. I’m making a little headway.”

“Had to do with a loan shark, didn’t it?”

“Yeah. Maybe you can help me a bit.” It wouldn’t hurt to ask him for a little information. She’d just have to stand firm and not let him take over the case. *Boundaries, remember boundaries.*

“If you think you need it.” He all but rubbed his hands together.

Shana forced her jaw to unclench. “How big are some of these loan shark operations?”

“Usually you’ve got the shark, the go-between, and the enforcers. Sometimes one of the bigger guns will have two or three go-betweens, but not too often. The more people involved, the more chances someone will get caught and squeal. Plus, the more middlemen, the more the profit gets cut.”

“Would a loan shark work with someone else, say someone who was involved with white-collar crime?”

“Nah, too chancy. Drugs maybe, or even prostitution if you’re talking about a family operation if you get my meaning, but they stay away from white-collar stuff. Not a good return on their investment.”

“So, unless we’re talking about the mob, or one of the really big boys, the run of the mill loan shark has a small operation.”

“Usually. Some of the smaller operations team up with bookies, but the really big operations are in the cities like Vegas or Jersey. You wouldn’t see that big a shark in Connecticut.”

“Did you ever bust any of the big ones?”

“I only worked Vice for a year before I got moved to homicide. I never busted more than the occasional bookie or working girl. I know a few

guys that were in on a big one after I got promoted if you want me to introduce you to them.”

“Yeah, that would be great, Dad.”

“I’ll wait for you out here while you go to the bank,” he said as they pulled into the parking lot.

“I won’t be long.”

Shana dug the safe deposit key out of her pocket as she headed into the air-conditioned coolness of the bank. Maybe David got hooked into one of the bigger operations that had come around since her father left the department? Times change and crime seemed to grow very easily. She’d have to talk to one of her dad’s old cronies and find out about this guy David met. Maybe he’d recognize some of the pictures.

Depositing the disk safely in the box and locking it, Shana went to the car where her father was waiting.

“Okay, now off to the rental place.”

“I don’t see why you couldn’t borrow the car for a few days instead of wasting your money.”

“Because I don’t know how long my car will be in the shop, and insurance will pay for it.” Maybe. “There is one thing you can help me with though.”

“Shoot.”

“If something happens to me, take this key and go to my safe deposit box. There is a disk in there, I want you to give it to the D.A.’s office.”

“What are you up to Shana Mae Quinn?” He pulled into a parking space so he could face her.

“Probably nothing,” she lied. “But just in case I’m onto something I want to make sure all this work I’m doing isn’t wasted.”

"I want to know what you are doing, young lady. You wouldn't be putting things in safe deposit boxes and preparing for the worst if it was 'nothing'."

"Look, Dad. I'm doing a side job for someone, and I can't tell you about it. Client confidentiality."

"That doesn't hold for fathers."

"Yes it does." She turned to face him, and looked him right in the eye. "This is something I need to do for myself. You're going to have to have faith in everything you've taught me over the years. It's not like once I get my own business you'll be able to tag along on every case I have."

"I could if I was your partner," he grunted.

That's so not what she needed. Her father breathing down her neck, second-guessing every decision she made.

"I don't even have a business yet." That should hold him for a little while.

"Just don't be afraid to ask for help, okay?" He pulled out of the spot and headed out into traffic. "I'm trying to treat you like an adult. A, ah, friend of mine suggested maybe I've been a little stifling."

"Oh really? A friend? Would this friend be of the female persuasion?" That would explain why her dad had been gone so much lately. He'd had the occasional date while she was growing up, but nothing ever turned serious. Could her father finally be getting over her mother in his advancing years?

"And what if she is? You have a problem with that?"

"Me? No. It's about time." Maybe if he had a girlfriend? Lady friend? Companion? That would keep him from being on her case all the time.

"Really?"

"Really. So when do I get to meet her?" Anyone that got her father off her back was a-okay in Shana's book.

"I don't know. Let me talk to her about it and we'll see."

"Just say the word. Take a left at the next light, there's the rental place I called. You don't have to wait around for me, it takes forever to get through the paperwork."

"I'll check out the car for you, make sure they aren't trying to rip you off just because you're a girl."

"Da-ad." So much for him not stifling her.

"Alright. Alright, old habits are hard to break."

"I'm glad you're trying. Why don't you meet me at my place and I'll make us some lunch after I get done with this."

"Grilled ham and cheese?"

"If you swing by the store and pick up some sourdough bread and chips we can have a feast," Shana laughed, thinking back to one of the first meals she learned how to cook.

"You got it. I'll stop by the store and meet back at your place in half an hour."

Shana waited for her father to drive off before she went in to pick up her rental. Would wonders never cease? Not only was her dad dating someone, but he was trying to treat her like an adult. Shana felt like the planets were aligned and the stars were singing at this miracle.

'Bout time something went right.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Thanks for lunch, sweetie. I’ll get back to you about meeting with Gloria, and I’ll have Stan from Vice give you a call too.”

“You’re the best.” For the first time Shana felt like she dealt with her father as an equal. They’d talked more about the case, in general terms, and her father had listened to her theories without writing them off. He was a great sounding board for her, in a limited capacity.

Her father had just slid into the car when Royce’s Mercedes pulled in behind it.

Son-of-a-bitch.

“Who’s that?” Padraic climbed out of the car and rounded the hood so he stood near her again.

“Ah—” Shana’s mind worked furiously to think of an explanation for Royce coming to her house in the middle of the day. She couldn’t tell her father the truth, but she had never been able to lie to him with much success.

Royce must have seen the sheer panic in her expression because he put a smile on his face and walked over to her as if it was the most natural thing in the world for a millionaire to be hanging out at her cottage. Bending down, he gave her a peck on lips that were slack with astonishment. Royce slipped his tongue out for a quick taste and stood up again before she could figure out what he was doing.

“Hi honey, I thought I’d stop by on my lunch break and see if you wanted to join me for a bite.” He turned towards her father and held out his hand, “You must be Mr. Quinn. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Funny, I haven’t heard squat about you.” Padraic shook the proffered hand and squinted up at the much taller Royce.

“You haven’t told your father about us? I’m Royce Renault, Shana’s boyfriend.” Royce wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close. “Were you going to wait until we moved in together to tell your dad about me?”

“Move in together!” Padraic’s eyebrows went up to his hairline.

“We, ah, we’re still discussing it. Nothing’s been decided yet.” Shana stepped on Royce’s little toe and leaned all her weight on it.

“There’ll be none of that without a ring on your finger, missy.”

“Dad, can we talk about this some other time?” She did not need her father getting all protective in front of Royce.

“You bet we’ll talk about this again.” He nodded his head towards Royce and moved back to the driver’s seat. “Renault.”

Shana winced as her father slammed the door to his car and pulled onto the grass to get around Royce’s car.

“What were you thinking with that bit of lunacy?”

“You looked like you wanted to keep our business relationship a secret, so I made up a cover story.” His eyes sparkled with mischief.

“So you told him we were going to move in together? Do you have any idea what verbal tap dancing I’m going to have to do to get out of that one?”

“What are you talking about? You’re twenty-five years old. I’m sure he doesn’t expect you to go into the convent, he must know you’ve had boyfriends before.”

“What he knows and what he’s willing to accept are two different matters. I’ve learned to be very, ah, discreet when it came to my love life.”

“You mean you snuck around behind his back.”

“Not exactly. I just didn’t shove it in his face. I’m surprised you didn’t give him a heart attack springing that load of crap on him. Why couldn’t you just say you were stopping by to give me my last check or something?”

“I don’t know. The boyfriend thing kind of popped out of my mouth.”

“Like your tongue?” Her lips burned at the memory of his feather-light caress.

Royce’s face was full of laughter, “Yeah, like my tongue.” The laughter abruptly left his face. “Let’s go inside. There’s a couple of things I want to discuss with you before I leave for a fund raiser.” Royce placed his hand on her lower back and escorted her to the door.

“Let me guess, you have to go to another black tie event.” Shana tried not to think about how hot his hand felt against her, but she still fumbled as she tried to open the front door.

“Yes, I do. And you’ll be joining me.”

“Excuse me?” He was taking this boyfriend charade a little too far.

“Yeah, it’s a political event. Well, a quasi-political event. The wives of some of the congressmen have a charity for homeless children. Lots of politicians will be there trying to look like they give a damn about homeless children while sticking their hands out for campaign contributions. Anyway, seems to me that it would be a good opportunity for you to see if you recognize anyone.”

“I doubt Tony the enforcer is going to be rubbing elbows with one of our honorable senators.” Shana moved away from the temptation of his long fingered hand.

“No, but the Helen project is a government contract. It only makes sense for you to get to know some of the players involved. You never know what could happen. Besides, I want your company.”

“And what you want you get?”

“Not always.”

“I highly doubt that.” Shana snorted as she moved into the kitchen and took out a can of soda.

Taking the soda out of her hand, Royce cornered her against the kitchen counter. “Don’t doubt it. If I always got what I wanted, you’d be in my bed by now.”

“I don’t think that’s part of our contract.”

“We don’t have a contract, but this has nothing to do with our business relationship.”

His arms were planted on either side of her, caging her between the hard counter and his harder body. The temptation was strong to run her fingers up his torso to see if his abs were as well muscled as she thought.

“You know I could get away from you right now with two well-placed kicks.”

“Then why don’t you?” His head moved closer and closer to hers, his breath feathering against her cheek.

“Doesn’t make good business sense.”

“Screw business.” His mouth captured hers in a mind-blowing kiss that made her think a lot about screwing and very little about business.

Her arms reached up to pull him down, deepening the kiss. Heat flowed between them, spreading through her body and melting her bones on its way. A spiral of pleasure started to unfurl in her center, growing bigger and bigger with every touch.

It was her turn to make a move and she did so by sliding her tongue along his lips, seeking entrance. Their tongues dueled and danced,

causing more heat to spin through her body. Shana could feel her nether lips swelling and dampening, and she rubbed her hips against him to ease the ache growing.

Royce groaned and lifted her onto the counter. Moving between her knees, he pulled her against his chest, crushing her to him. The friction of his erection rubbing against her jeans made her blood roar in her ears and heat flow through her body like boiling lava. If he didn't touch her soon she knew she'd erupt.

As if sensing her thoughts, Royce moved his hand to her breast, and cupped it. His thumb tweaked her nipple, causing it to harden and throb. Her tee shirt was no protection against the heat of his hand, and Shana felt the burn clear to her toes.

Giving into the urges that had been riding her since the moment she laid eyes on him, Shana ran her fingers up Royce's torso, exploring his body through her fingertips. He definitely was as well-built as she had thought. Hard ridges of muscle moved under her hands as he gasped at her teasing caress.

"You're killing me," Royce muttered into her ear before stabbing it with his tongue. "Don't stop."

Shana threw her head back to give him better access to her neck and ears, loving the way his touch sent shivers of excitement to her core. He tormented her with every touch of his hand, his lips, and his tongue.

Royce pulled her closer to the edge of the counter, and reached down to unsnap her jeans. As she leaned forward to kiss the strong column of his throat, the shrill ringing of the phone jolted her out of her sensual daze.

Talk about a buzz-kill. But maybe that was a good thing. She shouldn't be getting hot and heavy with Royce Renault of all people.

"Hello?" Her voice was husky with suppressed desire.

“Watch yourself, lady. You’re in way over your head.” The voice was muffled, like someone was talking through a sock.

“Who is this?” A sharp click and the dull buzz of the dial tone were her only answer.

Shana hung up the phone and moved to the other side of the room, as far away from Royce as she could get in the tiny kitchen. Her knees were like water and her legs shook. She needed a little space so she could think about the call, and not what was going on before that.

“Who was it?” Royce watched her from across the room with hungry eyes. She could see the evidence of his arousal jutting out in his dress pants, but he didn’t pursue it.

“Someone who isn’t happy with the direction of my investigation.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I’m getting closer, and someone doesn’t like it, so they’re threatening me, trying to scare me away.”

“And this is a good thing?” Royce looked at her with an incredulous expression on his face.

“It is if you want me to find your niece.”

Royce opened his mouth like he wanted to say something, then closed it and shook his head. He ran his hand through his hair and tried again. “So, I’ll pick you up at seven. Dinner is at eight-thirty with a cocktail hour beforehand.”

“What? No way. I have to track down this call, follow some leads, maybe hit the police station and check out some of the mug shots Vice has. I can’t go with you, I have too many other things going on.”

“And they’ll all be there tomorrow. You have an appointment at Salon Beaux Dames for, I don’t know, girl stuff. I told them to give you the works. You need to be there at three. I’ve arranged for the limo to take you, so be ready.”

“Aren’t you listening to me? I’m not going.”

“I’ll see you tonight. And don’t worry about not having anything to wear, my secretary is taking care of that, too,” Royce called over his shoulder as he headed out the door.

“Then she’ll have to take it all back. I’m not going.”

Royce stopped in the doorway and trapped her eyes with his blazing blue orbs. “Yes, you are. Someone leaked information that made my niece a victim. Someone who could possibly be at this party. I want to find out who it was, and you’re going to do it for me.”

Well, when you put it that way. “Fine. But that doesn’t mean I’m your date. This is business.”

“Screw business.”

* * *

What the hell was she supposed to do for four hours at a salon? Shana’s usual concession to beauty was to get her long, brown hair trimmed every six months. She wore it in a ponytail or a braid most days so styling wasn’t a priority to her.

Sitting in the back of the limo Shana bit at a loose hangnail. Spending hours doing girl stuff was way out of her realm of experience. The driver moved around to open the door, and Shana had the urge to lock him out.

Stepping out of the limo was one of the hardest things she’d ever done. With her huge purse clutched to her chest, she smiled weakly at the driver and headed for the entrance. A uniformed doorman looked down his nose at her tee shirt and jeans, making her want to crawl right back inside the lush interior of the car.

Giving the snooty doorman her best “bite me” look, she breezed past him into the lobby. It looked like a rainforest had exploded inside the building. A receptionist desk sat behind two overflowing plants with huge leaves. Shana walked up to it with as much confidence as she could muster.

“Can I, ah, help you?” The skinny little teeny-bopper looked at her with something akin to horror.

“Yes. I have an appointment I believe. Shana Quinn.”

The girl sniffed in her direction and flipped open her book. As she ran her finger down the appointments her eyes widened. “There you are, Ms. Quinn. Mr. Renault has requested our Inca Goddess package for you. Right this way.”

The pixy practically genuflected now. What the hell was the Inca Goddess package? Didn’t the Incas make sacrifices to their goddesses? If anyone came at her with tongs to rip out her heart, she was out of here.

The pixy opened the door to a room painted in a soft gold color with a couch-like chair in the center. She handed Shana a thick gold robe and matching terry cloth slippers.

“Just leave your, uh, clothes on the bench over there with your purse and I’ll send someone in for them.”

Goddess treatment or no, the chick couldn’t prevent a sneering twist of her lips.

“I’ll keep the purse with me thanks. I’ll need my inhaler.” She didn’t have an inhaler, but her gun was in the purse and she wasn’t letting it out of her sight.

“Of course, Ms. Quinn. Just get undressed and Fawn will be in with you in a moment.”

Great, she was supposed to get naked and wait for someone named Fawn. It sounded like something out of a porno movie.

As she got undressed and into the robe, Shana checked out the room a little more. One wall had a table full of bottles and tubes, all with the salon's logo on them. Next to the padded lounge chair a tray held implements better suited to a dentist chair. Or maybe a torture chamber.

A soft knock at the door interrupted her thoughts, and in walked a woman who looked far removed from a fawn. Fawn was close to six feet tall and muscular. She looked like she should be playing basketball—in the NBA.

“Oh good, you're ready. Now just sit back and relax. We're going to start with a scalp massage, then an acupressure massage. After you're nice and relaxed you'll have a facial, body exfoliate, seaweed wrap, paraffin treatment, manicure, and pedicure. Then you'll get your hair done and you even have an appointment with our makeup consultant before you leave.”

“Oh. Great.” Shana wasn't even sure what half of those things were.

“You're in for a marvelous afternoon. We don't get many Goddess Packages.”

“Guess I'm just lucky.” She was going to kill Royce.

Fawn might not look like a beauty consultant, but she had the most marvelous hands. Shana felt herself relaxing into the chair as warm, lavender scented oils were massaged into her scalp. The lights were dimmed to a golden glow, and the sound of some stringed instrument played softly in the background.

Maybe this girly stuff wasn't so bad.

Shana was rubbed, patted, prodded, plucked and creamed all afternoon. She had no idea what was in the water they kept giving her, but by the time she got to the manicure and pedicure, a leg and bikini wax seemed like a wonderful idea.

That notion quickly vanished at the first tug of hot wax against her inner thigh. The pink-coated sadist that ripped Shana's leg hairs out by the roots refused to listen to any pleas for mercy, but blithely continued to pour on the hot wax and rip it off in strips. Shana was almost whimpering by the time the ordeal was over. Man, her black belt test hadn't been this painful.

Fawn came bustling back into the room with her arms full of bags and boxes. Were those more implements of torture? These guys could teach the KGB a thing or two. First they lulled you into a false sense of security with the massages, then they got you to agree to cruel and unusual punishment.

Although, now that the sting had faded away a bit, Shana grudgingly agreed it would be nice to not have to shave for a week. And her legs looked so smooth, maybe it was worth it.

"Honey, I don't know what you did to land Royce, but you should write a book about it. You'd make millions." Fawn ran to her with sheer rapture on her face.

"What?" She hadn't done a single thing to entice Royce. Not that the thought hadn't crossed her mind a time or two, but she hadn't acted on it.

"Here, read this note, I'm sure it will explain everything. This is just like a fairy tale!"

Shana and Fawn had bonded over the hours they had spent together. The beautician had taken it upon herself to coax Shana into taking full advantage of the package Royce had bought for her and introduced her to all the little girly pleasures Shana had never even known existed.

That still didn't explain the fairy tale comment. Taking the note Fawn shoved in her face, Shana opened the envelope with the Renault logo engraved on it and opened it.

S—

Here is everything my secretary thought you'd need for tonight. I'll pick you up at the salon since she also informed me I didn't allow enough time for you to get ready.

R.

Not exactly the love note Fawn expected. Shana hoped that Royce's secretary knew what she was doing. It wasn't like Shana had a lot of fashion options for a black tie function. She had the suit she'd bought for the job interview, a black dress that did double duty for weddings and funerals, and a few pairs of black pants she used for everything else.

Fawn nudged her arm to get her attention. "Come on. Don't you want to see what he bought you?"

Shana came out of her daze as Fawn dragged her over to a table where the packages were laid out. "I'm coming, I'm coming. Slow down. Your legs are twice as long as mine and my toes are still crammed into these separator things."

Fawn either didn't hear her or didn't care, because she pulled Shana along without stopping.

"Look. This is from Donna Karen. And these! These are Ferragamos. Do you have any idea how much these cost? What are you waiting for? Open them up!"

"If you'd let me get near them maybe I could." She didn't know Donna Karen from K-Mart, but it must be something good cause Fawn all but drooled over the bags.

Reaching for the bag with the hanger sticking out of the top, Shana's hands shook as she opened it. Why was she so excited? It was just some

stupid dress she'd have to give back when the night was over. Fawn's enthusiasm must have rubbed off on her.

"Oh my God! With your coloring this is perfect." Fawn clapped her hands and bounced in excitement over the midnight blue dress.

"If you say so." Shana didn't see what the connection was between brown hair and a blue dress, but she'd take Fawn's word for it.

"Oh, absolutely. With your blue eyes and dark hair, this is so much classier than if he'd gotten you black. Take it all the way out, we'll steam it a bit to freshen it up before you put it on."

Shana thought Fawn just wanted a better look at it, but did as she was told.

"That is gorgeous. I can't wait to see you in it."

"Me either."

The dress was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. Made out of a dark blue clingy material, it was covered in shimmering sparkles that caught the light with every shift. Floor length with a halter-top, it had a slit that would reach to mid-thigh. It was also completely backless with a low-cut front as well.

This could be a problem.

"Crap."

"Crap? You look at thousand-dollar dress and say crap? What is wrong with you?"

"Nothing is wrong with me, except I'm barely five feet tall. Everything I buy I have to get hemmed, I don't exactly have a seamstress on call you know." Not only that, how in the world was she going to hide a weapon in a dress like that?

"Oh. I guess I never thought of that."

Shana looked at the Amazon next to her with more than a little bit of envy. "You wouldn't."

“Open the shoe box, maybe they’ll take care of the problem.”

“Only if he bought me stilts.” Shana snorted, but opened the box anyway.

“I knew those were Ferragamos!” Fawn practically cooed. “You short girls get all the good shoes. They don’t make heels like this in size ten, I tell you.”

“I don’t care who makes them, I’ll break an ankle in those things.” Shana lifted the spiked heels and winced. They would make her taller all right; too bad she wouldn’t be able to walk in them. The platforms were easily two inches tall, and the stiletto heels had to be close to six inches.

“Don’t be ridiculous. It’s just like wearing any other heels.”

“None of my heels end in ice picks.” Shana wore heels out of necessity, but they were chunky and easy to walk in, not lethal weapons.

“Stop whining. You just have to take your time and walk slower in them. Look, he even got you underwear.”

A blush filled Shana’s face at the sight of the blue thong. Did the secretary buy them on her own or did Royce tell her to? Did he think he was going to see that on her? Did she want him to?

“What? Don’t tell me he’s never seen you in your underwear before?” Fawn looked shocked. “He’s spending thousands of dollars on you for one night and you haven’t even slept with him yet?” Her plucked eyebrows arched half way to her hairline.

“It isn’t like that.”

“Honey, a guy doesn’t spend this much money on you if it isn’t like that, or going to be very soon.”

Shana didn’t know what to say to that, but luckily another pink-coated “technician” came to tell her they were ready for her in the hair salon.

“She needs to have an up-do, with some dangling curls around her face,” Fawn directed, not even asking Shana what she wanted.

Not that Shana knew what an up-do was. Hell, Fawn hadn’t steered her wrong yet, might as well go for the whole enchilada. If Royce was going to play her fairy godfather tonight, he might as well get the princess instead of the pumpkin.

Too bad her chance to play Cinderella would end at midnight.

CHAPTER NINE

“So glad you could make it, Royce, and I’m just thrilled you were able to bring your date with you at the last minute.” Mitzi Rothchild eyed Shana like a shark eyed raw meat. The senator’s wife might wear diamonds and rubies, but she was as bloodthirsty as any predator Shana had seen.

“All for a good cause, Mitzi. Is the senator here?” Royce handed the shawl he’d given Shana only minutes ago to the doorman and kissed the proffered cheek of his hostess.

“He’s running late, I’m afraid. You know how these public servants are, always busy with last minute meetings and what not. I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name dear.” Mitzi rubbed her jewel-encrusted hand up and down Royce’s arm and shot Shana a challenging look.

“This is Shana Quinn. David introduced us a few weeks ago and I haven’t been able to think about anything else sense.” Royce pulled himself away from the sparkling piranha and wrapped his arm around Shana’s bare shoulders.

“How charming.” Her tone was anything but.

“Yes, Royce can be very persistent when he sets his mind on something. You have a lovely home Mrs. Rothchild.” *Keep it simple, don’t play her game. Just be polite and let Royce handle the chitchat.*

“Yes, he can be very stubborn sometimes.”

“I think we should let you greet your other guests, Mitzi. We don’t want to monopolize the hostess after all.”

"I really should mingle. Be sure to save a dance for me, dear."

"Of course." Royce practically carried Shana away.

"Slow down. Your secretary is trying to kill me with these shoes she bought me." Although, they were the right height to keep her dress from dragging on the floor. The woman knew her fashion.

"I think she did a fantastic job picking out your outfit. You look stunning. And I'd hate to ruin the dress with Mitzi's claw marks. Shall we see what the bar has to offer?"

"I'll have seltzer water and lime." Royce slowed down enough for her to walk at a safe pace. "So, did you actually sleep with her, or is it just wishful thinking on her part?"

"Excuse me?" Royce's gait slowed a bit with surprise, but he kept a smile on his face.

"If she showed you any more of her cleavage, you'd have been able to tell me her cup size."

"Don't remind me. No, I don't poach, especially with a man-eater like her. I prefer to pick my own lovers, not be chased down like a rabbit."

Was he trying to tell her that he was picking her as a lover? Better not go there. Right now she had to keep her wits about her and her eyes open. Who knew what she might overhear with all the movers and shakers in the room tonight.

"Tell me again how this necklace works." Shana took her hand off Royce's arm and fiddled with the pendant hanging down between the upper slopes of her breasts. "And how did you get it to match the dress so well at the last minute?"

"Nancy told me what color dress she had picked out and I told R and D which stone front to use." Royce got their drinks from the bar and led her towards the display of fruit and cheeses set up in the dining room.

“How does it work?” Shana put a few grapes on her plate and a couple crackers. With her luck she’d spill dip down the front of her dress.

“A lot like the camera you have in your pen. There’s a little switch on the loop where the chain goes through. If you push that down it will take a picture. You only have thirty shots, so don’t fool around too much.”

“I won’t. My pen only holds about fifteen, I’m used to picking my targets.”

“I don’t know if you’ll need it anyway, but it makes for a good beta run.” Royce popped one of her grapes into his mouth, and Shana couldn’t help but remember what those lips felt like against hers.

Focus on the job, Quinn. Remember, this is all just a fantasy, you’re here to do a job, not lust after the boss.

“So that’s the reason you wanted me here? To test out your newest gismo?”

“Well, I do think you might be able to glean some information from some of the people here. Everyone on the government end of the Helen project will be here, someone is bound to slip.”

“Maybe. I’ll keep my ears open.”

“Good. Meanwhile, I’ll keep my eyes on you. You should wear dresses more often, you’re positively ravishing tonight.”

Shana pushed down the wave of hunger that crept into her system at the hot look in his eyes. *Focus. Keep your mind on the job.*

“If I wore dresses like this all the time I wouldn’t exactly blend into the crowd. Besides, do you know how hard it was to wear a gun in this thing?” She waved her hands down the skintight dress.

“Please tell me you’re joking?” Royce closed his eyes.

“I’m joking. I left my gun in my purse.” She had slid her switchblade into a garter belt she bought at the salon’s gift shop though.

"I don't think our safety should be an issue tonight, but just in case I'll keep you close by my side to protect me." Royce's tuxedo-clad chest rubbed against her bare arm.

"From criminals or from frustrated Stepford wives?" She really should step away, and create some distance. And she would, in a minute.

"From the wives of course. They're much more dangerous."

A large hand clapped her on the shoulder and cut off her laugh.

"Royce, my boy, I thought that was you. And who do we have here?"

"Hello Senator Downy, nice to see you. This is Shana Quinn. Shana, the honorable Senator Downy."

Shana shook hands with the beefy senator, her smaller one seeming to get swallowed up by his much larger one. He had the plastic look she associated with all politicians; white hair neatly combed in a perfect wave, square jaw closely shaven, his tie was perfectly tied and the gold cufflinks understated. A perfect gentleman, to all appearances.

He gave her the willies. "A pleasure to meet you, Senator." Shana tried to pull away from him and move closer to Royce. Downy's hand was still on her bare shoulder and he squeezed her once before letting go. She knew right then and there he was a bully. He wanted her to know that he was bigger and stronger and could do what he wanted.

"Mitzi tells me David introduced you. How is David doing these days?"

"Just fine. He'd be here tonight but he's working on a project and doesn't want to leave it at a crucial time."

"You two boys, always working on one project or another. You have to learn to take some time off, enjoy life. When you get as old as I am you learn that you aren't going to live forever." He laughed self-deprecatingly.

"I'm sure you'll be around for a long time, Senator."

"I hope to be, son, I hope to be. Now, you're not going to hide your beautiful date in here all evening are you? There's dancing on the patio after dinner. I'll be looking for you."

"We'll see you then. Isn't that your wife waving? She's talking with Senator Rothchild."

"Looks like Jim finally got here. He had some last minute meeting or something. I better go see what he wants. I'll see you on the dance floor."

"Not if I see you first," Shana mumbled under her breath.

Royce held his fake smile in place until the senator was out of earshot, then a possessive look crossed his face. "If the senator asks you to dance, I highly recommend making an excuse."

"Oh really?" Shana didn't have any intention of dancing with the touchy-feely senator, but she didn't especially care for the way Royce was looking at her either.

"Really. Unless you want to be groped on the dance floor by a seventy-year-old man."

"No thanks. I'm not sure he'd appreciate my gut reaction to being groped. Isn't it against the law to geld a U.S. Senator?"

Shana moved back aside in time to avoid getting Royce's drink spewed down the front of her.

"I imagine it would be. Why don't you just stick with me and we'll get out of here as quickly as possible."

"I thought you wanted me with you to look for clues?"

"I did, but more I just wanted you with me because these things are boring as hell. At least with you by my side I won't have to worry about falling asleep."

"I could see where going to bed would be a welcome alternative to an evening spent with these people." Shana put her plate down and turned towards the dining room where dinner was announced.

“Darlin’ going to bed with you would be a welcome alternative to just about anything.” Royce placed his hand on her lower back, his fingers mere inches from her derriere.

The heat of his touch on her naked skin had an almost branding effect. Every nerve ending in her body was suddenly wide-awake, and the feel of the dress rubbing against her breasts was a tease. Dear God, those sticker things Fawn had given her to wear over her nipples better work, or everyone in the place would know exactly what was going on in her body.

As they passed a mirror in the hallway, Shana got a look at the two of them together, saw her own desire reflected in Royce’s gaze. Yeah, like anyone was going to miss that. She might as well be wearing a sign declaring, “I’m in lust.”

As they approached the gigantic table set with enough sterling and crystal to finance a small country, Mitzi floated over to them.

“I’m so sorry Royce, there’s been a small mistake with the seating arrangements.” She fiddled with the diamond and ruby pendant around her neck.

“What type of mistake?” Royce ran his hand lightly up and down Shana’s back, sending chills through her body.

“We didn’t know you were bringing a guest, you see, and I’m afraid you aren’t sitting together. It’s too late to rearrange things now, I hope you don’t mind.”

“We can always take our plates and sit somewhere else,” Royce told her with a frown.

Shana knew the mistake was a ploy, but didn’t want Royce to make a scene. She might actually be able to learn something if the people she was sitting next to thought she was a brainless piece of ass Royce had picked up.

“Don’t worry about it, honey. You’ll have me all to yourself for the rest of the night. I’m sure I can survive the dinner hour without you.”

Royce didn’t look pleased at her words, but Mitzi cut off anything he might have said. “See, there, we’re all settled. And look, here’s Jim. He can escort your date to her place. You’re with me at the head of the table.”

“I’ll be fine. Enjoy your dinner conversation.” Shana waved Royce off and almost laughed out loud at his look of disgust. Hey, it was his idea to come to this party, not hers.

“I see my wife has absconded with your date, leaving me the enviable job of leading you to your seat. You’re Miss Quinn, are you not?”

“Yes I am, and you must be Senator Rothchild.” Shana laid her hand lightly on the arm the senator offered her.

“Please, call me Jim. You’ll probably be the only one at my end of the table worth talking to all night. All the stuffed shirts my wife invites for their connections and their wallets but doesn’t want to be bothered entertaining will be at our end.”

Shana laughed at his charm and candor. “Don’t you need those stuffed wallets for the charity?”

“That helps, but all they want to talk about is how the stock market is doing, or their latest car, boat, or house.”

“Oh, and what would you like to talk about? Please don’t say politics.”

“Lord no, I get enough of that all day. How about baseball? Tell me, Red Sox or Yankees?” Jim held her chair for her and waited for her to adjust herself before moving to his place at the end of the table.

“Forth generation of die hard Red Sox fans I’m afraid.”

“You poor thing. Me too, but then again, I’ve always had a thing for the underdog.”

“No kidding Jim, that’s why you lose nearly every bet you place.” A large, balding man huffed his way into the seat next to Shana, jostling the whole table in his effort to get situated. As he lumbered his way into the seat, Shana got a strong whiff of whiskey coming off him. He obviously took advantage of the cocktail hour.

“Yeah, but when I win, I win big.” Jim’s eyes were cool.

“That’s the same song you’ve been singing for years, and you still haven’t broken even. So what are we having for dinner anyway? I hope it’s not some fru-fru meal that looks like a flower and doesn’t fill you up.”

Mitzi glared at the man from the other end of the table. “You’ll be happy to know, Sid, that we are having Beef Wellington. That should be enough to satisfy even your appetite.”

“Ha! Don’t bet on it, Mitzi,” Sid shot back.

Shana wasn’t sure if he was joking or not. How interesting though, that the senator liked to gamble. She’d file that piece of information away for later.

Trying not to spill any of the gazpacho on her dress, Shana searched for something intelligent to say. All her schooling hadn’t really prepared her for hobnobbing with millionaires and congressmen.

“So Senator—Jim—do you think this will be the year the Red Sox go all the way?” Shana ventured.

“I’ve got a good feeling about this year. They’ve got the pitching to go far in the post-season for once.”

“For your sake, I hope they do, Jim. How much do you have riding on them this year?” Sid buttered a roll and crammed it into his mouth.

“Let’s not talk about a gentleman’s agreement in front of mixed company.” Jim looked embarrassed at her table partner’s big mouth. Embarrassed? Or afraid?

She'd have to make a point of getting the talkative Sid alone for a few minutes later on.

"No problem. So, you still thinking of selling your place in the Hamptons?" Sid asked around a mouthful of food. "With the tennis courts, pool, and heli-pad, I might be interested in it myself."

"Maybe. We really don't get up there much these days. Seems like a waste to have a summer place when we're never in it. Why don't you give me a call on Monday after I talk to Mitzi about it."

"Will do, will do. God, I hate this cold soup crap."

Which didn't stop him from sopping up the last of the gazpacho with another dinner roll.

So, the senator liked to gamble, didn't do it well, and was thinking about selling his house in the Hamptons. He and David had an awful lot in common.

"How did you meet Royce?" Shana asked the senator, doing her best to look guileless.

"Renault Technologies has done several contracts for the government. They always come in at or under bid, are done on time, and offer ongoing technical support."

"And their stock is growing every year." Sid ate his sherbet in two bites and clanked his spoon on the plate loudly.

"How did you meet him? Mitzi said something about David introducing you." Jim smiled politely at her.

Despite his good old boy act, the senator was on the ball, swiftly turning the tables on her.

Shana considered her answer carefully. "I met David through mutual acquaintances, and he thought Royce and I would get along. The rest is history." Well, it was sort of true.

“Interesting. Funny how a chance meeting can change the course of a person’s life.” Jim’s eyes faded in memories for a minute but snapped back when Sid spoke up.

“Enough of this philosophizing, what do you think the market is going to do?”

Shana sat back so Jim and Sid could discuss their stock portfolios. She had a lot to think about.

* * *

“Did you enjoy your dinner?” Royce joined her as soon as the dessert course was finished, and pulled her away from the table almost before she could finish her Crème Brule.

“It was very interesting. And informative.”

“What do you mean by that?” Royce led her onto the dance floor and pulled her close so he could whisper in her ear.

At least that’s what she thought he was doing. The feel of his hand on her back, the brush of his starched tuxedo shirt against her lightly covered breasts, and the touch of his lips against the shell of her ear were all serving to send her brain into a hormone induced fog.

“Uh, well, I think the good senator might have a gambling problem.”

“Jim? Are you sure? I’ve known him a long time. He’s one of the few people on Capitol Hill that I can honestly say I believe.”

“Well, he’s selling his house in the Hamptons, and he and Sid have a ‘gentlemen’s agreement.’ Sure sounds like he’s gambling to me.”

“You could be right, but don’t discount other possibilities.”

Shana lifted her head from his chest and looked Royce in the eye. “I know how to do my job. I’m just putting that information in with the rest. The more I find out, the better I’ll be able to put the pieces together.”

"I'm not telling you how to do your job, you've proven to me that you know what you're doing. I just can't imagine Jim getting into something that would put a child at risk."

"Desperation makes you do crazy things. Anyway, it's just one piece of the puzzle, I'm not jumping to any conclusions."

"Good." Royce drew her head back down to his chest.

"How was your dining experience? Every time I looked, you seemed to have the ear of everyone listening." Shana didn't want to think about how often she had looked at Royce during dinner.

"I was doing my best to keep from dumping my water glass in Mitzi's lap. She had her hand on my thigh so often I'm surprised she didn't leave marks."

"Poor baby, it's not easy being rich and sexy, is it?"

"I'd settle for being poor and alone right about now. What do you have on under this dress anyway?"

"You don't know?"

"No. Nancy left at lunchtime and went shopping with my credit card. The only thing she told me was the color of the dress."

"Oh, well, let's just say Nancy has great fashion sense and a distaste for panty lines."

Royce's hand brushed over Shana's thinly clad behind, sending a flash of heat straight to her groin. And apparently one to his as well because she felt a telltale bulge pressing against her.

"I'm sending that woman flowers on Monday." Pulling her closer, Royce rubbed his erection against her stomach, showing her how aroused he really was.

Shana looked into his blue eyes and shivered at the hunger that burned in them. This was getting out of control. Her knees were weak, and her heart beat so loudly she was surprised he couldn't hear it. She

was on the verge of grabbing him and dragging him out to the gardens so she could jump him. What was wrong with her?

“Do you think you’ve had enough of this place for one night?” Royce leaned into her, his forehead rested against hers, and his lips were a breath away.

“Way more than enough.”

“I’ll say goodbye to the Rothchild’s, you go get your wrap.”

“I need to hit the bathroom first, I’ll meet you by the door.”

Shana headed for the powder room in a daze. Did she know what she was getting into? She could deny it all she wanted, but her body wasn’t playing games. It wanted Royce and the rest of her better get with the program or it was going to take over.

Opening the door to the bathroom, Shana splashed cold water on herself, trying to calm down. She repaired her makeup and was headed out the door when she heard Senator Downy’s booming voice. Playing coward, she clicked the light off and hid in the bathroom, hoping to avoid him.

“Jim, a minute of your time.”

“What is it Peter? I’ve got to get back to the party or Mitzi will have my hide.”

“This won’t take long. Have you talked to Sid about that matter we spoke of?”

“Briefly. He’s going to be calling me on Monday.”

“Good. I’d hate to see your career ruined over something so trivial.”

“I’m taking care of it. Now, if you’ll excuse me I need to attend to my guests. Looks like Royce is saying goodbye, and I don’t want to see him attacked by my wife.”

The senator gave a greasy laugh, “I’ll bet that little spitfire of his could handle Mitzi. She doesn’t look like the type to put up with someone messing with her man.”

She waited until their voices faded away before cracking the bathroom door open. It sounded like Downy knew Sid too. And what could the “trivial” matter be that might end Jim’s career? She had a lot to think about.

With a quick scan to make sure the hallway was clear, Shana straightened her dress and stepped out of the powder room. Her mind turned over the conversation she’d heard as she walked carefully towards the front door where Royce waited for her.

So Downy thought she had a claim on Royce. That was the plan, wasn’t it? A temporary role she was playing to do her job. A charade that would end as soon as they stepped into the limo.

If that was the case, then why was she scared to death to go home with Royce?

CHAPTER TEN

"You're awfully quiet. Something on your mind?" Royce worked the foil off a bottle of champagne that chilled in the back of the limo.

"Just thinking."

"Care to share with the class?" Royce poured the bubbling froth into two beautiful champagne flutes.

"What do you know about Downy other than he's a womanizer?"

"Not too much firsthand. Lots of gossip and innuendo. He's on the subcommittee that approved one of the projects we did for the Department of Defense a long time ago. The one that funded the development of that necklace you're wearing as a matter of fact."

"So he wasn't involved at all with the Helen project?" The wheels in Shana's head spun. Something was wrong with Downy, and it wasn't just that he was a smarmy politician.

"No, Jim was and a couple of other senators I introduced you to tonight. Pete Downy is in charge of foreign intelligence. You know, the C.I.A."

"Yes, I know what the foreign intelligence is. How about Sid? What do you know about him?" Shana slipped off her heels and curled her legs up on the seat.

"Now that's a player I don't know much about at all. I believe he's a campaign contributor, a big contributor. He started hanging around about six months ago. No one says much about him, and Mitzi shuns him like he's a leper."

“Yet he’s always invited.”

“If you’re running for re-election you don’t have to like someone to take their money.”

“I know, but there is something going on between Jim, Downy, and Sid. I overheard Downy asking Jim if he had spoken to Sid about a matter they were discussing. There’s some connection there.”

“Maybe it has something to do with campaign contributions?”

“I know you like Jim, and I do too, but it doesn’t mean he isn’t involved. He likes to gamble, and he doesn’t win at it. Remind you of anyone?”

“What are you trying to say?” Royce’s eyebrows furrowed and the muscle in his jaw began to twitch.

“It sounds like David and Jim have a lot in common, and maybe that’s why David got targeted. He’s your weak link.”

“Will you lay off David? He hasn’t had an easy time of things you know.”

“Isn’t that too bad. I’m sorry if I don’t have more sympathy for someone who made his own messes and expects everyone else to clean them up.”

“You don’t know what you are talking about.” Royce’s hands were white on the champagne flute.

“Maybe I don’t, but I do know that it’s his fault your company is in trouble, and it’s his fault his daughter has been taken, yet you’re the one paying me to get her back while he sits home and whines.”

“I owe him, okay? I’m the reason his wife is dead and he’s raising Allison on his own. I’ll do whatever I have to do to make up for that.”

He was the reason David’s wife was dead? What did that mean?

“Care to explain that a little?” Shana knew she wasn’t going to like what Royce had to say, but something inside of her pushed her to find out. It was like wiggling a loose tooth—it hurt but you had to keep at it.

“No, I don’t want to talk about it.” He drained the champagne and put the glass down. Tapping his fingers on the armrest, he stared silently out the window.

Was he going to stay silent? Should she try to change the subject or push him to find out more?

After the silence dragged out almost painfully, Royce turned towards her, tension etched on every plane of his face. “I dated Mary, David’s wife, when I was in high school. Once I got the scholarship to the University we broke up and I moved on. After a few years I came home to find out that she and David had gotten married.”

“Okay.” Had Mary held a torch for Royce and just transferred it over to David or was there more?

“It looked like they were happy together, so I minded my own business. I was just getting Renault Technologies off the ground and didn’t have the time or the energy to worry about my brother’s love life.”

He loosened his necktie and stared out the window again.

“Once I got a few government contracts, Renault grew by leaps and bounds. David had an engineering degree too, so I hired him on to take over some of my work since I was spending more and more time doing the business aspect.”

“You and David have the same degree?”

“Yeah, electrical engineering with a programming minor. I got a full scholarship to UConn, and I helped David get through school. Anyway, I hired him when I found out Mary was pregnant and he needed a job with good benefits.”

“Let me get this straight. You paid for David to go through school, then got him a job because he couldn’t get one on his own and he had knocked up his wife?” Didn’t he see what was going on here? David had been in Royce’s shadow all his life, and Royce had bailed him out time and again. No wonder David was such a screw up.

“He’s my little brother. What was I supposed to do? Let him struggle and not provide for his family?”

“How about letting him grow up and be his own man? Don’t you see? David went to college to do the same thing you did, dated the same girl you did, and got a job at your company. He’s doing everything he can to be just like you and can never measure up.”

“Do you want to bash David or do you want to hear about Mary?”

Shana was almost afraid to find out about her. “I’ll shut up. Go ahead.”

“Anyway, things were going well for a while. David really is a smart guy. He did a few projects that got some critical acclaim and seemed to be really happy with his wife and daughter. We started spending more time together, you know, having dinner together, going on vacations, stuff like that.”

Shana just knew what was coming next. Like a horror movie where the music is playing in the background and everyone is screaming at the heroine not to open the door because the zombie with the knife is on the other side.

She opened the door anyway. “Then what happened?”

“Mary started to get a little too friendly with me. One night after a few drinks, David was putting Allison to bed and Mary and I were sitting on the porch. Mary told me she only married David because she really wanted me, and that David was just a pale comparison.”

“Oh no.” She knew it.

“Oh yes. I excused myself and got the hell out of there. Apparently, Allison’s window was open and David heard everything. He and Mary had a huge fight and she took off in the family van.”

“Drunk?”

“Yes, drunk. She hit a tree doing seventy miles an hour and died on impact.”

“And this is your fault, how?” Talk about misplaced guilt. Royce actually blamed himself for his sister-in-law’s stupidity.

“Do I have to spell it out for you? If it wasn’t for me hanging around, Mary and David wouldn’t have been having problems.”

“For a such a smart guy, you’re pretty dumb when it comes to people. What ever gave you that idea?”

“David told me that everything was fine between the two of them until I came back into the picture. Mary was the one who nagged him to get a job with me, said I owed him something since I was making the big bucks.”

“Seems to me that paying for his college should have canceled any debt. Besides, you started your own business with your own brains, David could have done the same if he had the balls to try.”

“You don’t understand, you can’t. You don’t have any siblings, you don’t know what’s it like.”

The verbal jab hurt, but she wasn’t going to back down. “You’re right about that, but I do know that if David doesn’t find a backbone and learn to fight his own battles you’ll be bailing him out for the rest of his life.”

“So be it. There’s nothing you can say that is going to make me throw him, or my niece, to the wolves.”

“Hey, it’s your life, I’m just the hired help.” The limo turned onto her street, and not a moment too soon. “I’ll see what I can dig up on the good

senators and Sid and get back to you. Thanks for the day at the spa, it was interesting.”

“Don’t be like that. You’re the one that keeps throwing the fact that you work for me between us.”

“Yes I do. And it’s going to stay that way.” Shana barely waited for the car to come to a stop before she gathered her clothes and purse and climbed out barefoot.

If Royce wanted to take responsibility for every mistake his brother made, that was his problem. She’d signed on to solve a case, not be his family therapist. The limo stayed in the driveway, but Shana didn’t look back.

The evening hadn’t ended the way she had wanted it to, but it was probably better this way. Getting involved with Royce was a recipe for disaster. Or heartbreak.

She could feel Royce’s eyes burning a hole in her back, her naked back, as she walked up the steps to the house. Let him look, he’d paid enough for the privilege. Digging through the giant purse for her keys, Shana fought to keep from turning around. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of looking at him again.

Finally finding the keys, she jammed them into the lock and kicked at the door. It didn’t budge. Stupid thing was stuck, must be from the humidity in the air. She was about to give it another good kick when her purse slipped out of her hands and the contents scattered all over the steps and into the flower beds.

What else was going to happen? It was bad enough that she’d almost allowed herself to go to bed with Royce, but now she had to squat down in a skin tight dress and pick up all her crap. She was so tempted to just leave it all on the ground and forget about it until morning, but she didn’t want to leave her gun out for anyone to grab. Damn it. The sound

of the car backing out of the driveway was a relief. At least now he wouldn't see her looking like a clumsy oaf.

Shana bent over to scoop the stuff into her purse as quickly as possible, and whacked her head on the front door. For the love of God. What else? All she'd need now would be for her dress to split and that would cap off—

A wall of hot air slammed into her, bowling her over and down the steps. Pain flashed through her elbow, shoulder and back and she slid across the sidewalk. Thunder echoed in her ears, flames flew and debris burned her arms and legs where they landed.

The cottage was on fire. Shana squirmed back on her rear end, too rattled to get to her feet. She screamed but couldn't hear her own voice. The smell of burning wood and skin was strong in her nostrils.

She had to call 9-1-1! Her home. Her home was on fire. Shana stood, and tried to get her bearings. She had to move back, it could explode. No sooner was she on her feet than a heavy body slammed her back down to the ground.

Someone slapped her, and pounded her legs and arms. A cloth was thrown over her head. Someone was trying to suffocate her! She kicked out, fighting back at the unseen assailant.

"Damn it Shana, your hair is on fire."

"Royce?" It was Royce pummeling her?

"Who did you expect?" The cloth came off her head. "There, I think it's out. Come on, we have to get out of here."

"My house. I have to call the fire department." Her brain felt like it was stuck in maple syrup. She couldn't seem to make sense of anything.

"My driver is on the phone with them now. Come on."

Royce scooped her up and carried her to the car. Shana sat where he put her. Her dress was in tatters, covered in scorch marks and dirt. She

bled from a multitude of small cuts and scrapes, and she had tiny burns on her arms and legs.

As if seeing them was her body's cue to start feeling again, every nerve kicked into overdrive and screamed out its pain. Shana whimpered once before she could get herself under control. Royce took one look at her and pulled her into his arms.

"What the hell happened?"

"I don't know, I was trying to open the door and my purse dropped so I bent down to pick it up and banged my head against the door. The next thing I know the place is in flames and you're pounding on me."

"We were pulling out of the driveway, and I was pissed off at you and frustrated as hell. I heard the explosion and jumped out of the car. Your hair and dress were on fire."

"My hair?" Shana reached up and felt the crispy ends of her hair. "I have so much hair spray in here I'm surprised I didn't go up like a torch just from that."

"I think I got to you quickly enough."

Shana started shaking. She tried to control the tremors that wracked her body but they were unstoppable.

"Shh, it's gonna be alright."

"My house. Someone blew up my house. My computer, my pictures, everything."

"Those things can be replaced, at least you're okay."

"My dad. He could have been the one to open the door. He has a key. I've got to call him! Tell him I'm okay. He has a scanner, he's going to know about this."

"Calm down. You can use my phone."

"I can't talk to him like this. I'm a wreck." Her muscles spasmed from the force of her shakes.

"I'll take care of it. What's his number?" Royce wrapped his shirt around her bare shoulders. She had no idea what happened to his dinner jacket but the feel of the silk shirt, warm and fragrant from his body, soothed her more than she wanted to admit. Before she could think twice about it, her father's phone number tripped off her tongue.

Shana snuggled into the safety of Royce's arms, her body still shivering. A voice in the back of her brain screamed at her to buck up and stop milking this, but the rest of her shouted it down. If you couldn't lean on someone when your home exploded and almost took you with it, when could you?

The deep timbre of Royce's voice moved through her and relaxed the shakes a bit. It was so warm and cozy sitting on his lap, his strength surrounding her. She didn't even pay attention to what he was telling her father.

"There, it's all settled."

"What?" she asked, coming out of her daze.

"I told your father you were staying with me."

"You told him what!" Shana sat straight up, almost knocking her head against Royce's chin. "What do you mean you told him I was staying with you? He's going to have a stroke."

"He was more worried about someone trying to kill you than about you living in sin. I assured him you'd explain things when you were feeling up to it."

Shana tried to move off Royce's lap, but he held her tight.

"I can't stay with you. It wouldn't look good." Shana searched her brain for logical arguments that wouldn't reveal the battle raging inside her.

"I live in a six bedroom mansion. I'm sure that if we go into separate rooms on opposite sides of the mansion that will be enough to keep you safe from me."

Ha! Showed how much he knew. She wanted him so much her teeth itched. It wasn't him she was worried about, it was *her*.

"But, but, you're my boss."

"Then consider it an order. You'll stay at my place until the case is over and you are no longer in danger. I have an alarm system, gates, and the police officer said he'd have a patrol car go by regularly just to make sure you were okay."

"Wait a minute, what police officer?"

"The one I spoke to after I reported the fire. He's going to want to talk to you, I told him you were too tired tonight."

"What was his name?" Please be a rookie, please be someone who didn't know her or her dad.

"I think his name was Babble? Babbage?"

"Right on both. His name is Ed Babbage, but he babbles like a girl after her first kiss. Every cop in the city is going to know that my house blew up and that I'm staying with you. You can bet there will be regular patrols going by your place." Shana winced as she thought about what her father's friends would do. Cops could have a very sick sense of humor.

"Hell, you'll be lucky if you don't have a veritable parade of police officers knocking on your door at all hours of the day and night to make sure you aren't taking advantage of poor, innocent me."

"Poor and innocent?"

"That's how they see me." Shana would have pounded her head against the window if it weren't throbbing in pain already.

"You're telling me they've never seen you in action?"

"Of course they have. Most of them have sparred with me. I've learned something from all of them, whether it was about hand-to-hand combat or weapons or following clues to solve a crime."

"And they still worry about you?"

"At my senior prom, I had a police escort. I'd already earned my black belt and they still had to make sure my date didn't try anything."

"And did he?"

"Are you kidding me? He wouldn't even dance with me. Would you?"

"Babe, you are worth any amount of intimidation."

"Let's see if you're saying that after a troop of the city's finest stomp all over your flowerbeds."

Shana felt Royce's laugh come up from his belly and travel through his entire body. If her body weren't aching so much from the battering it had taken, it would have been singing from sheer enjoyment of being this close to him. As it was, the feel of his hard thighs under her nearly naked butt was enough to make her wonder how badly she was really hurt.

Moving a little to relieve the pressure set off fireworks of pain. Inhaling sharply, Shana winced at the individual clamors of agony shouting through her body.

Royce must have noticed her reaction. "Are you okay? How do you feel?"

"Like microwaved death if you want to know the truth."

"You're pretty scraped up, and you've got some nasty burns on your back. We'll get you cleaned up and checked out at home, unless you want to go to the hospital."

Visions of a waiting room filled with her father and his cronies all screaming questions at her popped into her brain.

"Uh, I think I'm fine. Just a little sore and banged up."

Royce raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything. Shana looked anywhere but in his all-knowing gaze. His bare chest drew her eyes. She knew he was toned from her previous explorations, but she had no idea how well muscled he really was.

Firm pecs surrounded small, brown nipples covered in sparse black hair. More hair trailed down the center of his chest over ridged abdominal muscles. Shana was tempted to lean back and follow the line of hair, but restrained herself. Her system had been through enough tonight.

"Uh, where's your dinner jacket?" Maybe if he covered up some of that skin she wouldn't get so addled.

"Probably on your lawn still. That's what I used to put out the sparks in your hair."

"Oh."

"You scared the hell out of me."

"It wasn't exactly a picnic for me either. I didn't even know my hair was on fire, it was like someone put my brain on pause." Shana thought about how her reactions had been slowed by shock and grimaced. "That's probably not the type of thing you want to hear from your private detective."

"Considering the circumstances you're allowed to be a little confused."

"Not really. A good cop—detective—should go on auto-pilot when the situation starts to go down the tubes."

"Most detectives don't have their houses blown up on them."

"Doesn't matter. My dad was shot twice and still managed to make the collar."

"Cut yourself a little slack, would you? I don't think your dad expects you to be dancing a jig after almost getting blown to hell."

“Yeah, but I don’t think he expects me to fall apart either. That’s not how he raised me, to be some wilting flower at the first sign of trouble.”

“From what I can tell, he raised you to be human. He wants you to be yourself, not some superhero.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” Shana stiffened and turned away.

“Seems like we’ve both got some hot buttons we’d rather not have pushed, doesn’t it?”

Shana said nothing, just continued to stare out the window. He was a fine one to talk about proving things to others. He didn’t exactly have a stellar grasp on his family relationships.

Her self-righteousness didn’t have a chance to build up a head of steam before it was overtaken by awe of her surroundings. The limo had pulled into Royce’s neighborhood, if you could call it that, and she was amazed at the size of the houses they passed.

Huge colonials with manicured lawns and wrought iron fences passed by the window as the car crept up a steep hill. Each house seemed to try to out-do the one before it. Yards got bigger and the houses were spread farther apart as they continued to climb.

By the time they got to the top of the hill the houses could barely been seen from the road. The limo pulled up to a stone fence with another wrought iron gate, which silently opened at some unseen signal. Low voltage lights lined the curved driveway, and ornate lampposts shone brightly on a cobblestone walk.

Floodlights lit up white columns in the front of the house, and more accented decorative trees and bushes in the yard.

“I take it you’re not worried about your electric bill, are you?”

“Ostentatious, isn’t it? I let a real-estate agent talk me into buying it when Renault went public. I had all this money and didn’t know what to do with it. There’s only so much you can piss away or give to charity.”

Shana wasn’t sure how true that statement was, but she’d sure like to find out. “So you bought a mansion on a hill? Did that take care of your itch to spend?”

“You could say that. I’ve found other ways to tame my inner child. I don’t need any more toys.”

Thinking about the stocked limo, the Mercedes, and the Harley, Shana was pretty sure Royce still caved in to his inner child occasionally. A thought crossed her mind, and she blurted it out before thinking it through.

“Did you get the house before or after Mary’s confession?”

Royce’s jaw clenched at her question. “Before. Why?”

“I think Mary’s sudden declaration had more to do with her wanting your money than to do with her wanting you.”

He looked like he was about to argue with her for a minute.

“That could be, but it still doesn’t change what happened. Would you like to look around, or get cleaned up first?”

Shana looked at her grass covered feet, her filthy hands, and her bleeding limbs.

“I’ll take a shower first.”

“Fine. Let me show you to your room. I’ll get the first aid kit and see if I can find you some clothes to get you through the night.”

“Thanks.” Maybe he could find her a suit of armor in this place, cause that was what it was going to take to get her through a night under the same roof as him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The needles of hot water spraying down from the gold plated showerhead zeroed in on Shana's every cut and scrape with amazing accuracy. She wanted to soak in the shower to get the smell of smoke out of her nostrils, but couldn't decide if it was worth the pain of having her nerve endings scraped raw. Screw it, she had to get them cleaned out anyway, it wouldn't feel any better if Royce did it with a washcloth later.

Royce. Oh boy. Even thinking about him made her get all gooey inside. This had to stop. In the last two days she'd been almost run off the road, gone to a dinner with the rich and powerful, and had her house blow to bits, and the thing she was most worried about was how she was going to handle Royce.

She was turning into the ultimate girly-girl. This was ridiculous. Just because she was staying in his house didn't mean she had to share his bed. She had a mind of her own and it was stronger than any hormones running through her system.

After her shower she'd write down some notes, make a list of the people who she had to call in the morning, and go to bed. Alone. She'd have Royce take her back to her place in the morning to see if anything was salvageable, and she'd go from there.

Scary as the situation was, it obviously meant she was on to something. People didn't try to kill you for no reason. Now she just had to figure out what it was she was on to.

Shutting the water off, Shana wrapped one of the blanket sized towels around her torso and squeezed the water out of her hair. It had taken her three shampoos to get all the hairspray out. Finger combing the sloppy mass, she saw the jagged spots from where the sparks torched her hair. Fawn would throw a fit if she saw how things ended up.

So much for Cinderella.

Shana was dabbing at the bleeding cuts on her legs when she heard a knock. Hitching the towel a little bit higher, she shuffled to the door, praying Royce had found something for her to wear.

Royce came barging in before she even had a chance to open the door.

“Oh, you’re still up. Good. I was afraid you had fallen asleep and I’d have to wake you up to take care of those burns.” He carried some clothes and a first aid kit.

“Nope, just got out of the shower. Are those for me?” Shana indicated the clothes in his hands.

“Yeah, it was the best I could do on short notice. We’ll go shopping tomorrow and pick you up some essentials.”

“If you drop me off at my place I can pick up my rental car and do it myself.”

“You think it’s still in one piece?”

“Won’t know until I go look. You gonna give me those clothes or hold on to them all night?” Shana really wanted the protection of being fully clothed. Standing two feet away from Royce while wearing nothing but a towel in close proximity of a bed was wreaking havoc on her resolve.

“I don’t know, you look pretty cute in that towel.”

“Ha, ha. Everyone’s a comedian.” She held out her hand.

"I got you a couple of my tee shirts for sleeping and found some old sweats from my college days. They'll be a little long but at least the pants have a drawstring."

"I'm sure they'll be fine. Right now I just want to go to bed—to sleep." Talk about a Freudian slip.

"Not before I check out those burns."

"They're fine, really. I washed everything off in the shower." No way she was letting him touch her bare skin. She could barely resist him when she was fully clothed.

"Just for a change of pace do you think you could not argue with me about everything? You got burned, you should at least put some ointment on the burns. And unless you're a contortionist you're not going to be able to see them all, never mind reach them. Just lay down on the bed and let me take care of you."

"I don't need you to take care of me. I don't need anyone to take care of me. I'm fine, okay?" That sounded defensive even to her own ears.

"No, you're not fine, you just think you are. You think that if you're stronger, tougher, harder than everyone else that means that you're okay. Well it doesn't."

"So you say." What the hell did he know about her? He didn't know what it was like to always be the last person picked and the shortest in the class.

"So I know. Can't you see that everyone needs a shoulder to lean on sometimes? Even your dad."

"Leave my father out of this."

"I can't because you keep shoving him in my face every time I get close to you."

"That is not true." Shana clutched the towel to her body a little tighter.

“Like hell it isn’t. Every time I try to treat you as something more than an employee you throw the fact that your father is a cop and I’m a millionaire in my face.”

“Are you saying it isn’t true?” Shana twisted her fingers in the towel. “You aren’t supposed to treat me as anything more than an employee, that’s what I am. Just like your secretary or Horton.”

“If you can’t see the difference between you and Horton you’re blinder than I thought. Sleep well, I know I won’t.”

The room rocked with the force of the door slamming shut. That was one way to avoid having him touch her, piss him off.

Shana pulled the soft, faded, cotton tee shirt over her head. It smelled faintly of Royce. The sweatpants were so long on her she looked like Gumby. She’d pass on those and just wear the shirt. It came down to her knees so she didn’t have to worry about compromising her modesty. She’d figure out what to do about clothes tomorrow.

Climbing into the lake-sized bed, Shana clicked off the lamp and pulled the covers up to her neck. She hadn’t made her lists for tomorrow or gone over her notes. Stupid man, he jumbled up her brain. How was she supposed to concentrate on the case and getting Allison back safely with Royce badgering her?

Shana rolled over and punched the pillow a few times. There was nothing wrong with trying to live up to her father’s expectations. If she were a boy it would be following in her old man’s footsteps, but since she was a girl it was overdoing it.

Figures. All men were the same. Her father thought she needed his help to get a job. Royce thought she needed his protection. Horton thought she used her sex to get the job. Why couldn’t they all just let her be herself and stand on her own two feet, win or lose?

Because this time around there's more at stake than just my ego. That nagging little voice in the back of her head jabbed the painful thought home. A little girl's life was in the balance, not to mention the security of the United States. If she failed because she was too stubborn to take any help it would mean Allison's death.

Shana sat up in bed and clicked the light back on. Would accepting her father's help in this case really be so bad? He had over thirty years on the force, what he didn't know wasn't worth knowing. If it were anyone else but her father, would she hesitate to ask him for information?

No. Part of being a good detective was using what resources were available to her. Maybe it was time she grew up a bit and stopped worrying so much about looking like she had everything under control. She was in over her head, and if she was too stubborn to admit it and ask for help, Allison could die.

She'd call her father first thing and have him come over for a strategy session. He could look at some of her pictures and see if he recognized anyone. There was also his friend in Vice who could help her out. It was time to pull out all the stops.

Turning the light off for a second time, Shana settled back into the comfort of the bed. She'd show know-it-all Royce that she wasn't afraid to ask for help. Just because she didn't want it from him didn't mean anything.

* * *

Bright sun shone in from a three-inch gap in the curtains. Shana's head ached, probably from adrenaline overload. She rolled over to avoid

the cheery ray of sunshine the seemed insistent on drilling through her eyes, and winced at the pull on her back from several fresh scabs.

Maybe she should have had Royce put some ointment on them last night. Gingerly climbing out of bed, Shana tried to move as carefully as possible to avoid pulling off any more of the scabs. She used the bathroom mirror and could see large spots of blood dotting the shirt like a vicious case of the chicken pox.

Before she could figure out a way to hide her condition from Royce, there was a knock at the door, followed by the man himself walking into her room. Shana tried to slam the bathroom door closed before he could see her, but she wasn't fast enough.

"What the hell?" Royce used his forearm to keep the door open.

"It's nothing." Shana faced him, hands on hips. She could feel blood dripping down her back and thighs from the multiple wounds.

"My ass, it's nothing. You had to be stubborn, you had to do things your own way and now look what happens. You're bleeding all over the place."

"I'm not bleeding all over the place. The burns scabbed over during the night and when I moved around this morning the shirt pulled some of them off, that's all. It's no big deal."

"Yes it is a big deal, because it could have been avoided if you had let me do what I wanted to last night."

"And is putting ointment on me the only thing you wanted to do last night?" What had made those words pop out of her mouth?

"You know it's not, but I wouldn't have touched you in any other way if you had said no."

That's what she was afraid of. She wasn't so sure she could say no.

"I wasn't in the mood to risk it last night."

"Then I hope you're in the mood now because I'm not going to let your pigheadedness scar you for life. You have to the count of ten to take off that shirt and lie down face first on the bed."

"Like hell!" No one was going to treat her like a child.

"If you don't, I'll rip off that shirt without any care for your modesty and put the ointment on you, if I have to handcuff you to the bed."

"You wouldn't dare." The anger churning in her gut couldn't completely subdue the sexual pull that his words brought forth.

"One. Two. Three—"

"You're behaving like a caveman."

"Only because you're forcing me to. Four. Five."

He'd really do it too. She could probably take him, but not without a great deal of pain to her already bruised and battered body. And not without the complete loss of any modesty she might try to hold on to.

"Seven. Eight. Nine—"

"Fine. You win. Are you happy now?"

"Take off your shirt and bring the sheet up to your lower back. I'll wait for you in the bathroom."

Shana brushed past him, a part of her fuming at his high handedness, and a part of her feeling sexually charged from the challenge he presented. What would have happened if she had let him try and take her shirt off? Would he really have handcuffed her to the bed? Heat slammed into her again. Probably a good thing she didn't find out.

Carefully pulling at the shirt, she managed to get it off, but not without ripping some more scabs open. She was going to get blood on the sheets. Shana laid the tee shirt down under her chest to keep the dripping blood off the white sheets. Hell, the shirt was already stained, better to sacrifice that than ruin something else.

Wiggling her way under the top sheet, Shana pulled it as high as she dared. She lifted the shirt to cover her breasts and used her arms to hold it in place before lying down. Knowing Royce was on the other side of the door and she lay in bed, completely naked, made her heart race.

What was he waiting for? The anticipation was killing her. The lust zipping through her body did a damn good job of masking the pain she'd felt earlier. If he waited much longer she didn't know what she'd do.

"Ready or not, here I come." Royce carried a basin of water and some towels with him.

"I already washed them off." And it hadn't felt good.

"That was before you got the shirt stuck in the burns. I'll have to wash off the blood anyway. Just relax. This won't hurt a bit. The ointment has a painkiller in it, so that should ease some of the sting."

She wasn't worried about it hurting, she was worried about it feeling too good. Royce worked the washcloth over her back with all the skill and detachment of a nurse. Shana relaxed marginally. This was no different than if she was at a doctor's office or the emergency room

Yeah, right.

"So what do you have planned for today?" Royce patted her back with one of the towels.

"I'm going to call my dad and have him come over for a little strategy session. I figure I have to explain things to him anyway, I might as well take advantage of all his years of experience."

"Really. What a mature approach. Aren't you afraid he'll take over?"

Shana winced at the sarcasm. "There's a lot more at stake than my ego. I need his help if I want to find Allison before it's too late."

"I'm glad you realize that. I'll have Nancy pick up some clothes for you, she can drop them off at your dad's and he can bring them here."

“No! That’s all right. I have some stuff still at my father’s place. I’ll have him bring over something until I can go shopping.” The last thing she wanted was for Royce’s secretary to know she was over his house with no clothes.

“If you say so. Okay, I’m going to put the ointment on. This may hurt a little at first.”

Shana braced herself for a sting, but all she felt was the heat of Royce’s hands. Those wide palmed hands moved over her back with a thoroughness that had very little to do with first aid, and a whole lot to do with foreplay. Biting down on the pillow in front of her, Shana tried not to moan, groan or give any indication she was enjoying his treatment.

Nothing could stop her from reacting on the inside though. Royce’s hands were gentle on her mangled flesh, but as he rubbed the ointment on his fingers brushed her sides, achingly close to her breasts. Her breathing got more rapid, and she was afraid if he were at it much longer even swallowing the pillow whole wouldn’t be enough to keep her quiet.

“Are you okay? I’m not hurting you, am I?” Royce’s voice was mere inches from her ear, and a shiver chased itself down her spine.

“Ah.” She had to clear the huskiness out of her voice. “I’m fine thanks. Are you almost done? I’ve got a lot to do today.” Like take a long cold shower.

“Almost. I rubbed the ointment over the scrapes on your back too, to keep them from getting infected and to take away some of the pain.”

“I don’t feel any pain at all right now.” Unless you counted extreme sexual frustration as pain. She was feeling plenty of that.

“Good.” His voice sounded a little hoarse as well. Was this getting to him too?

Now his fingers brushed lightly up and down her spine, and sent goose bumps chasing their way across her back. Shana could feel her nipples tightening with every touch of his fingertips. She had to put a stop to this before it got out of control.

“So, am I all done?” Her voice sounded breathy.

“Not by a long shot.” Royce pulled the sheet lower, exposing her behind to his gaze.

“I’m not so sure this is a good idea, Royce.”

“Just checking to see if I missed any burns.” His mouth nipped at the upper curves of her hips.

“With your mouth?” Oh God, it felt so good. Little arrows of fire shot from his lips to her center, and she grew wet and swollen.

“I’m making a thorough investigation.”

Investigation. That’s what she was supposed to be doing, not writhing on the bed like a cat in heat. “We can’t do this, you’re my boss.”

“Fine. You’re fired. Now just shut up and enjoy.”

Shana would have argued with him, but his hand moved in ever widening circles from the back of her knee to where her thighs ended and her derrière began. All thoughts but one deserted her.

The only thing she could think of was how badly she wanted to spread her legs and let that wandering hand touch all of her. Shana’s body begged to be satisfied, and for once her mind couldn’t come up with any good reasons to deny it.

The sheet was completely off her now, and her entire body lay bare for his perusal. When she tried to move, to roll over so she could touch him, Royce pressed her back into the mattress.

“Shhh, let me,” Royce whispered into her ear, licking the delicate lobe once before moving to the back of her neck.

Who was she to argue? His lips had turned her bones to water, and his hands made her insides quiver with need. Giving in to her body's insistent demands, Shana spread her legs and arched her hips off the bed in silent supplication.

Royce trailed his fingers over her slick nether lips, bringing her to new heights of frustration.

She couldn't take it any more. "Touch me." She wanted it to sound like a command, but her voice was husky with need. It sounded more like a plea, and God help her she didn't even care.

"My pleasure." Royce slid one arm under her waist to lift her to her knees.

His large hand managed to cup her swaying breast, sending more hunger pumping through her system. Shana began to rock, trying to get the hand that was next to her heated core to enter her body. One of his fingers circled her entrance, teasing her with its nearness, but every time she tried to rock back he moved it away.

"You have to let me be in control this time. Let go for once." Royce nipped the back of her neck.

Shana stopped moving and waited with bated breath. Her heart almost stopped as his finger slowly slipped into her moist depths. Sliding it in and out of her channel, Royce worked his thumb against the sensitive nub, rubbing circles along it every time his hand came close.

She wanted to weep with frustration. Everything he did felt so good, too good, yet she couldn't let go. Her whole body was on fire, straining to grasp the gold ring that was so very close but not quite in reach. When Royce bit her earlobe and pressed his thumb against her at the same time, Shana's heart almost burst from the force of the release.

Her hips spasmed wildly, bucking against his hand as waves and waves of pleasure rippled over her. Shana felt both lighter than air, yet too heavy for her arms to support.

Before she could collapse in a puddle of contentment, Royce rolled to his back. He was fully clothed, and very fully aroused.

Eyes so blue they were almost black burned into her, refusing to let her look away. "It's your choice now. You can take what you want, what I'm offering you, or you can run away again. Either way, it will be of your own free will, with no coercing on my part."

Shana looked down at him. His white oxford shirt was a wrinkled mess with splotches of ointment all over it. His jeans bulged so badly from the force of his erection that she thought he was going to pop the snap, and his hands clenched in fists by his sides.

And he'd walk away if she gave the word? Not on her life.

"What and waste all this? In for a penny, in for a pound. But this time I get to be in control." Shana straddled him, her still quivering core pressed against his denim-clad hardness.

She leaned down and began kissing the strong column of his throat. He was salty from sweat, and a part of her wanted to shout her triumph that she was the one who caused it.

Busy fingers slid buttons open and ran over the wide expanse of chest that was all hers.

"Sit up," she ordered. Shana wanted him as completely naked as she was. Wanted to explore every inch of his body until he was as mindless with need as she had been.

Doing as ordered, Royce sat up so she could strip his shirt off, but didn't stop there. He reached down to caress her breast, cupping and lifting it. Bending down, he sucked her peak into his warm mouth, making the smoldering fires in her blood burn hotly again.

The friction of his jean-covered legs reminded her that she still had a ways to go, so Shana reluctantly pulled away from his ever so talented mouth.

“Don’t distract me, I have a lot of work to do.” Shana playfully pushed him back against the bed and looked her fill at his naked chest.

Just watching how his muscles rippled as he breathed made her heart race faster. “For a paper pusher, you sure do have a great bod.”

“Get these pants off me and I’ll show you what I can do with it.” Royce reached for her again but she batted his hands away.

“All in good time. I’ve wanted to get my hands on your chest forever.”

Shana ran her fingers through the sparse hair between his pecs. He had just enough to look manly, but not so little he looked like a kid. Leaning down, she ran her tongue around his flat brown nipple. Sucking it into her mouth, she pulled on it for a few seconds before letting it go and blowing cool air over it.

“You keep taking your time, this isn’t going to last very long.”

“I’ll worry about that later, I’m a little busy now.” She trailed her tongue down the tantalizing line that lead to his belly button and lower.

Swirling her tongue around his navel, Shana worked at his belt buckle and fly. His hand was back on her rear end, but she didn’t have the desire to tell him to keep his hands to himself.

As his erection sprung free from the confines of his jeans, her desires had most decidedly turned elsewhere.

“You’re not wearing any underwear.” Her mouth was suddenly very dry, and her heart rate was faster than if she’d run a marathon.

“Very observant. Help me get these things off.” Royce lifted his hips off the bed, jutting himself even closer to her.

She snapped out of her daze and pulled the tight denim down his muscular legs. The rest of his body was just as impressive as his chest.

Narrow hips led to thighs that bulged with muscle. Part of her wanted to sit back and look at him for hours, appreciating the beauty of his masculine form.

“Come here, Shana.” Royce’s husky voice pulled her eyes from his body. He held a foil wrapped package in his shaking hand and was trying to tear it open.

The rest of her could think of better things to do with this prime example of human male than look at it.

“Allow me.” Shana took the condom from him, her hands none too steady either, and tore it open. Grasping his length in her hand, she gave him a few teasing strokes as payback before sheathing him.

Royce groaned at her torture, but laid a counter attack by sliding his hand between her legs and rubbing against her aching cleft. She threw her head back as the pressure grew and grew.

“Enough games, come here.” He carefully pulled her on top of him in deference to her bruised and battered body. With devastating thoroughness he captured her mouth in a searing kiss that left no doubt of his intentions.

Shana climbed astride his body and carefully placed him at her entrance. Looking him in the eye so he’d know she had no doubts, she slid him inside of her, inch by devastating inch.

“My God that feels so good!” Royce growled, grabbing her hips with both hands and bucking into her channel.

Full. She felt so full of him. Like the last puzzle piece sliding home, his body in hers felt so right, so complete it rocked her world. Never had she felt like this before. The physical act had moved far beyond anything she’d experienced before and she knew she’d never go back to that pale existence again.

“Look at me, Shana.”

She focused her eyes on Royce's face. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and his jaw was clenched with some internal struggle. His eyes held her. The pupils were dilated with desire and his gaze so intense she could swear he tried to read her mind.

Pulling her down to him, he drew a pebbled nipple into his mouth and sucked on it. One of his hands moved between them to rub her nubbin yet again, sending her on an out of control ride of sensation. She was headed for sensual impact and couldn't find the brakes even if she wanted to.

"Come for me, baby." Royce thrust harder and faster into her body dragging her to the cliff and throwing her off without thought if she could fly.

As his guttural moan sounded in her ear, Shana found that she could.

CHAPTER TWELVE

It took a few minutes for Shana to realize that the annoying ringing noise wasn't coming from lack of oxygen to her brain, but from the phone by the side of her bed. Thinking only of silencing the pest that was invading her dream world, she reached for the receiver.

"Hello?" Was that low, throaty voice hers?

"Shana? Is that you? What's wrong with your voice? Did you swallow some smoke?" Her father's worried voice destroyed her dream world with the force of a nuclear explosion.

"No, Dad, I'm okay. I just had a little frog in my throat, that's all."

Royce raised an eyebrow in her direction and gave her an evil grin. That couldn't be good. Both his hands crept up her stomach and cupped her breasts.

"What? I'm sorry, I wasn't paying attention. What did you say?"

Her father was trying to talk to her and Royce was teasing her nipples between his fingers. Not exactly optimum conditions for concentrating.

"I asked you what in Sam Hill is going on. And no more dancing around the truth, missy."

Shana sighed. "Why don't you come over to Royce's place and we can talk about it."

"I think I'll do just that. I can be there in half an hour."

Shana pushed Royce's mouth away from her breasts and climbed off his still semi-erect body.

"Dad, would you grab me some of my clothes out of my old room?"

"You don't have any clothes?" The roar of her father's voice killed any budding amour she had been feeling.

"They were blown up with the house, and the dress I was wearing pretty much got trashed. I'm wearing some of Royce's clothes, but I'd prefer my own until I can go shopping." Shana yelped as Royce pinched her behind, helping her to scurry off the bed more quickly than she'd planned.

"What was that?"

"I saw a spider, a big hairy one."

"Don't be such a girlie-girl. I'll bring you some clothes and be there soon."

"Thanks. And Dad? Could you bring me my old Berretta too?"

"Already cleaned and loaded."

Shana hung up the phone with a smirk. Couldn't put one past her old man.

"I take it a Berretta is a gun?"

"Yeah, I don't know what happened to my Walther, but I'm betting it's out of commission after the house went up in flames." She pulled her borrowed tee shirt out from under Royce's hip and put it on. Being naked while they were getting hot and heavy was one thing, carrying on a conversation in the buff was entirely another.

"It was in the house?"

"No, it was in my purse, which, the last time I checked was on my doorstep. Seeing as fire was shooting out of said door, the investigative phenom that I am concludes my gun is history."

"Do you always carry a gun?" Royce hadn't bothered to cover up, and he looked far too sexy for her peace of mind.

"Always. I feel naked without one. I usually carry it in a holster, unless I'm in a situation where it would be obvious and out of place."

“So you weren’t kidding last night when you complained about not being able to hide a gun in that dress.” Royce climbed out of bed and stretched his arms to the ceiling.

Shana’s jaw almost dropped to the floor. It just wasn’t fair for one man to be so damn good looking. He should have to give up some of his attractiveness to those less fortunate.

Like every other man on the planet.

“Ah, no. I thought about trying to strap it to my thigh, but I didn’t have anything strong enough to hold it up.”

“Thank God. That would have been fun to explain. I can see it now, ‘Sorry Senator, my date didn’t mean to shoot you, her gun fell off her leg.’ The press would have a field day.”

The rational part of Shana’s mind finally burned through the fog of lust that had been blanketing it for the last hour. The press. It was a very real concern for him. If he got bad press his stocks would go down. Wasn’t that part of the reason why she was involved in this case in the first place? To avoid a scene with the media?

“I’m going to wash before my father gets here.” She scooped up the sweats and ran for the bathroom.

“I could do it for you.” He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Shana stopped at the bathroom door. “Not this time. My dad will be here before you know it, and I’d rather he didn’t know about us.”

“What are you talking about? He already thinks we’re a couple.” Royce ran a hand through his hair then tapped his hand against his thigh.

“I’m going to tell him everything when he comes over. Not everything, but you know, the part about you pretending we’re a couple and why.” Shana wished he’d put some clothes on. His nakedness didn’t seem to bother him at all, but it distracted the hell out of her.

“So let me get this straight. You’re going to come clean and tell him you’re working for me, and that I lied about being your boyfriend, but not tell him that we’re having a relationship?” He stalked over to where his pants lay half on and half off the bed.

“We had sex, once. We’re not having a relationship.”

“So that’s all it was, a good time? Thanks for the orgasm, see ya later?”

“No! Don’t make it into something so, so—”

“Torrid? Raunchy? Cheap?” Royce threw the words at her as he jabbed his legs into his pants. “If you don’t like the way it sounds, don’t turn it into that.”

“Listen, we come from two different worlds. You should be thanking me for not making a big scene and trying to get all clingy on you.” Was that the problem? He was used to being the one who got up and walked away and didn’t like to be on the receiving end of the brush off?

“You, clingy? That’ll be the day,” he scoffed.

“Sorry I bruised your ego, Mr. Renault, but I can stand on my own two feet. I don’t need to hang on to any man.”

“I apologize for ever doubting you. I guess you showed me you can be as emotionless about sex as any man. Congratulations.”

Royce grabbed his shirt off the bed and stomped out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Egotistical jerk. Didn’t he realize she was trying to help him? How would it look when the press splashed headlines about him dating some barely making it cop-wanna be? She’d look like a gold digger and he’d look like a gullible fool.

He might be mad now, but when the orgasm afterglow wore off he’d be relieved. Hell, he’d probably thank her for not taking advantage of him in a weak moment.

If that was the case, why did she feel so rotten?

Running some water in the sink, Shana wet a washcloth and soaped it up with the lemon shaped soap on the holder. He had seemed almost hurt at her words.

Had she hurt him by putting the brakes on? Nah, he was used to playing games with high society model types. There was no way some goober like her was going to take him down a peg. It was probably what she suspected before, he was just mad because she walked first.

Not her problem. She needed to get dressed so she could talk to her father and find Allison. Royce would have to take care of his own ego.

* * *

“So let me get this straight, you and Renault aren’t dating, you’re working for him, and you have a week to find out where his niece is and who’s behind it?”

“That about sums it up.” Shana sat in Royce’s cavernous living room sipping ice water while her father paced in front of her. She wore faded jeans that were a touch on the snug side and a concert tee shirt that had seen better days. It wasn’t haute fashion, but it was better than oversized sweats.

“And that’s why your car got totaled and your cottage blown up?”

“Yes. After looking at some pictures, I identified one of the thugs I saw beating David Renault in the alley on the way to my interview. I think he spotted me and pegged me, so he tried to eliminate any threat I presented.”

“And you didn’t think I should know about this? Jeez, Shana.”

“Dad, I know you worry about me, but this is my first case. I didn’t want you getting all over protective or trying to take over.”

"I wouldn't have done that. I might have given you some pointers on the way, but I know you know your stuff."

"Do you really?"

"Of course I do. You learned from the best."

"Yet you still think I need your help to get a job, to start my business, even to pay my own bills. Face it, Dad, if I was a boy you'd act differently."

"Maybe I would, maybe I wouldn't. We'll never know will we? But just because I want to help you out doesn't mean I'm not proud of you."

"You just don't think I can do it on my own." Shana got up and poured herself some more water. Was she going to spend the entire day fighting with the men in her life?

"Maybe I don't want you to. Did you ever think of that? Maybe I might want to have a part in something other than going to the races or hanging out with a bunch of old men who talk about their grandchildren and their golf games all day."

"Hold the phone. Are you saying you want to be my partner because you're bored?"

"Hell, yes. It isn't because I don't think you can do it. Shit, you know more about following clues and solving crimes than half the rookies on the department. And you can shoot better than any of them too. I'd rather have you for a partner than any ten of those wet behind the ears probies."

A lump formed in Shana's throat. All this time she thought she failed her father. Now that she was in way over her head and screwing up her life big time she found out he'd been proud of her all along.

"Don't you dare cry on me, missy, or I'll take back everything I just said."

Shana sniffed back the threatening tears and swallowed hard. "I'm no girly-girl, I'm not blubbering." She crossed over to him and gave him a hug around the waist.

"I know that, I didn't raise no sissy." Padraic wrapped her in a headlock and gave her a mock nuggie to her skull.

"Hey, be careful. I got burned there last night." Shana squealed.

"Damn it! I forgot—"

As soon as Padraic loosened his grip, Shana grabbed him by the wrist and spun around, locking his arm behind him.

"Say 'uncle' old man."

"Old man my left foot! I'll show you old." Padraic twisted out of Shana's laughter-weakened grip and threw her over his shoulder. "Now who's old? Come on smarty pants, who's old now."

"Put her down! For the love of God, she's got cuts and burns all over her body." Royce came storming into the living room, thunderclouds of anger forming on his face.

"Jesus, I'm sorry Shannie." Padraic lowered her gently to the floor.

"I'm fine. Royce was just overreacting." She shot him a death glare. Like a little rough-housing was going to kill her.

"So I take it everything is out in the open here?" Royce dropped a file folder on the coffee table and took a drink out of Shana's waterglass, silently daring her to stop him.

"I told him about why you lied and said we were dating, if that's what you're asking." She glared at him. He better not say anything to her father about their earlier activities.

"Then shall we get started with the planning session? I believe that was part of the reason you were coming over, Mr. Quinn, wasn't it?"

"That, and to make sure you weren't taking advantage of my little girl."

Shana jumped in before Royce could utter a syllable, "Don't be ridiculous, Dad. Royce has supermodels at his beck and call, he doesn't need to waste his time with a blue-collar tomboy like me." Shana shot Royce another glare.

"And what's wrong with you? You're a beautiful woman, the picture of your mother. You'd make a fine wife for any man."

"Da-ad, quit it, would you? Let's talk about the case, okay?"

"Fine, but I won't have anyone putting my girl down. Even you."

Shana ignored the smug look Royce shot her and opened the file he'd dropped on the table.

"Okay. This guy here, peaking out from behind the bar. He's Tony, I met him in the alley the day he was beating the snot out of David."

"Enforcer," Padraic noted.

"Yup. I think he was a little bent out of shape that I took him and his partner down and let David run away."

"You use the gun?"

"They were unarmed. I did the best scissor kick you've ever seen. Took 'em both out in one shot. It was sweet."

"Must have been, he's not a little fellow, now is he?" The pride in his voice was obvious.

"If we can move along?" Royce looked at his watch. "I've got to run into the office for a little while today."

"Sorry to hold you up." Shana didn't know why he was so annoyed. He was the one who wanted to be here for the planning meeting, it wasn't like she asked him to come.

"This guy here, David recognized from his dealings with the shark. Now these were the two guys I was dealing with. I don't think they have anything to do with David, probably just another branch of the operation."

“This one,” Padraic pointed to the man David had identified. “He looks familiar. I don’t remember from where though. Anything else?”

“No, I don’t think—”

“Here are the pictures you took with the necklace camera last night,” Royce interrupted, pulling a handful of pictures from under the rest.

Had it only been last night? It seemed like eons had passed since she’d lain down at Les Beaux Dames and had herself buffed and polished.

Shana looked down at her hands, the nails that had been so carefully treated were torn. The nail polish had chipped, and her palms were a mass of scratches and scrapes. That was why she never spent the money to go to places like that in the first place. She just wasn’t meant for beauty salons and fancy parties.

“Earth to Shana.” Her father’s voice snapped her back to the present.

“Sorry, I was trying to remember who I took pictures of last night.”

“They’re right here in front of you. This guy here, what’s his name?”

“That’s Sid, Sid Barrows I think. He’s a hanger on,” Royce answered.

“He’s a damn scumbag is what he is,” Padraic spat.

“I take it you know him?”

“Know him? Hell, he’s practically a living legend.” Padraic got up and shoved his hands into his pockets, idly kicking at the oriental carpet. “Every cop in the city would love to pick him up for anything, but the slug always manages to slime his way free and clear. That asshole doesn’t so much as have a parking ticket.”

“What’s his gig?” Shana asked.

“What isn’t, is the better question. He has his fingers in so many pies I’m surprised he has time to attend fancy-schmancy fund raisers.”

"I think he might have a senator or two in his pocket." Shana looked at Royce out of the corner of her eye. His jaw was clenched, but he didn't defend his friend.

"Probably more than that. He's got connections in the underground that cover more countries than the United Nations. He runs drugs, guns, girls, you name it."

"Is he a shark?"

"Definitely. Started out as a runner and worked his way up until he was running the operation. If he's involved in this, you can bet it's big time."

She knew her father wasn't going to like her next question, but she had to ask. "David said he was told if he went to the police or the FBI the kidnappers would know about it and kill Allison. I thought at the time that was just the usual scare tactic, but now I'm wondering if it's true. Could Sid have more than a senator in his pocket?"

Padraic cursed and shoved his hands into his pockets. "As much as I want to deny it, I'm sure he has a dirty cop or two on his payroll. There's no way he could have been in operation for so long without someone on the inside. And it wouldn't surprise me if a fed was collecting a little extra either."

Shana shivered at the thought of what could have happened if Royce hadn't refused to go to the authorities. Allison really could be dead.

"So you're saying if Sid is involved in this, we're on our own because anyone we turn to for help could potentially be in his employ." Royce tapped his fingers against the table.

"In a nutshell, yes. I know a few guys I can talk to on the sly, but if you want to see your niece again you'll either have to pony up what he wants or hope to hell my girl's as good as I think she is."

"I wouldn't have gone with her in the first place if I didn't think she could do the job."

Really? That was news to her. She'd thought he only went with her because he didn't want the publicity around the shareholder's meeting.

"All right then. I'll find out what I can about Sid. Shannie, you start digging around those two fellows that David recognized, and we'll meet up again when someone has something to report."

"I can do some digging of my own and see if I can find any shady financial dealings in either of the senator's pasts," Royce said.

"Excuse me? Last time I checked you hired me?" Damn it. She knew her father was going to take over. If she didn't put her foot down now the two of them would be walking all over her. This was her investigation and she wasn't having two overbearing, stubborn, men take over.

Padraic gave her a sheepish look. "I'm doing it again, huh? I said I wouldn't take over and I won't. What do you want me to do?"

Was this her father? He actually looked embarrassed. His sudden acquiescence took some of the wind out of her sails.

"Actually, I want you to see what you can find out about Sid, but I think we should meet again tomorrow afternoon regardless."

"I can make it tomorrow night, but I'll be in meetings all day." Royce looked at his watch.

"Then we'll meet tomorrow night. At the barn. It's time you got some target practice." She tried to act professional but a shiver went through her when he hit her with the full force of his blazing blue gaze.

"I don't need to know how to shoot. I have no intention of carrying a gun."

Padraic snorted but Shana held up her hand to silence him. "I'm not saying you should carry a gun. In fact, a gun in the hands of someone who doesn't respect them and know how to use them is the most

dangerous thing in the world. I want you to know how to shoot one without killing yourself should the situation arise.”

“Somehow I don’t picture me wrestling a gun away from anyone.”

“No, but I could and I just might need you there as back-up. I’d feel a lot better if I knew you weren’t going to shoot me by accident when you picked the thing up.”

“Fine. But I won’t get there until at least nine o’clock. If you want a ride back to your place we’re going to have to leave now.”

Oh yeah, that was tops on her list, getting a ride from a pissed off Royce. “That’s okay, my dad can take me, this way you don’t have to wait around for me if I have to go to the rental agency again.”

Royce nodded once and held out his hand to Padraic. “It was nice meeting you again, I’ll be sure to give Joe Peterson your regards next time I speak to him.” He turned to Shana and looked like he was going to say something. Apparently changing his mind, he dug into the pocket of his slacks and pulled out an envelope.

“Here are the keys to the house and the codes for the alarm system. I’ll leave a spare remote for the gate on the table by the front door.”

“Thanks.” Shana felt uncomfortable taking the keys to his house after everything that had happened that morning, but she wasn’t going to argue in front of her father. With any luck she could avoid him indefinitely.

With another nod Royce spun on his heel and walked out. At least this time he didn’t slam the door.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Royce got into the Mercedes and let out the breath he'd been holding. Shana was staying with him for another night. He still had a chance.

Starting the car, he let the clutch out and cruised out of the driveway much calmer than he felt. How had things gotten so freaking complicated? A week ago he was President and CEO of a Fortune 500 company, shares were up, he'd gotten a choice government contract, and he'd managed to escape from yet another woman who thought having long legs and a beautiful body would make her the next Mrs. Royce Renault.

Now he was taking orders from a woman half his size, watching her house blow up, and doing everything in his power to convince her to stay with him. Indefinitely. He was losing his mind. That's what was happening. The pressure of trying to be the youngest self-made millionaire had finally gotten to him and his brain had self-destructed.

Royce hit the steering wheel with the heel of his hand and stepped on the gas pedal. This was ridiculous. He had to get his life back on track.

There was no way he was going to be led around by the nose by a stubborn woman with a Napoleon complex. She tried so hard to prove herself to her father and to the world that she didn't even pay attention to what she really wanted. And the next time he saw the little general he was going to tell her that.

If he could keep his hands off her.

His dick chose that moment to rear up and remind him that one taste of her wasn't going to be enough. Would he ever be able to get enough of her? He wouldn't mind trying to find out. Who would have thought that hiding under that tough girl exterior was a sexual dynamo who could match him so perfectly?

Match him? Hell, she challenged him to catch up to her. Never had he wanted someone so badly that he couldn't have. Every time he thought he was close to her she'd throw up a new wall and he'd have to start all over again.

But that was half the fun, wasn't it? Maybe that was what had him so intrigued. He hadn't had to chase a woman since he made his first million. Truth be told, he hadn't had to chase many women before that either. He certainly never had to convince a woman who was obviously attracted to him to act on that attraction.

Shana was unique. And wasn't that the understatement of the year? Royce hadn't gotten to where he was today by giving up easily. He'd get Shana to admit she belonged with him, despite her protests to the contrary.

Royce slowed down and took the exit that led to his office. The sense of pride that always hit him when he saw the Renault Technologies Logo across the top of the sky rise was absent today. What good had it done him to build all this if it meant the death of his niece and watching his brother turn into a shell of a man?

Parking the car in his reserved space, Royce thought about David and what he could do to help him out of this mess. He'd tried to make things as easy as possible, granting him a leave of absence after he screwed up the code on one of their less secure projects. Had he done the right thing?

Could Shana be right? Had Royce enabled David by helping him all the time? Royce entered the code to access his private elevator and shot straight up to the top floor.

Maybe he'd stop by David's house on the way home and have a talk with him. Try to get him outside for a little while, away from the webcam of Allison's prison cell. A site that had been on his computer more than the stock exchange lately.

Royce opened the door to his office and was surprised to see someone sitting at his desk.

Senator Downy turned around in the leather chair and looked at him with the smarmy smile he'd perfected.

"Senator Downy, how—interesting—to see you here. Might I ask how you got into my private office on a Saturday?" Royce took a quick glance around the room, had anything been moved?

"Sorry about the surprise visit, Royce my boy, but I didn't want this meeting to be made public. If I had made an appointment through my secretary, well, you know how it is during a campaign year. The press follows you everywhere, looking for the next Watergate."

"I see. So what is it that you'd like to talk about, off the record?" He moved around his desk and stood by his chair. If the senator wanted to play mind games that was fine. Royce waited silently for the senator to move.

They stared at each other for ten seconds, then twenty, finally the senator got up. "A bit warm today, mind if I get myself a drink?"

"Go right ahead." Royce indicated the mini-fridge along the wall. *Renault one, Downy nothing.*

"Thanks." The senator made a big show of choosing a cranberry juice and opening it, then sat down in the chair in front of the desk.

Royce waited until he was sitting, as befitting a host, and sat back in his own chair. "What can I help you with, Senator?"

"It's like this. I'm worried about Jim, and I know he considers you one of his closest friends."

That was stretching things, but he'd play along. "I have a great deal of respect for Jim, we agree on many of the same issues. What has you so concerned?"

"I'm afraid he's gotten into a little trouble that could destroy his career, and all the good he's done while holding office." The senator seemed to be worried, or at least looked that way.

"Really? I wasn't aware of that. He didn't mention anything to me at the party last night."

"Not the time or the place, and I don't know if he'd come to you anyway. He's old school, wants to handle his problems on his own. Too proud to ask for help and all that bull."

"Go on."

The senator leaned forward in his chair and placed his clasped hands on the desk in front of him. "I think Jim might have a gambling problem, and I think he's gotten in with a bad crowd because of it."

"Jim? Are you sure? He doesn't strike me as the type to let things get out of control."

"Of course not, boy! But that's what happens with addictions, you think you can control them until it's too late."

"What makes you think he has a gambling problem?"

"He's been at the off-track betting place more times than the casual gambler should be. I know he lost a bunch on the Kentucky Derby not too long ago, and he's putting the house in the Hamptons on the market soon."

"I thought he was doing that because he and Mitzi are never there?" Did Jim really have a problem? And if he did, why would Downy be coming to him about it?

"Mitzi loves to summer up there with all the other snobs, she wouldn't sell it unless they were in dire straights. And I really think the situation is dire indeed."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Have you noticed Sid Barrows is at every function they have these days?"

"It would be pretty hard to miss him."

"He has some business dealings that are on the shady side, and I think one of them could be loan sharking. I think Jim is in deep with him."

"And what do you think I can do about this? I'm sure you've talked to Jim about getting help for his problems." *Sure he had.*

"Of course I have, but he won't listen to me. Says everything is fine. He doesn't want to tar his public image. You have to talk to him, he'll listen to you."

"I don't know about that. If what you say is true and he has an addiction, there's not much I can do to fix things, but I'll try anyway."

"I knew you would." The senator hoisted his bulk to his feet and offered his hand to Royce. "I have to go, but I'm glad to know Jim's problems are in good hands."

"I'll do my best." Royce had to steel his face to avoid showing the revulsion he felt at touching the senator's hand.

"Then it's as good as solved. I'll show myself out, wouldn't want to stir up any excitement you know."

"Ah, yes. It was nice seeing you, Senator Downy." If he kept lying like this he was going to be as bad as the politicians.

Royce waited until the senator was safely in the elevator, then stalked to his secretary's phone.

"Horton! I want you up here immediately. I don't care that you're eating your lunch, I mean immediately. I want to know how the hell someone as fat as Senator Downy got by your team and into my office."

Slamming down the phone, Royce counted the seconds it took for the elevator to chime Horton's arrival.

* * *

"So, you got a thing for this Renault guy?" Padraic asked when they were in the quiet familiarity of his car.

"For Royce? Get real. We're on opposite ends of the social spectrum, don't you think?" When did her father ask her questions about her social life? Hell, when did he start discussing feelings? She was going to have to meet this woman he'd started dating. Talk about your miracle worker.

"I did a little checking on him, talked to a few guys that I know. He's not so different from you or me."

"Yeah, right. Just a whole bunch of extra zeros in his bank account that aren't in ours. Did you see that house? I was looking for a 'you are here' map so I could find my way around!"

"So he's done alright for himself, doesn't mean he's a snob."

"Dad, he's friends with senators for cripes sake."

"Big deal. You know his father died when he was in school and he took care of his brother and put him through school too?"

"I knew he put his brother through school." How come her father knew so much more about Royce than she did—and she'd just slept with him.

“Yeah, he made it big by inventing some computer thing and patenting it. He’s no dope. And he graduated from State U.”

“I know he had a full scholarship there.”

“Sure did, and they don’t hand those out every day now do they?”

Padraic wagged a finger at her.

“So he’s smart, I knew that. Doesn’t mean he’s the type of guy I should be dating.”

“What is the type of guy you should be dating then? You want to date a poor, stupid guy?”

“No. I just want to date someone, I don’t know, more like me.”

“Stubborn?”

“Thanks a lot. I mean someone I don’t have to impress, someone I can be myself with and not have to worry if I’m using the right fork.”

“I can see your point there, but Renault doesn’t strike me as the type to care if you remember to stick your pinky out when you drink your tea, if you catch my drift.” He mimicked drinking a cup of tea with his pinky pointing skyward.

“Can we talk about something else now?”

“Like what?”

“Like when do I get to meet your lady friend?”

“Ah, I’m not sure.”

“What’s wrong Dad, afraid she won’t like me?” Shana was only half kidding.

“No, she’s dying to meet you. It’s just that she’s, well, a little younger than I am.”

“How much younger?” Shana had been picturing some nice grandmotherly-type woman who baked cookies and went to Bingo. What if her dad was dating some thirty-year-old? Would she be able to keep an open mind for her father’s sake?

"She won't say exactly, but I know she's in her early fifties. She could pass for forty-five though."

Whew. That she could live with. Hell, her father had been alone long enough, if he wanted to date a twenty-year-old she'd suck it up and smile. At least she hoped she would, but fifties was much better.

"Dad, you cradle-robber you."

"And you wonder why you haven't met her yet? She's very sensitive. If you said something like that it might make her think you didn't like her," Padraic protested.

"Come on, give me some credit. I'm not a complete idiot. I know how to behave in public. I wouldn't do anything to hurt her feelings or embarrass you. Now when can I meet her?"

"We'll see."

"What's her name anyway?"

"Gloria."

"You already told me that. I meant last name." she pushed.

"Not on your life, missy. I know what you're doing and I'm not giving you anything else you can use to go digging."

"Spoilsport." Shana pretended to pout. It was fun being able to tease her dad about his love life. Ew, bad word picture. She did *not* want to think about that part of it.

Padraic let out a low whistle as they drove up her street and her cottage came into view. "You're lucky to be alive, young lady."

Shana waited for her father to come to a stop in the driveway.

"I'll be alright from here. Looks like the car survived." The rental car was still in one piece. It had plenty of debris covering the hood, but at least it wasn't falling apart.

Unlike her house.

"Are you sure? I could stay around for a bit."

And do what? Watch her cry at the remains of her life? “No, it’s okay. Besides, I bet that cop parked over there will want to talk to me anyway.”

Padraic opened his mouth to argue with her, then snapped it closed. “Okay, but call if you need me.”

“I will, thanks.” She took a deep breath, then steeled herself to go look at the house.

The windows had exploded outward, taking gouges out of the sides of the house as they went. The siding was melted and bubbled in places that weren’t completely blown off. The roof was caved in, and the stench of burning wood came from inside.

Yellow fire tape surrounded the house. Shana headed towards the cop parked on her front lawn. He was talking to two guys in fire gear, and Shana wondered if he was the one she was supposed to talk to later on today.

Pushing the lump that had formed in her throat back down, Shana tried not to look too closely at her home as she walked over to the three men sitting by the cruiser. She could see a charred beam poking through a hole in the house. It was waterlogged and still steaming. Chunks of her miniscule lawn were torn up with tire tracks and objects so burnt she couldn’t even begin to guess their origins.

So much for her vague hope of salvaging anything.

“Are you the owner of the house?” The cop addressed her as she got closer. The two firefighters stepped back and one of them leaned on the hood of the car.

“I rent it. The owner is in Florida somewhere. I’m Shana Quinn.”

“Ms. Quinn, we have some questions we’d like you to answer when you have the time.”

“I’ll tell you what I can. Do you know how soon I can go in? I want to see if there’s anything left.”

The firefighter who was closest to her stepped up. "The damage was confined to the front two rooms, with minimal water damage to the rest of the place. You won't be able to go in until the Fire Marshal comes to inspect it."

"How long will that be?" Her bedroom was in the back, so maybe there was some stuff that could be saved after all.

"He'll probably come some time today, but it won't be safe to enter the domicile until the roof is taken care of and supports are put into place."

"I understand." Damn, she wanted to get some of her clothes and a few personal belongings. She could probably ask one of them to get her firebox so she'd have her important papers, but she didn't want a stranger pawing through her underwear drawer.

"I do have some good news for you." The officer drew her attention back to him.

"Really?" She could use some good news for a change.

"We found this in the flower bed, and it appears to have survived with only a little water damage." The cop pulled her pocketbook out of the seat of his cruiser.

It was covered in mud and had boot prints all over it, but it was a beautiful sight indeed. Not having to replace her credit cards and license would save her loads of time.

"That is good news. Thanks."

"Your gun permit expires in July."

So he'd looked through her purse. Guess he would be curious to find a gun at the scene of an explosion.

"I realize that. I'll make sure it doesn't lapse. I can answer your questions now if you'd like."

"It won't take long." He pulled a pad out of his pocket.

Shana took the opportunity to read his badge. R. Slifer. Didn't ring a bell. He was pretty young though; chances were he didn't know her father. She hoped.

"Can you tell me what happened last night?"

"Sure. I was coming home from a-a date," she did not want to go into specifics about the case with him, "and after I said goodnight I unlocked my door. I had my hands full, and I dropped my purse, as I bent over to pick it up I smacked my head against the door. I don't remember too much after that." Except the feeling of Royce's arms around her.

"Did you see anyone in the area? Notice anything suspicious?"

"Not that I recall. We got home after midnight and I was pretty tired. I just wanted to get into bed." And how.

"Did you have a fight recently? A nasty break up?"

"No. I quit my job and it wasn't exactly cordial, but I have a hard time picturing my boss trying to blow me up when he wanted me gone anyway."

"Where did you work?"

"Renault Technologies. I was in the security division, my boss was Mr. Horton."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Renault huh? They're damn tough to get into."

"I have connections." She wasn't going into it with this guy.

"You recently filled out a report on a hit and run. Do you think it could be connected?"

Hell yes. "It could be. I don't know for sure. I didn't recognize the car that hit me, and I didn't see the driver." It went against the grain not to tell the police everything, but she couldn't trust that this guy wasn't one of Sid's dirty cops. Until she knew for sure, everyone was a suspect.

"I saw that you have your detective's license. Are you currently working on a case?"

"I'm also on birth control, that doesn't mean I'm currently having sex. And you know and I know, if I'm on a case I can't tell you about it anyway."

The cop rubbed the back of his neck. "Your cooperation would help us find out who did this to you and protect you from further harm."

"I am cooperating, as much as I'm able too. Now, if you don't mind, I'll be going."

"Can we have a number where we can reach you?"

Shana rattled off her cell phone number and walked back towards the car. If she took it to the car wash, maybe she wouldn't get fined out the wazoo by the rental agency.

Pulling the keys out of the front pocket of her purse, Shana clicked the automatic door-lock from a good distance away. After what happened to her house she wasn't taking any chances that her car wasn't rigged to blow up too.

So far so good. No fiery explosions yet. Gingerly opening the door, Shana threw her purse onto the seat and looked around for something to clean the car off with. She grabbed her windbreaker from the back and used it to brush the hood off.

She waited until she had the bulk of the car blocking her from the view of the men, then squatted down to look under the car for anything that looked like a bomb. She might be paranoid, but better paranoid than dead. Everything looked appropriately car-ish. She was no mechanic, but there weren't any wires that didn't belong. Just in case, she tugged on the brake line too. If you were going to be paranoid, might as well go whole hog.

If anything else was wrong with the car, she couldn't figure it out. Waving to the trio of men watching her every move, Shana backed out of the driveway and headed to the carwash down the street. It might be a good idea to trade in this car and go to another rental place. Someone knew way too much about her activities. Changing cars made sense.

Shana dug around the bottom of her purse for some change. Feeling blindly for the quarters she knew were in there, she felt something sharp and heavy. What the hell was that sharp in her pocketbook? Putting the quarters on the dash, she dug around some more, finally dumping the whole thing out on the seat next to her.

What was this? A money clip in the shape of a dollar sign spilled out. Where did this come from? She didn't carry a money clip. Taking the money out she counted ten fifties and at least five more twenties. She certainly didn't carry around that kind of cash.

Maybe it was Royce's. Her purse had been in his limo while they were at the dinner, maybe he dropped it in there so he wouldn't get weighed down by a wad of cash in his pocket.

Now if that wasn't an example of the differences between them she didn't know what was. She was scrounging around the bottom of her pocketbook for quarters and he had fifties by the bundle that he didn't even miss. Her father had a few screws loose if he thought Shana and Royce could make it as a couple.

Not that they didn't work well together in a business relationship. He was pretty handy with a computer, and it was kind of nice to get those gadgets from the research and development department. And he certainly wasn't tough on the eyes.

Don't go there. Shana climbed out of the car and slammed the door. Just because he was hot, smart, and the best thing in her bed since she bought an electric blanket two years ago didn't mean it was going

anywhere. She slipped up this morning and let her hormones run away with her. Just because they got along in bed once didn't mean it was going to continue.

Shana grabbed the quarters and plunked them into the carwash, yanking out the hose with a bit more force than was necessary. Hell, they couldn't even remain civil to one another for ten minutes after they were done. If she was going to have a relationship, a serious relationship, it wasn't going to be with someone who got his ego bruised over the least little thing.

Is that what really worries you? Or are you worried that he'll get sick of you and drop you cold just like he did all those models he's seen in the magazines with? She was beginning to get really annoyed with that voice in the back of her head. Sure Royce was attracted to her, this morning made that abundantly clear, but it could just be because she was so different from every other woman he'd been with.

Or it could even be because she said no to him. She rinsed the car down, wincing at the scratches in the paint. Maybe he was one of those guys who thrived on the chase? Now that she'd had sex with him, maybe he'd get bored and move on.

Furiously soaping the car, Shana tried to get these thoughts out of her head. This was stupid. She shouldn't be so worried about Royce when her time was running out and she wasn't any closer to finding Allison.

That wasn't true, though. She'd found out that Sid was a possible lead, one or more senators were involved somehow, and the guys she'd met at the off-track were in it together. Maybe she'd take another trip to the bar and see what turned up.

There had to be some connection between Sid and Jim that would lead to Allison. Jim was involved in the Helen project, was known to

gamble, and was under Sid's thumb somehow. How hard would it be for him to spot a fellow addict in David?

The wheels in Shana's head spun faster and faster. She had no proof of course, but with a little more digging she might be able to find enough evidence to bring to the police for a search warrant. If nothing else, it gave her a direction to focus on. Royce wasn't going to like it. She'd wait until she had all her ducks in a row before she brought it to him.

Hey, he had hired her to find his niece, not to spare his feelings. Politicians lied all the time, what was one more? If he wanted the truth sugar-coated he'd come to the wrong place.

Man, the case was really starting to come together. Shana hung up the hose and yanked open the door, forgetting it was a rental and she didn't need to rip it open like she had with her own car. The door flew open and her wallet and a bunch of change from her purse fell on the ground.

Crap, like her stuff wasn't water-logged enough as it was. Bending down she reached to pick it all up. She was going to have to be more careful with this stuff. If that was her gun she could have blown her head off.

No sooner had the thought entered her mind than the window on her car shattered, spewing glass on her head and shoulders. Snagging her gun from the seat, she flattened to the soaking wet cement and rolled under the car for cover.

What the hell was going on? She was in a carwash for heaven's sake. It wasn't like a stray rock came from the road and turned the corner to get inside and hit her window.

Crawling on her belly in the soapy water and who only knew what else, Shana wiggled her way to the rear of the car. The overhang on the building limited her view, and she couldn't see anyone nearby.

She strained her ears, trying to hear the least little sound that indicated someone approaching, but all she could hear was the blood pounding in her head. *Okay, think.* She hadn't heard a report, just the sound of breaking glass. For someone to shoot at her and do it without her hearing it, they had to use a silencer and high-powered rifle.

Sniper. A sniper rifle could easily target her in the bay of the carwash and aim for her head. Damn, once again her purse saved her life. She was going to have to bronze that thing.

The thud of another shot hitting the tire near her head snapped her back to the present. She had to stay alive if she wanted to immortalize her bag.

Sliding backwards on her stomach, Shana scurried away from the rapidly deflating tire. If this guy shot the other one she'd get crushed by the weight of the car before she died of a gunshot wound.

Her jeans and tee shirt were soaking wet, and the fumes from the engine of the car made her nauseous, but she didn't dare leave the dubious safety of her spot. Her handgun didn't have the range to fire back. It was all a waiting game now.

Shana heard the rumble of a motor. A car pulled into the bay behind her. Was it the sniper coming to finish her off?

Sweat dripped into her eyes and her hands were slippery on the handle of the gun. She heard the creak of a door opening, and saw a pair of expensive basketball sneakers walking towards her car. The squeak of rubber soles on wet cement echoed in the bay. To Shana's hypersensitive ears, each footfall sounded as loud as a cannon.

"Hey. You done in here or what?"

Her arms felt weak with relief. Peering out from under the car, Shana saw the scarecrow figure of a teenager in baggy jeans and a concert tee shirt.

“Yeah, I just had to check something under here, I’ll be done in a sec.” Saved by a scrawny kid with acne.

Sliding out on the side of the car that wasn’t covered in broken glass, Shana slowly got to her feet and looked around. The kid had gone back to his car and started it up, blaring the radio and staring at her impatiently.

She waved to him and slowly moved around the front of the car. The rear tire was almost completely flat, but she’d have to drive on it anyway. There was no way she was stopping to change it. Leaving her change on the ground with the broken glass, Shana climbed into the car and pulled away.

And she had been worried about the fine she’d have to pay for damaging the paint job?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

For Christmas she was buying her father a cell phone. This was ridiculous. She'd called him at home, at the barn, at his local watering hole, and he was nowhere to be found. There was no help for it, she was going to have to call Royce and have him pick her up.

Wonderful. She could hear the speech now. If the rental place wasn't closing in half an hour she'd stay there until she reached her father, but with a sniper after her head she didn't really want to be waiting out in the open right about now.

Crap. Punching in the number to Royce's cell phone, she waited for him to pick up.

"Yes?"

"Hey Royce, it's me, Shana. Can you pick me up at the rental car place on Jefferson Street? I had to turn my car in and they won't rent me another one."

"Was it totaled by the explosion?"

"Uh it was damaged. I'll explain it to you later."

"Sure. I was finishing up here anyway. I had an interesting visitor today. I'll tell you all about it when I get there."

"Really? Can't wait to hear about it." Her breath caught as a car drove slowly by the window.

"What's going on?" His voice got deeper with concern.

“We can swap stories when you get here.” Shana eyed the clock. The clerks behind the counter were shooting her dirty looks. They probably wanted to close up early and she was keeping them honest.

“And Royce, ah, can you hurry?”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes.” Royce hung up without another word. At least he wasn’t one for long goodbyes.

Shana flipped the phone shut and chucked it in her purse. The clink of the phone hitting metal reminded her of the money clip that she’d found. Grabbing a seat away from the front windows, she pulled it out again.

Something about it was very familiar, but she couldn’t put her finger on it. It just didn’t seem like something Royce would carry, but how else had it gotten into her bag?

Digging around some more, all she came up with was some grass and dirt. Whoever found the bag must have scooped it up from the ground where she dropped it, shoving all the stuff into it along with some dirt.

Her brain started to click on a few more cylinders. She got up to pace, making sure she was never in front of the windows or in a direct line of fire. Okay, let’s just suppose while she was out getting buffed and polished at the salon, Royce called old Mitzi to let her know he was bringing a date.

Mitzi, being the jealous wench that she is, complained to Jim about Royce bringing some nobody to her dinner. Jimbo makes a few phone calls and while Shana and Royce are out smiling and shaking hands, one of Jim’s goons comes along and rigs her house to go boom.

Carrying this a little farther, Tony, or someone of his ilk sets the bomb in her apartment. In his hurry to get out through the window, since he can’t go out through the now booby-trapped door, he drops his money clip on the ground.

That made sense. She drops her purse, house goes boom, but since her stuff is below the impact range it's mostly unharmed. Firefighters come in and do their stuff, stepping all over it. Once the fire is out they find her stuff on the ground near her purse and shove everything into it.

Including the first God's honest clue they've come across. Hot damn! Now they were on to something. As long as she hadn't smudged every fingerprint on the thing with her handling of it.

"Miss, we'd like to close up now."

Shana almost jumped out of her skin. The clerk who had checked the car back in had snuck up so quietly Shana had completely missed her approach.

"Uh, sure. My ride should be here any second." She hoped. Waiting outside she'd be a sitting duck to the sniper that had used her for target practice at the car wash.

Slinging her purse over her shoulder, Shana slipped out the door and searched for a good hiding place. The lot was flooded with light from lamps placed all over the lot. Great for keeping car thieves away, but not exactly conducive to keeping her alive right now.

Slipping around the corner of the building she looked for some shadows to slide into. There was a sliver of darkness behind the dumpster, and Shana headed for it like it was an island in a turbulent sea.

The dumpster was fragrant, but it should be reasonably safe. Shana tried to ignore the scratchings coming from inside the huge container. If it was a choice between a bullet in the head or rats, she'd take the rats. For now at least. Where the hell was Royce?

As soon as he got here, she'd have him take the highway to somewhere, anywhere, while she told him what was going on. Then they'd meet up with her dad, if he'd ever get home and answer his damn

phone. Then they could make a plan for how they'd get enough proof to nail the bastards that were trying to kill her, kill Allison, and destroy the country.

She just had to stay alive long enough to do it.

A Mercedes purred into the lot, looking like a purebred amongst alley cats in the lot filled with dinged up rental cars. Shana waited until he pulled by the front doors of the office before she sprang from her spot, dodging between cars and using as much of the shadows as she could find.

Royce had just stepped out of the car when she made her last desperate dash to the passenger side.

"Get in and go!" she shouted, jumping into the seat and crouching as low as she could.

"What's going on? What happened to you this time?" Royce got in and tore out of the lot while firing questions at her. "You're all scraped up, and your clothes are trashed. What'd you do, get into a cat fight with the rental agency?"

"Ha, ha. Just get on the highway and floor this thing."

To his credit, he didn't argue with her, he just did as she asked and took the next on ramp.

"We're doing eighty, you should be able to sit up now."

"Good, my legs were starting to fall asleep." Shana wormed her way into the leather seat and snapped on her seatbelt.

"You want to fill me in? Why are we playing Jane Bond here?"

"Cause I didn't want to ruin your interior with bullet holes, smart ass."

"Excuse me? What bullet holes, and who's shooting?"

"Semi-automatic sniper rifle bullets, and I don't know who is doing the shooting, but they're pretty good. Not as good as me, obviously."

“What?”

“If they were as good as me, I’d be dead right now.” It didn’t come out as smug as she wanted it to. Maybe she was a little more shaken up than she thought.

“What does that mean, exactly?”

“It means we’re getting close. After I picked up the car today I brought it to the car wash to try to clean it up a bit before I dropped it off at the rental place. I was hoping they wouldn’t notice any damage. Ha! What a joke.” She’d ended up with a bit more than a scratched paint job.

“Could you stick to the point, please?” Royce wove in and out of the light traffic, and shot her looks every few seconds.

“While I was at the carwash, someone decided to use me for target practice. They missed, but my window got hit and so did my tire. I drove the car back to the rental place on the rims and turned it in, then called you.”

“Let me get this straight. Your car has been totaled, your house blown up, and now someone is taking pot shots at you, and all you can say is that we’re getting close?” Royce’s eyes blazed at her and his jaw began to twitch again.

“Don’t get all tweaked out. Things like this happen when you’re dealing with the folks we’re dealing with. When they resort to kidnapping children to get their way, did you think they’d stop at crank calls?”

He let out a long breath. “I know we’re dealing with monsters, I just didn’t think it would go this far. I mean, this is like something out of a movie, not real life.”

“Maybe not to you, but this is what I’ve trained for.”

“You sound like you enjoy getting shot at.” Thunder rumbled in the air, echoing the fury on Royce’s brow. A bolt of lightning lit up the interior of the car showing the anger that had tightened his face.

“Look, I grew up reading unsolved murder cases with my dad, trying to figure them out before he did. I spent every weekend perfecting my shot. All I ever wanted was to help people the way my old man did. Now that I’m in a position to solve a case and help someone I’m not going to back away just because things are getting tough.”

The rain hit the car like a tidal wave, forcing Royce to concentrate on his driving and not on her. Thunder crashed all around them, and cars pulled to the side of the road to wait out the storm. Not Royce, he kept driving into the chaos like he was on a mission to prevail over the forces of nature.

“I’m calling in the FBI,” he said at last.

“What? You can’t do that. Sid could very easily find out and kill Allison.”

“Sid isn’t going to do anything that ruins his chances of getting the Helen project code. I won’t see you killed because of my family. You’re officially off the case.”

“Bullshit!”

“I beg your pardon?” Royce turned off the highway and onto a back road. There were no streetlights and the lightning ripped the sky apart with every bolt. Thunder shook the car, but it was nothing compared to the fury in Royce’s eyes.

“You can fire me if you want, but I’m not giving up. These guys are going to come after me whether I’m working for you or not. They aren’t going to suddenly decide to leave me alone just because you fire me.”

“I don’t want to see you hurt. Can’t you get that through your thick skull?”

“I don’t want to see me hurt either, but giving up isn’t going to stop it. I’m a loose end that needs to be tidied up. They can’t afford to leave me hanging around.”

Royce pulled into a little lot with the grandiose title of a “scenic overlook” and stopped the car.

“I hate this. I hate that you’re right and there isn’t a damn thing I can do about it. I hate that I feel this way and you’re sitting there all calm and collected while I’m ready to tear my hair out. I hate seeing cuts and scrapes on you, knowing there’s more under the clothes and that it’s because of me that they’re there.”

“I’m sorry you hate everything about me. I’m doing my job, and there’s no crying allowed. Keeping this code of yours out of the hands of some greedy bastard is worth a few cuts and scrapes. It’s part of the job and you can’t stop it.”

“Then try to stop this.” Royce popped her seatbelt and pulled her into his lap. Her legs sprawled across the seat and his arms were the only things holding her up.

As he crushed her chest to his steely hard one, she had a second to gasp at his tactics before he swooped down and captured her open mouth with his own. Thunder and lightning shook the car, but it was nothing compared to the storm that raged inside her body at the touch of Royce’s lips on hers.

His hand captured her head and angled it to the side, allowing him free reign to plunder her mouth. Shana wasn’t about to complain, her body was hungry for his touch, and as long as he started it, she was free to enjoy him again.

Her hand fumbled on the side of the driver’s seat for the button to move it back. Almost silently, it eased back, making some space in front of the steering wheel. *Gotta love a car with lots of leg room.*

Using her feet to get some leverage, Shana managed to get to her knees and straddle his lap. She could feel the raging hard-on pressing

against her jean-covered mound, and the friction excited her almost as much as it frustrated her.

Her fingers dove into the opening of his shirt, popping the buttons off when they didn't come undone fast enough for her. She needed to feel his skin beneath her fingers, to touch him and glory in the strength of him. He was so alive. So vibrant and responsive to her every touch. She wanted more and more of him.

Royce dragged his mouth away from hers and pulled her tee shirt over her head. The plain white bra she wore underneath was ripped off as well, and Royce wasted no time sucking her aching nipple into his mouth.

Flames seared their way through her body, striking her core with amazing accuracy. She rubbed against him, and tried to ease the desperate need he created, but the contact only made it worse.

"I don't have any protection." Royce gasped as she unsnapped his pants and reached in to clasp his erection.

Shana's hands shook as she fumbled for her purse. Her wallet tumbled to the ground but she managed to find her "emergency" condom. "Here. It's the only one I've got so be careful with it."

"Thank God, because honestly I wouldn't care right about now. I need to be in you."

With strength Shana had suspected but never seen, Royce pulled her up with one hand and yanked her faded jeans off her hips with the other. Her cotton panties came off her body, tearing with the force of Royce's impatience.

The sound of tearing cloth, and the fury of Royce's need for her made Shana feel powerful, wanted, and hotter than blacktop in July.

"Hurry."

"I am, but I keep getting distracted." Royce's finger dove into her cleft, his knuckle brushed against her over-sensitized nubbin and sent hot sparks sizzling through her.

"More, oh God, more. I want you, all of you."

"You first." Royce was sweating, panting as he teased her.

But Shana didn't want to be first, she just wanted him. Grabbing his length, she reared up and fitted him to her body, sliding down over his hardness until she was fully impaled.

"Together."

"Anything you say." His hips bucked, driving into her from below.

She was vaguely aware of the storm surrounding them, but it was a distant second compared to the storm raging between them. Sweat dripped off her forehead as she pumped on top of him. His hands clenched her hips, driving her on harder and harder. A lightning bolt hit and she threw her head back, not sure if the bolt came from inside or outside the car.

All she knew was she'd been struck and she'd never be the same. Her body quivered and spasmed from the force of her orgasm. Waves and waves of pleasure washed over her as she slowly came to earth. Royce was quiet beneath her, his thumbs rubbing circles over her hipbones.

"Are you done?" he asked, licking at the sweat pooled between her breasts.

"Oh yeah."

"I'm not." Royce drew her nipple into his mouth and thrust inside her at the same time. The drops of pleasure that had been rippling outward shot back to her core as his double assault on her senses devastated her yet again.

"I want to make love to you all night long. To touch every inch of your body until you're begging me for mercy. I want you so seeped in pleasure

that you'll never think of anything but me and what I can do to you, for you, again."

His eyes stared into hers, demanding her attention. His words tore through her as determinedly as the darts of pleasure he used to send her flying. Part of her reveled in the emotion of his words, the sheer amount of feeling she brought forth from him. Another part of her shied away from the intent behind those words. What if she couldn't live up to his expectations?

When his finger rubbed against the bud of her pleasure, all her thoughts focused on what was happening inside her, and the eruption building, growing, waiting to explode.

"Look at me." Royce demanded. "Look at me!" He nipped her neck when she waited too long to comply.

Shana looked at him, feeling strong and powerful as she floated on the waves pulsing through her.

"Say my name. I want you to know who you're with."

She said nothing. Playing along the knife-edge of danger. Let him sweat it out a little more. He wanted to tame her, but he would learn she could wait him out.

He stopped moving, holding just the tip of his penis inside her wet nether lips. Shana tried to drop down on him, to fill the emptiness, but he held her steady.

The flashing light from the heavens highlighted the glistening sweat dripping down the side of his face, and the glare of determination in his eyes.

Leaning in to him, she teased his chest with her pebbled nipples, and licked at his lips. Sucking the lower one into her mouth, she gave it a little bite before letting go.

"Royce," she whispered against his mouth.

“Mother of God!” Royce speared her, driving into her with enough force to push her against the steering wheel. She’d end up with the Mercedes logo tattooed on her rear end, but it would be worth it.

Just as her body flew into a thousand pieces, Royce’s hips bucked wildly beneath her as he too found his pleasure.

The storm outside the car carried on, but the one contained inside had spent itself completely.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“So what’s the plan?” Royce asked once Shana had gotten dressed and buckled into her seat. She was making him lose his mind, and he had no idea how to find it again. He hadn’t had sex in a car since he was sixteen.

And he’d never forced some sort of affirmation from his partner. Hell, he’d never had to. There was something in him that demanded a response from Shana, that needed to know she was as out of control as he was.

God knew he’d given up control over his life from the moment he let her talk him into giving her the case. The least she could do was be as stupid in lust as he was.

“We go to my father’s house and wait for him to get back from wherever he is.”

“You want to practice shooting now?” Was she insane? She’d been shot at twice today and just given him the most mind numbing experience he’d ever had and she wanted to give him a lesson in gun safety?

“No, I wanted to get some more clothes, these are pretty trashed. I also wanted to have a meeting with my dad and see what he found. I might have a clue.”

“Oh, okay.” He didn’t expect her to want to go back to his place and have another round of incredible sex, did he?

“Didn’t you say that you had a visitor or something today too?”

The conversation with Pete Downy came back to him, killing off any lingering sexual feelings.

"I sure did. I'll wait to tell you about it until your dad is there. Might as well lay everything out at once."

"Kay."

Royce glanced over at her as he pulled out of the rest area. It was called a scenic overlook, but the sights burned on his brain had nothing to do with nature. Shana stared out the window, her fingers running up and down the strap of her gigantic purse.

Was she thinking about what just happened? About them? He got the impression that she wasn't very experienced. Her reactions seemed instinctual, not rehearsed, but maybe that was his pride talking.

What the hell was wrong with him? Since when did he wonder what a woman was thinking? He had never been one to chit chat with his lovers, leaving as soon as they fell asleep, preferably before they could get all emotional on him.

Shana's attitude should suit him perfectly. She didn't declare her love for him just because he gave her an orgasm. It was what he'd always wanted, right? Lord knew she gave him pleasure like he'd never had before. If that was all he'd been looking for then why was he so disappointed?

"Take this exit, we can use the back roads to get to his house without letting everyone know where we're headed."

He checked his rearview mirror even as he followed her directions. There was almost no visibility with the rain still crashing down. If someone were following them in this mess they'd be out of luck.

"Don't you think it's a little late for caution now? If anyone was trailing us they just had plenty of time to catch up."

"Sorry, force of habit."

“You get followed often?”

“Nah, but my dad used to tail me and see if I could spot him, so I know a million ways to shake someone lose.”

He wasn't even going to bring up the fact that most kids didn't shoot guns and shake tails for fun. No sense spoiling the mood any sooner than he had to.

The back roads Shana sent him on took all his attention to navigate in the downpour. It was probably a good thing, because being alone with her in the close confines on the car obviously drained all his brain cells. Trying to fathom a woman's moods was dicey at best. When the woman was Shana, he didn't even stand a fighting chance.

“Pull around the back of the house. I've got to get the spare key to get in. No sense announcing our presence to anyone who walks by.” She slipped out of the car into the darkness, her white tee shirt becoming soaked in seconds.

Royce tried to see where she had gone, but the night was too encompassing for his eyes to penetrate. Within minutes lights came on and the house glowed with warmth. Shana stood framed in the doorway, looking smaller than he remembered. Her personality seemed to enlarge her until she was the height of an Amazon.

She waved him in, so he cut the engine and made a dash to the door. He was almost as soaked as she was by the time he got through the sliding glass door into what looked like the kitchen. She handed him a towel as she rubbed at her dripping wet hair.

“I'll get you one of my father's robes and you can wear that while I throw your clothes in the dryer. I'm going to take a quick shower before my dad gets back.”

“Dry clothes would be nice, thanks.” Although her wet ones were more than just a little enticing.

The thin cotton shirt clung to her breasts and clearly showed her nipples standing out from the cold. The wet, faded denim clung to her hips like a second skin and made his mouth water at the thought of peeling them off her.

Down boy! Royce didn't know when Padraic was coming home, but seeing Shana's temperamental father while sporting a raging hard on wasn't a wise idea.

Shana's eyes filled with matching heat. Her little pink tongue came out and moistened her lips, while her gaze dipped down to where his slacks announced his thoughts. She shivered, making her breasts jiggle enticingly.

"I'll, ah, go get you the robe now. The dryer is over there." She waved her hand to the left of him, but didn't take her gaze off him. Her pupils were dilated, and her chest heaved with her rapid breathing.

Before Royce could take a step towards her and act upon the desire arcing between them, she shook her head and bolted down the hall. He watched her flee before turning to find the dryer. Maybe he'd take a cold shower when she was done with hers.

Stripping out of his soaked clothing, he tossed the ruined items in the dryer and started it up. That was one thing he didn't miss about his old life. He'd hated doing laundry every week. Now everything that couldn't be dry-cleaned he left for the cleaning people to wash. Rank had its privileges.

"I left the robe on the door handle. Make yourself at home, I won't be long," Shana shouted through the door. He heard the rapid patter of her bare feet against the wood floors as she scampered back down the hall.

Coward.

Royce reached around and pulled the flannel robe into the laundry room. It was a little tight in the shoulders but it would do until his

clothes were dry. With any luck he'd be able to return the robe before Padraic got home.

Walking out of the bathroom, he wandered around the small ranch house looking for clues to Shana's personality. Anything to distract him from the sound of the shower running over her naked body.

The den was done in earth tones popular in the seventies. Wood paneling pervaded a room that sported plaques and trophies scattered willy-nilly. Royce saw commendations from the police force for Padraic. Marksmanship trophies for both the Quinn's, and a picture of Shana in a karate gee, sporting a black eye and missing front tooth holding a trophy as big as she was.

Where were the prom pictures? The family photos? The pictures of Shana at her first dance? All the things he remembered rolling his eyes over during his high school years? When his mother was still alive it seemed like every little thing warranted a picture.

The only pictures of Shana and her father together were from newspaper clippings announcing her winning championships in karate or firearms. When was she allowed to be a girl? To play dress up and gush over boys?

"Oh jeez, put that down. I hate that picture." Shana was in another pair of jeans, these ripped at the knee, and a Red Sox jersey.

"What? You mean you don't like showing off your awards?" His voice sounded sharp and he winced at his lack of control.

"Not really. My dad put all of these up, said this would be our trophy room. He loves that picture especially. I was twelve and had just gotten my first advanced belt. Two days before the tournament I tried to break up a fight between one of my friends and some older kids who were picking on him."

"Him?"

"Yeah, my best friend in grammar school was Robbie Lenler. Anyway, some of the older kids were picking on him, and I thought I was this big tough girl because I took karate and I jumped in to save him."

"And did you?"

"Not before I got my front tooth knocked out and punched in the eye. I could barely see out of my right eye, it was so swollen."

"But you went to the tournament anyway?"

"Well, yeah. I didn't want to be a quitter. It wasn't that bad, and look, I won first place in forms."

"Congratulations."

"What has got you so snippy? It was years ago."

"Where are your prom pictures? Pictures of you being goofy with your friends? Pictures of you playing dress up or putting on makeup with other girls?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Where in this house is a picture of you acting like the daughter you are, not the son you wanted to be?"

"Listen here Dr. Phil, just because we had sex doesn't mean you can psychoanalyze me. I may not have done the usual girly things, but I still had fun. And for your information, I did go to the prom. With a date."

"That's right, and you had a police escort."

"So what? My dad didn't want some guy screwing with his daughter. And neither did his buddies. It was awkward, yeah, but it showed he cared."

Royce put the picture down and turned away from her. He didn't know what was wrong with him, why it mattered so much that she appreciate being a girl, a woman.

"Tell me something. Who told you the facts of life?"

"It's a little too late to be wondering about that now, isn't it?"

“Just answer me.” He turned to face her again. “Please.”

Shana sighed, then moved to sit on the arm of a butt-ugly couch. “One of the dispatchers at the police station was a good friend of the family. She had all boys and always wanted a girl, so she adopted me. We’d go shopping for school clothes together, she helped me get my first bra, told me about, you know, changes I’d go through, that stuff.” She looked uncomfortable mentioning simple biological functions.

Royce relaxed and sat on the couch. She hadn’t been left completely in the dark at least.

“Are you happy now? You get so weird sometimes.” Shana looked at him out of the corner of her eye.

“Yeah. Must come from oxygen depravation. All the blood has been rushing south of my brain since the first time I laid eyes on you.” Royce hoped she’d take his teasing as a peace offering.

“Serves you right then. I’m your employee after all. You aren’t supposed to lust after the help you know.”

“Everyone needs a vice, guess you’re mine.” He pulled her off the arm of the couch and onto his lap. “I don’t know what’s going to happen once all this is over with, but I know I want you in my life. If that bothers you, too bad, you’re going to have to learn to live with it.”

She looked like she was going to argue with him, then a half smile turned up the corner of her mouth. “We’ll see.”

In a move he didn’t see coming, she slid out of his grasp and dropped to the floor, slipping away from him with a laugh. “I’ll go check on your clothes, I think I hear my dad pulling up now.

* * *

“So let me get this straight, you think that Jim arranged for your house to get blown up?” Royce paced the room, his hand had gone through his hair so many times Shana was surprised he hadn’t ripped it out by the roots.

“I’m adding up all the pieces and this is what I’m coming up with. I know he’s your friend, but sometimes desperate people do desperate things.”

If he couldn’t see that Jim was getting increasingly frantic, then he was blinded by emotion. After the information Royce had shared about his visit from Downy, the situation looked even more damning.

“I could see him getting anxious, but not going this far. It just doesn’t ring true to the man I know.”

Shana bit hard on her tongue and walked over to where he stood by the counter. Taking his hand she twined her fingers with his. “We’ll keep our options open, but for the time being, let’s go like you believe it’s him. We aren’t going to the DA without proof, so if he’s innocent then there’s no harm in our conjectures.”

“And if he’s guilty?”

“Then we nail him to the wall.” Padraic’s tone left no room for discussion.

“Okay, so what’s the plan?” Shana asked. Royce didn’t look thrilled, but at least he didn’t have that stubborn, closed off look on his face anymore. She walked back to the table and sat down across from her father.

“From what my sources could tell me, and none of this goes into any report to the DA.” Padraic waved a finger at Shana. “That bar they met you in is nothing but a front for Sid’s operations. There’s offices upstairs where he keeps track of his dealings, but no one’s been able to get their hands on those computers.”

"If you give me half an hour, I could copy anything he has on them," Royce offered.

Shana's heart leapt into her throat. "No. It's too dangerous, and it wouldn't be admissible in court anyway. We don't want any chance of him slipping through our fingers."

Royce grunted but didn't say anything.

"She's right, we have to do this by the book or Sid will skate off scot free."

"The thing we're forgetting here though is we want to find Allison and rescue her more than we want to nail Sid." Shana stared down her father.

"But if we can do both..."

"If we can do both that's wonderful, but the goal is to save Allison, and keep the Helen project out of enemy hands. Agreed?" She looked at both men until they nodded their assent.

"So, boss-lady, how do we go about finding where the little miss is?" Padraic leaned back in his chair and shot her a challenging look.

"I've been thinking—"

"Oh Lord." Royce rolled his eyes.

"Listen, they obviously know that I'm not some bored housewife looking for a cheap thrill by gambling. I say I go back to the bar—"

"No way. Are you out of your mind? The last time they almost killed you." Royce slammed his hands down on the kitchen table.

"Hear her out, the girl's got a head on her shoulders, let her use it."

Shana offered a quick smile to her father. "I'll go into the bar, spouting something about how they better back off or I'll take my evidence to the DA. I'll make sure everyone there gets a nice, good look at me, then I'll drive away like I'm the idiot they obviously think I am."

"And wait for them to try and kill you again?" Royce's eyes were blazing.

"No, I'll drive around for hours while they follow me on a wild goose chase. Meanwhile, Dad will follow whoever is following me. And you'll follow whoever comes out of the bar after them."

"What makes you think that the next person out of that bar will be able to lead us anywhere?" Royce tapped the table with his fist.

"Because she's going to up the ante. And whoever has your niece is going to have to either move up the schedule or cut and run." Padraic answered.

"What if they decide to cut and run with Allison?"

"Then you'll be there to call in the authorities and stop them." Shana leaned back in her chair.

"I don't like it. You're basically wearing a sign that says 'Here I am, please shoot me.'" Royce loomed over her.

"That's why my dad will be following me."

"Why don't I follow you instead?" Royce glanced at Padraic with a raised eyebrow.

"Because you don't have a permit to carry a concealed weapon, and if anyone is going to take pot shots at me I want my backup to be carrying some firepower."

Royce spun a chair around and straddled it, looking between Padraic and Shana. His knuckles continued to tap on the table, adding a counterpoint to the falling rain outside. Finally he heaved a sigh.

"Alright. I'll go along with it, but I want you both carrying the new wireless radios we have, and you are going to wear a bulletproof vest."

"In this heat? Are you kidding me? Do you know how bulky those things are? It's not like I could hide it under a sweater," Shana sputtered.

"I've got something that will work. It might still be hot, but it will fit under a long-sleeved shirt no problem. Plus, it has the wireless radio built in, and I can rig it so that it records your conversation with the guys you're meeting with too."

"How'd you get your hands on something like that?" Padraic's eyes lit up. If there was something her father liked more than weapons, it was gadgets.

"We invented it. Not the bulletproof shirt, but the wireless radio that goes in it. The military sent us the body armor, and we've been working on inserting the communications technology into it. I only have one though."

"Give it to Shannie, I can wear a regular one, nobody's going to be looking at me."

"So it's a go? We'll meet at McDonald's by the bar and time our arrivals from there. Royce, do you have anything a little less flashy than a Mercedes or a Harley? Anything nondescript?" Shana asked.

"I think I can get something. In fact, I'll get something for the two of you too."

"Must be nice to have that much money at your fingertips." Padraic snorted.

"Sure beats being poor. I've been both, if it's all the same to you, I'll take being rich."

Padraic threw back his head and laughed. "You got balls, boy. I like that. You'll do."

"If the testosterone-fest is done now, I think I'd like to get some sleep. Looks like tomorrow is going to be an interesting day."

"Sure will be." Padraic rubbed his hands together and his eyes shined. He hadn't looked this happy since he retired. "Say goodnight to Renault then, and I'll put new sheets on your bed."

Shana felt a sinking feeling in her stomach. She didn't want to stay with her father, she wanted to go back home with Royce. If this was going to be the end of the case, she wanted to take advantage of what time she had left with him. No matter what he said, when the case was over and he got Allison back, their relationship would be over. Their lives were too different to stay meshed after the crises had ended.

"She'll be coming home with me." Royce stood up and looked down on the smaller Padraic.

"Now just a minute here, boy-o. That's my daughter we're talking about."

"Your daughter who's an adult and can make her own decisions." The words popped out of Shana's mouth before she could stop them.

Both men turned from their staring contest and looked at her.

"You two are talking about me like I'm not here and I don't have any say in the matter."

"Then have your say." Royce crossed his hands over his chest and leaned back, waiting for her to make a decision.

"Dad. I love you, I really do, but I'm not staying here tonight. For one thing, I don't want to put you in danger. The house is close to the road and it would be too easy for the sniper to get you instead of me."

"Balderdash!"

"Fine. Royce's place is more secure, but that's only part of the reason I want to go home with him. Do you want me to spell out the other one?" If he wanted to have her give him details of her love life she'd just croak. *Please don't call my bluff in front of Royce.*

Padraic looked at her in silence for eons. The only sound was the pinging of the rain against the sliding glass door. Finally his face softened and he put his hand over hers.

"I'll see you tomorrow then. I-I love you too."

Almost as if to make up for any mushy feelings he might be showing, Padraic shook his head a bit and lasered a stare at Royce. One thick finger wagged in Royce's face.

"You take care of her. If anything happens to my girl I don't care how much money you've got, I'll make your life a living hell."

"Yes sir."

Shana followed Royce out into the rain-spattered night, holding her jacket over her head to stay as dry as possible. As she hustled into the car past the door Royce held open for her, she turned to look back at the home she had grown up in. Her father stood in the light of the kitchen, watching her through the sliding glass door.

She waved, feeling a little guilty for leaving him alone. Should she have stayed with him? Was he disappointed in her? As Royce ran around the car to get into the driver's seat, her dad gave her a smile and a thumbs up before turning away.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"I'll start a fire in the study, we can have a nightcap in there." Royce's body shielded her from the worst of the rain as he punched in the security code on the front door.

"Sure." Shana walked into the marble tiled foyer and felt an uncomfortable surge of inferiority rearing up inside her. Here she was wearing five-year-old jeans with a hole in the knee and an old baseball jersey and Royce was using his thousand-dollar sport coat to protect her from the rain.

Was she the only one who saw something wrong with this picture? Her tennis shoes were soaking wet so she toed them off and looked for a mat to dump them on.

"Just leave them by the door, the cleaning crew will take care of the puddles tomorrow morning."

"Oh. 'Kay." Cleaning crew. Shana had worked one summer during college cleaning office buildings. She had been the cleaning crew, now one was coming in after her? This was insane.

Royce returned from the back of the house with two towels and a blanket.

"Come on, it's my turn to warm you up. There's a great fireplace in here. Dump your wet clothes in the bathroom, I'll throw them in my dryer."

"What? Don't I get a robe?" Shana could have bit her tongue off. She had meant to tease him for the repeat of the scene at her father's house.

If he actually came out with a woman's robe she'd choke on her own spleen.

"Sorry, I don't have one handy, you'll have to wrap up in the blanket."

Relief washed through her. So he wasn't in the habit of having women move in with him. Shana followed him through the enormous living room to a smaller room that opened off to the side.

"This is my favorite room in the house. Besides the kitchen."

"Do you cook?" Shana looked up from her study of the book-lined walls in surprise.

"A little, nothing fancy, just the basics." He seemed almost embarrassed by the fact.

"Me too. My father hated to cook. It was the first thing he taught me how to do, so he wouldn't have to do it any more."

"I don't mind it. My mom was a great cook, and when my dad died and she had to work longer hours I took a lot of it over. I mean, I'm no gourmet or anything, but I get by."

"You don't have a cook?" Shana shivered and wrapped the blanket around her a little more.

"Nope, no staff whatsoever, just a cleaning crew that comes in once a week. So there's no reason for you to be standing there shaking from cold. Go into the bathroom and change out of those wet clothes."

She knew it was ridiculous to be embarrassed to take her clothes off in front of him. Lord, she'd practically attacked him earlier in the car, but this was different. Intimate. Less like lovers and more like a couple.

And she didn't have a clue what to do about it.

Chills wracked her body yet again, making the decision for her. Shuffling her way to the bathroom in wet jeans, Shana clicked on the light in the pink and black powder room and quickly shed her clothes.

The blanket was so big she couldn't wrap it around her like a sarong without tripping over it. Instead, she wrapped it over her shoulders and around the front of her, pulling up the extra handfuls of material so she wouldn't trip over it. Femme fatale she was not.

The crackling fire beckoned her into the room, and she waddled her way to where Royce waited for her in front of the hearth. He'd already shed his wrinkled clothes and had the towel wrapped around his hips.

Just one little tug and all that glorious skin would be hers for the touching. The flicking light danced across his torso, casting shadows over the ridged muscles. Shana felt her mouth water at the sight. How could he turn her brain to mush without lifting a single finger?

"I know it's a little too warm for a fire, but with all the rain it just seemed like a good idea."

"Works for me. I'm freezing."

"I poured you some brandy, I don't know if you drink it or not. I've never seen you drink anything."

"I don't drink much. I don't like being out of control."

"Considering you carry a gun with you at all times, that's probably a good policy." Royce handed her the goblet filled with amber liquid.

Shana sniffed at it and took a cautious sip. It burned all the way down her throat, and brought tears to her eyes. She tried not to cough as the heat made its way to her stomach.

"If that doesn't warm you up, I don't know what would." She gently set the delicate glass on the end table before she dropped it.

"If it doesn't kill you first. I'm more of a beer drinker myself."

Shana laughed at the thought of him drinking beer in this fancy mansion of his. Her head felt a little woozy, but she definitely felt warmer. Sitting on the floor next to a near naked Royce probably had a lot to do with it.

“What’s so funny?” He nudged her shoulder with his and put his drink down too.

“I’m picturing you in the kitchen drinking beer and making yourself a ham sandwich all alone in this big freaking mansion.”

“Don’t laugh, I’ve spent more than one afternoon doing just that.” He ran his hand through his hair and gave a little half laugh of his own.

“If the truth were told, I pretty much live in this room, my bedroom, and the kitchen. The rest of the place is empty unless I’m entertaining.”

“Then what’s the point of having this huge place if you only live in three rooms? Hell my cottage has, err, had the same three rooms and only cost me eight hundred a month.”

“Because it’s the biggest one on the hill.”

“So?”

“I know I told you this before, but David and I didn’t grow up with silver spoons in our mouths. My dad died when I was in high school and my mom had to work her butt off to support us. We didn’t have much to begin with, but after dad died there weren’t many extras around.”

“I hear ya. I always had a roof over my head and food on the table, but there wasn’t a lot left over.”

“I didn’t think too much of it until I went to college.”

“And you were around a bunch of kids who got cars for graduation and whose mommies sent them a hundred bucks a week, right?” Shana had been around plenty of folks like that in college. She had to work all four years just to have book money and these kids blew more money on beer in one night than she made all week.

“Exactly. It didn’t help that I was a scholarship student to begin with. I still had to help pay for expenses at home for David and keep up my GPA.”

“Which didn’t leave you a whole lot of extra money for screwing around.”

“Right.” Royce leaned forward and stoked the fire, sending sparks flying. “After college I had to put David through school. Then I worked my ass off to get my business going. It seemed like all I had done for fifteen years was work, work, work.”

“So when the stock went public and you had some extra money lying around...” Shana was starting to get a better picture of this unusual millionaire.

“I had to have the best of everything, no matter what the cost. I went a little overboard for a while.”

Shana raised an eyebrow, “A little? How many rooms does this place have?”

“Okay, more than a little. It wasn’t until after Mary died that I realized having all the toys, going to all the ‘right’ places, and rubbing elbows with all the beautiful people wasn’t going to make me any happier than I was when I lived at home and had to scrounge around for money to fix up my beat up Chevy.”

“So you decided to give all your money to charity?” She poked him in his rock hard stomach.

“Not quite. I stopped buying toys, started spending more time with Allison and David, stopped trying to be seen with all the A-list people who didn’t give a damn who I was.”

“I notice that doesn’t extend to the supermodels.” Damn it. That brandy was loosening up her tongue.

“Jealous?” The teasing half-smile was in full, devastating effect.

“Of some woman who has to starve herself for a living? Not exactly.” Even if she did have legs longer than Shana’s whole body and boobs that would be more appropriate on a cow.

“Want to know something?”

“No.” She did not want to hear about what they looked like naked.

“I never brought a single one of them into this room, or told them anything about my past. I had more fun sharing a burger at a fast food joint with you than I ever had eating some five hundred dollar meal with someone who was going to puke it up later.”

“That’s disgusting.” She had to say something to defuse the situation. A warm feeling in her stomach spread upwards causing her heart to melt in her chest. If he kept up this mushy talk she’d be a puddle in no time.

“I’m not kidding.” Royce used his fingers to turn her head towards him. “This week has been the first time I’ve felt like I could be myself in years.”

That was because he didn’t have to impress her, she was just a blue-collar tomboy. He’d get bored with this in no time. Then he’d be back with his supermodels, and where would she be?

“Ah, you know, I think I’ll check on those clothes. They’re probably dry by now.” Shana hauled herself to her feet, almost tripping over the excess material of the blanket.

Royce grabbed her hand and kept her from leaving. “I’m not making this up to get you in bed, Shana. I mean every word.”

“I know you think you do. Hell, maybe you really do right now, but we’re in a stressful situation that goes way beyond anything you’ve ever dealt with before.”

“I’m thirty-three years old. I think I know my own mind by now.”

Shana heaved a sigh, she didn’t know how to say all the emotions that were flying around in her head without slipping up and telling him more than she wanted him to know. God, this brandy was making her head do crazy things.

"I'm not saying you don't know your own mind. I'm just saying that when all this is over, and life goes back to normal, you'll still be invited to dinners with senators and I'll be looking for another job."

Cause there was no way she would be able to go back and work for him after all of this was over. Seeing him every day, knowing what he looked like under those tailor-made suits and not being able to touch him again would drive her nuts.

She wrapped the blanket around her a little tighter and moved away from the temptation he presented.

"Right now the playing field is level. I'm the only one who can find Allison without involving the police. You need me."

"When the pipe bursts I need a plumber too, but I don't sleep with him." Royce stood up and planted his hands on his towel-wrapped hips.

"I know that. That's not what I'm saying."

"Then what are you saying? You've never spared my feelings before, why start now?"

"Fine. What I'm saying is, when all this is over, so are we. Our lives are too different, and it just wouldn't work out."

"That's it? Just, 'it's been fun, I'll see you around?'"

"Better that than letting it drag out until we hate each other."

"And what if we wouldn't hate each other?"

That was what she was most afraid of. That she'd love him and he'd move on. Better to cut it off now while she still had some pride left. She wasn't going to be the topic of conversation at his next party.

"Get real. I'm going to bed, we have a busy day ahead of us tomorrow. I suggest you do the same." Shana fled, ignoring the voice in the back of her head that called her a coward.

* * *

"Would you relax? He'll be here," Padraic stirred his coffee and folded his newspaper in the booth across from Shana.

"I'm relaxed, I'm just wondering what Royce's idea of indiscreet is." She snorted.

Padraic frowned at her over his reading glasses. "I don't think you give him enough credit. He's come through for you plenty of times, finding out about that senator friend of his and his gambling problem, giving you that fancy body armor you're wearing, and probably saving your ass when your house exploded."

"Jeez, Dad. I'm not saying he hasn't been useful or anything, I'm just saying he's a rich guy, you know?"

Slapping the paper down on the table, Padraic pulled his glasses off and stared at her. "I don't believe what I'm hearing. I didn't raise you to be a judgmental snob."

"I'm no snob. He's the one with all the money, the one who thinks he's better than us."

"The only one who's said anything about money or being better than anyone else is you. Renault has gone along with every scheme you've come up with, let you show off your shooting and karate, and even agreed to learn how to use a gun, even if we didn't have time for it. You could show a little appreciation instead of making fun of him."

"I can't believe you're taking his side." Shana couldn't believe how ashamed his words made her feel. Didn't he get it? She was just trying to see things as they really were.

"I'm not taking anybody's side. All I'm saying is Royce has been a partner in this, doing his part of the job the best he could. Maybe he can't shoot a gun or go in undercover, but without the information he provided this investigation would be dead in the water. Stop treating him

like he's some trust fund baby and start giving him the respect of a partner."

"Weren't you the one who didn't want me staying with him in the first place?" She would not cry because her father reprimanded her in public. She was an adult, she would not cry.

"That's different. You'll always be my little girl and I don't like to think about you growing up and doing, uh, grown up things with any man. But if I had to choose someone for you, Royce would be at the top of my list."

"You wouldn't want me to be with a cop? Someone more like you?"

"Hell no!" Padraic sat back in the seat. "Cops make lousy husbands." He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I just want you to be happy. I don't care if you love a ditch digger or a millionaire as long as he treats you well."

"I thought if I couldn't be a cop you'd at least want me to marry one."

"Where do you come up with these crazy ideas? Is that why you got your detective license?" He swore at her nod. "Honey, I love being a cop. It was the only way I could make a difference in this world. I like solving mysteries and wrapping everything up. I thought you did too."

"I did, I do. I like shooting and reading the cases. And I want to be a detective because of it. I mean, I guess at first it was because I couldn't be a cop, but then it was because I wanted to make a difference too."

"That's fine, as long as it's what *you* want, and not what you think I want."

Shana looked out the window and saw Royce getting out of a beat up Oldsmobile. Her breath caught in her throat at the sight of him standing there. Oh yeah, there were a lot of things she wanted.

"I'm really going to have to meet this Gloria. I don't think we've ever had this many conversations that didn't involve weapons or crooks in my entire life."

"Smartass. Maybe I'm getting soft in my old age."

"Yeah, right. Let me know when you get there and I'll see." Shana got up and threw out their garbage.

Her father caught her hand as she headed towards the door.

"I've got your back today, kiddo."

"You always have, Dad." She gave him a peck on the cheek and walked out into the sunshine.

Royce leaned against the blue Olds, looking good enough to eat in faded jeans and a black tee shirt. He twirled a pair of sunglasses around by the earpiece as she approached, not making any move to meet her halfway.

Damn, still pissed from last night. Probably not the time to tell him she might have misjudged the situation.

Put it out of your mind, Quinn. Focus on the job, you can fix your love life later.

"Where'd you get that clunker?" As she got closer, Shana could see the rust spots on the door panel and a crack in the headlight.

"It was my mother's, I had it in the garage." His face was blank, giving her no clue as to his thoughts. Was he angry? Relieved? He'd left the house before she even got up, leaving her a note on top of a pile of clothes by her door.

"Oh." She searched for something to say. "Uh, thanks for the armor and the clothes. They're perfect." She looked down at the loose pants and long sleeved shirt he'd given her. They were loose enough to not restrict her movements, but covered the body armor perfectly.

"I figured you'd need something other than the wet jeans. I had David help me bring the two other cars out here earlier this morning. Yours is the beige one over there, and your dad's is the black Honda over here." He pointed the two cars out to her. They'd do nicely.

"Great."

"There's a switch in the sleeve of the body armor, once you press it, everything you say will be recorded. It only has a two foot range, so make sure you're close enough to whoever you want to get on tape."

"Okay. How do I work the radio part so I can contact you and Dad?"

"See the cuff here?" He lifted her hand and pushed back the sleeve of her shirt. "Where this logo is, press it to talk. These sunglasses have a transmitter in the earpiece, so you'll be able to hear what your dad and I are saying."

"Cool, kind of like the hearing aids that are built into people's glasses."

"Exactly like that. You'll have to wear them on your head in the bar, it'll be too dark for you to see anything with them on."

"Okay. You ready to get this show on the road?"

"Ready when you are."

"Great. Why don't you go to the bar first and wait in the parking lot. I'll tell my dad we're moving out. Any questions?"

"Nope. You explained everything quite clearly last night. I know my role here perfectly."

Ouch. She deserved that, but it still stung. "Royce, about last night—"

"You two going to talk all day or are we going to get going? I'm not getting any younger you know." Padraic slapped Royce on the arm.

"We're all set. Here are the keys, Shana can show you to your car."

Fine, if he wanted to pout that was just dandy. She'd talk to him later, when she had things straightened out in her own head. Right now they had a job to do.

"I'll keep in contact with you."

"You do that." Royce gave her another steely look and climbed into the car.

Shana showed her father his car, pointedly ignoring Royce's exit. Climbing into her own she counted to one hundred and left for the bar. Her father sat in his car, probably counting to one hundred as well.

The bar was just as seedy as she'd remembered. The lot was full, despite the early afternoon hour. She'd have plenty of witnesses when she made her entrance.

Checking to make sure her gun was loaded, she slipped it into the holster and secured it to her body. Grabbing her windbreaker, she put that on and zipped it up partway. Pressing the logo on her sleeve she got out of the car.

"Let the games begin."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Where’s Tony?” Shana kicked a chair out of her way and stormed up to the bartender.

“Haven’t seen Tony around for weeks, lady.” The bartender wiped the surface of the bar with a dirty rag, giving her a derogatory look.

Shana looked around the room. For as full as the parking lot had been, the bar was pretty empty. Two guys sat in a booth smoking cigars, while a couple of other guys played pool. Not one of them looked familiar.

“Then maybe you can pass a message to him should he decide to show up again.”

“Do I look like his social secretary?”

Leaning across the bar and opening her jacket so the beefy bartender could get a good look at the gun she had there, Shana stared him down. “I think you could multi-task this once.”

His gaze didn’t move from the gun, but he nodded his head.

“Tell Tony if he doesn’t get off my back I’ve got a great deal of information saved in a bank somewhere. Should I suddenly expire it goes straight to the DA’s office. He can pass that message on to any of his friends in the government as well.”

“Lady, you don’t know who you’re dealing with here.”

“Maybe I do and maybe I don’t, but if one more bullet goes whizzing by my head, it won’t matter now will it?” In the reflection of the mirror behind the bartender she saw one of the guys in the booth make a hand signal to one of the pool players.

Spinning around Shana snapped a roundhouse kick to the guy's ribs, causing him to drop to the floor along with the pool cue he was going to brain her with. Stepping on his wrist she brought the gun out and clicked the safety off before she held it to his head. The adrenaline pumping through her system made her senses hyper-alert.

"Now that wasn't a good idea, was it?"

Her victim shook his head, sweat dripped off his forehead and his bloodshot eyes widened in panic.

"I'm going to be nice and not splatter your brains on the floor. If you move one inch towards me I'll change my mind in a hurry." Shana stood slowly and looked around the room, staring the occupants down one by one. When no one made any move towards her she slowly backed to the door, one step at a time.

She was reaching behind her for the handle when she stumbled over the half step that led to the doorway. One of the guys in the booth pulled out a gun.

Expecting just such a move, Shana shot the gun out of his hand.

"Care to try that again?" The door pushed open and she stepped out into the sunshine. Shutting the door behind her, she tamped down the urge to run to the safety of her car.

It was one thing to talk big like she was some female "Dirty Harry," it was another to actually do it. In all her daydreams about busting the bad guys, she never thought she'd feel so scared or downright sick to her stomach.

"If they don't take that bait I don't know what else to do." Shana slid the glasses over her nose and backed the car out of the parking space.

"Take the bait? You practically dared them to come after you." Royce did not sound pleased.

"That's the point. Now stop this chatter and keep your eyes open." Padraic cut off any response she might have given.

"I'm taking the ramp onto the highway, anyone coming?"

"Oh yeah. There's a black Monte Carlo coming up on your tail. He's keeping two car lengths behind you, I'm two behind him." The edge of excitement in her father's voice chased away any fear she might have felt.

"I see him, and you. I'm heading to exit fifteen, then I'll get off and visit every bank in town. Anyone need a loan?"

"Why don't you get me a couple thou while you're in there?" Padraic laughed.

"Glad you two think this is so funny. I'm following a Hummer that has someone who looks a lot like your buddy Tony in the driver's seat."

"Which way are they headed, boy?"

"South. If I had to guess, I'd say we're headed to Long Island."

"Keep back and don't let them spot you. Make sure you keep your eye on them." Shana had a bad feeling about this. The Hamptons were on Long Island.

And Jim had a house on the Hamptons. If it were Jim's house, would Royce be able to drive away? Or would he want to confront his friend?

"Remember, this is a recon mission only. Find out where Tony's headed and drive away." Shana hoped her fear didn't come across the radio.

"I know what I'm doing." Not a hint of his thoughts showed in his voice.

"If you see Jim, don't confront him. You don't know what he could do."

"You just make sure you don't get killed, I'll take care of myself."

Shana forced herself to concentrate on the Monte Carlo behind her instead of on what Royce might do. He was far from stupid; he'd stick to the plan. She hoped.

"Dad, I'm going to pull off this next exit and start bank hopping."

"Roger."

Checking her rearview mirror for the car, Shana made sure to use her signal light like she had no clue she'd been followed for miles. Did they really believe she was that dumb? Apparently, because they pulled up right behind her.

Pulling into the first bank on the strip, Shana took a blank disk out of the box of them she had on in her purse. Slipping it into an envelope, she dropped the disk into the night deposit box and climbed back into the car.

Some teller was going to wonder what the heck was going on when they found it Monday morning, but that wasn't her problem. One down nine to go. She'd go to as many banks as she had disks, that would keep them busy for a while.

* * *

Royce paid the toll and crossed the Throgg's Neck Bridge onto Long Island. The Hummer was an easy target so he didn't worry too much about staying close to it. Besides, he had a bad feeling he knew where Tony-boy was headed.

How could he have misjudged Jim so badly? First David, now Jim, when had his instincts gone down the toilet? Had he been so busy trying to fit in with the right crowd and become a mover and shaker that he'd become blind to everything going on around him?

As he crawled along the Long Island Expressway closer to the Hamptons, Royce's hopes dropped. By the time the Hummer pulled off the highway his hopes had been dashed. The houses here were huge and spread apart by acres of manicured lawn. Traffic was next to nothing, and Royce's Olds stood out like a sore thumb.

"Shana, can you hear me?"

"You're scratchy but readable, what's up?"

"I'm turning around. Tony is in the Hamptons, and he'll spot me if I keep following him. I'm afraid I know where he's going anyway."

"Come on back then. We'll meet at your place tonight and discuss our options."

"Sure. Whatever." Damn it. He'd been so sure Jim wasn't involved.

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah. Thanks. I'm sorry too." He still couldn't believe it, but unless there was someone else living in Jim's house, he had no choice but to face facts. One of his good friends had set up his brother and kidnapped his niece, and was trying to steal secrets that could put hundreds of government agents in danger.

Great judge of character he'd turned out to be. Royce had looked down his nose at Pete Downy for his smarmy ways, and embraced Jim's integrity. Yet it was Pete who told him Jim needed help. That still didn't ring true, but facts were facts.

He'd done a little creative hacking that morning, and hadn't liked what he'd found. Jim had been taking some large sums of money out of his personal bank accounts. There were two transfers of ten thousand dollars to an account he traced to Sid.

It looked like Shana was right about that. She seemed to be right about a lot of things. Royce shifted uncomfortably in the seat. He'd

forgotten about the loose springs, and one of them was stabbing into his butt. Even thinking about Shana gave him a pain in the ass.

As well as several other parts of his anatomy. Last night he'd tossed and turned, trying to tamp down the frustration, anger, and yeah, lust Shana had left him with. Why couldn't she see that he didn't care what her background was—he enjoyed spending time with her.

Maybe she didn't want to spend time with a computer geek like him? Could that be the problem? She wanted to be a cop so bad, maybe she only wanted to date someone who could show her some action and adventure?

Too damn bad. The last thing she needed was another cop in her life. If she dated a cop she'd kill herself trying to prove how much more macho she could be. She needed someone she could be weak around. Someone she didn't have to compete with.

She needed him, and by God he wasn't giving up without a fight. He'd already gotten past her barriers once, he'd do it again and again—however many times it took for her to admit they belonged together.

He just prayed they lived long enough to keep fighting.

* * *

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! Who knew there were so many banks in this damn town?” Padraic cursed in her ear.

“Be glad, it's buying us time. Have you been able to get a good look at this guy yet?”

“Yeah, and there's a passenger in the car too. The idiots have the windows down and are smoking. You'd think if you were following someone in a car with tinted windows you'd keep the damn things rolled up.”

"We've already decided they aren't exactly the brightest group of criminal masterminds." Shana shifted in her seat. She was getting sick of being in the car.

"That's the truth."

"This is the last bank I'm hitting today. I'm going to get some gas then start driving around town in circles."

"I'll watch your back."

Shana pulled into the next gas station she found. She really did need gas, but if these guys were going to try anything she'd have to get out of the car for them to do it.

Stepping out to pump the gas, her shoulder blades twitched. *Nothing like presenting a target or anything.* If the sniper decided to take another shot at her she didn't stand a chance. And if the bullet came anywhere near the gas pump, the whole place would go up in flames.

That was probably enough gas for now. Shana tried not to bolt to the safety of the mini-mart. Once inside the little store, she paid for her gas and bought a soda, while searching for the Monte Carlo. It was nowhere to be found. Crap.

Fighting the urge to stay in the little store indefinitely, Shana walked back to the car on adrenaline-fueled legs. Her hands were sweaty on the door, but she got in and started the car up calmly.

She didn't start breathing again until she pulled out of the station though.

"Dad? Where are you?"

"I'm following the Monte Carlo. It kept going north when you stopped at the gas station."

"Okay, be careful. I'm going to head towards Royce's place. Don't do anything stupid. If they go back towards the bar turn around and meet me at Royce's."

“Tell me something I don’t know. I’m just making sure they aren’t circling around to go at you from the other side.”

“Okay. Royce is going to be a few hours. He followed the Hummer to New York, so it will be at least two more hours before he gets back here with traffic and all.”

“Too bad about his friend.” Padraic sounded genuinely sorry.

“I know. I was hoping it wasn’t him either. We still have no proof, so I’ll keep my options open.”

“Don’t let what you want to be true blind you to the truth,” he warned.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” she threw back at him.

Shana kept her eyes peeled for any signs of a tail, but nothing alerted her to any followers. Were they just trying to see if she was bluffing? Maybe they were worried that she did have enough on them to put them all away for a long time.

Man, she wished. Once they got Allison back, she was going to find a way to nail Sid’s fat hide to the wall. Shana’s heart ached for Royce. First his brother stole secrets from him, then his friend tried to destroy his company and the free freaking world.

Royce’s mansion looked even more impressive in the evening. The gates shone in the fading sunlight, and looked like something out of a fairytale, all gilded and glowing. What was it like to come home to a place like this day after day? Did it ever get old? Boring? Lonely?

She could see where it could get lonely very easily. Of course Royce was out most of the time at dinner meetings, parties, or other social requirements so he probably wasn’t there much. What a waste.

Shana clicked the garage door opener looking thingy to open the gates. Nothing happened. She smacked it against her hand a few times. Maybe the battery was dead? Still nothing.

Crap. What was the code again? She could manually open the gates, she just had to remember what the darn numbers were. Wait! He'd written them down on the sheet with the security code. Now what had she done with that?

Digging around in her purse, Shana found some receipts and two napkins before she finally found the slip of paper with the all-important numbers on it. Shifting the car into park she climbed out and searched for the keypad.

She typed the numbers in, pushed enter and waited for the gates to open. They didn't move. What the hell was going on? Was the damn thing broken? All that freaking money and the darn things wouldn't open.

Walking over to the fuse box, Shana searched vainly for the problem. Not that she could do anything to correct it, but it would be nice to know what was wrong.

She hadn't gotten two steps away from the car when a bullet whizzed by her ear, striking the weeping cherry tree by the gate. Dropping to the ground, Shana rolled to the safety of a decorative boulder and pulled out her gun.

Where was he this time? Shana peeked out over the edge of the rock and almost got her head blown off. Okay. He obviously knew where she was. And he had her pinned.

Time to call in the calvary.

She pressed the switch on the cuff of the body armor. "Dad? Can you hear me?"

"Yeah. I'm on my way back. The idiots went to the off-track betting by the airport."

"Uh, so you're way out there, huh?"

"I'm on my way back, why?"

"I'm in a little bit of trouble here." How much to tell him?

“What kind of trouble?”

“Apparently they weren’t as dumb as we thought. The sniper has me pinned outside Royce’s house.”

“What!”

“I was trying to get into the gate and he took a shot at me. I’m stuck, between a rock and the gate.”

“Hang tight, baby, I’m coming.”

“Dad! Wait. Don’t get yourself killed trying to ride to the rescue. I’ll stay out of sight. It’ll be dark soon and I should be able to make a run for the car then.”

“Don’t do anything until I get there. I can be there in half an hour, just hold still.” Padraic’s voice was thick with worry.

The last rays of the sun slanted down, ruining any hope she had of seeing the shooter. Where could he be hiding? It wasn’t like there was a lot of cover out here.

Okay, think. He obviously sabotaged the gates so she’d have to get out and he could get a shot at her. Did he just want to scare her, or was he really trying to kill her? So far he’d shot at her four times but hadn’t hit her yet.

Either he was a really bad shot or he wasn’t actually trying to kill her. It wasn’t like she could test out her theory by stepping away from her hiding place. If she moved now the sun would highlight her every move. She had to wait it out.

At least the car had a full tank of gas, since it was still running in front of the gates. The driver’s door was open to her, and only four feet away. Four feet right out in the open where she would be an easy target.

What was that? Shana peered around the side of the boulder. She could have sworn she heard a tree branch snap. Could he be hiding in one of the neighbor’s trees? That would explain his angle.

Did the snap mean his perch was breaking? Squinting into the sun, Shana looked for movement in the trees. Instead of zeroing in on one tree, she let her eyes lose focus and tried to catch any movement out of her peripheral vision.

There! The third tree over was swaying while the other two were perfectly still. He must have lost his balance. Did she dare make a run for it?

Her heart beat so loudly it blocked out any other noises. Sweat ran down her back and her hands felt clammy. If she stayed where she was she might be able to wait him out. Might. This could be her only chance.

Crouching her legs under her, Shana made a dash for the car, staying as low to the ground as she could. Springing forward she jumped through the open door, just as two solid hits slammed into the side of the car. Bits of metal ricocheted around the interior, striking her along the ribs. The body armor protected her from serious damage, but damn it hurt.

She'd think about that later. Using one hand on the brake pedal, Shana reached up with the other and put the car into drive, then punched the gas. The impact of the car slamming through the gates rocked her back, slamming her head against the seat, but she kept moving.

The car rumbled over the lawn and God only know what else. Shana lifted her hand off the gas pedal and wiggled her way behind the wheel trying to right her course. When she got to the house she drove around back over the cobblestone walk and onto the patio before she rolled out of the car and scampered to the back door.

Fumbling with the lock and the alarm, she prayed the sniper wouldn't be able to climb out of the tree and get across the street before she could get inside the house. The door crashed open and she almost

fell in, gouging her hands as she ripped the keys from the door and slammed it closed.

Shana raced to the front of the house to see if she could spot the sniper. The front window shattered in front of her before she could reach it. Crouching under the now open window Shana spotted a man in fatigues dodging behind one of the trees.

It would be close, but he might be in her range. Wiping her hands off on her pants, she bent low and scampered over to the window next to the front door, waiting for him to show himself again.

If possible she wanted to take him down without killing him, but she'd do what she had to in order to stay alive. Two more trees were between the house and his present location. Was he waiting for her to move?

Seeing her dirty sneakers still in a pile by the door, Shana grabbed one and an ornamental walking stick that was nearby. Taking her gun out, she undid the safety and laid it on her lap. Putting the shoe on top of the stick, she waved it in front of the window next to her. Was it enough to make him think she was on the move?

Glass exploded and the stick flew out of her hands. Jumping up, Shana focused, aimed, and fired in less than a heartbeat. Ducking back down she waited for return fire. Sirens wailed in the distance, someone must have reported her entrance through the gates.

Would he try to take one last shot before running from the cops? Could he? Had she hit him? Her legs began to cramp from crouching for so long, and her ribs were killing her, but she held her position. The sirens got louder.

Shana made a dash across the foyer. No shots followed her. Keeping the lights off, Shana searched the grounds for any signs of the sniper. She didn't see him anywhere. The light was almost gone, and shadows

played tricks on her vision. Her breath came rapidly, and the blood pounded in her veins. Was he still out there?

It seemed to take forever for the sirens to wind their way up the hill. Two squad cars pulled into the circular driveway and two officers got out. She'd have to do some quick talking to get out of this one. For all she knew these guys were on Sid's payroll and she couldn't take any chances.

The officers followed the tire tracks across the lawn, and Shana got her first good look at the wreckage she'd caused. Deep gouges were torn out of the putting-green lawn. Several of the low voltage lights had been crushed, and she'd run over at least two azalea bushes.

The cops weren't the only ones she'd have to do some explaining to.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Padraic ushered the cops to their cars, thankfully dealing with them through the old boy network. He'd shown up shortly after the officers had figured out that someone was actually in the house. Shana had no idea what her father said to get them out of there so fast, she just thanked her lucky stars for it.

Now that the adrenaline rush was over, all the aches and pains in her body made themselves known. Shana slunk into the powder room and took off her shirt. There were two holes in it four inches apart.

Two jagged scraps of metal were trapped in the body armor along her ribs. She hurt like hell, but at least she was still alive. Peeling down the life saving material, Shana tried to get a good look at where she'd been hit.

Purple bruises bloomed along her ribs, but the skin wasn't even broken. Thank God she'd listened to Royce. Those ricochets would have hit her lungs for sure.

So much for her theory that the sniper wasn't trying to kill her.

"Shan? Are you okay in there?"

"Yeah, Dad. Hold on a sec." Shana took the rest of the body armor off and put her clothes back on. At the rate she was going through cars and clothes, she'd be working three jobs just to keep a shirt on her back.

"You ready to tell me what happened?"

"Sure, what did you tell the boys in blue?"

"I told them it was one of my old busts that just got out on parole. They'll check him out. Hope he has a good alibi."

"Dad. What if he doesn't? He could go to jail again."

"Only if he has a semi-automatic rifle and a bullet wound."

"So I did hit him." That was one good thing at least.

"Yup, found a blood trail leading to the trees in the neighbor's yard. Trail ended there. I think they're going for dogs to see if they can follow the scent."

"Good."

"You want to explain to me why you're holding your side?"

"Yes, but only if you don't say 'I told you so'." She'd have to hear it from Royce when he got back.

"You got hit!"

Shana lifted up her shirt to show off her bruises. "But not by a bullet. When the bullets hit the car they tore through the door and scraps of metal shot all over the place. All I have to show for it are two bruises. Not bad, huh? The body armor stuff stopped the shrapnel cold and even trapped it."

"Thank God for that. If we can find the bullets in the side of the car we can put them in the evidence bag with the money clip you found on our way to the police station."

"Excuse me?" What was he thinking?

"Hearing you getting shot at almost gave me a heart attack. I want you out of this."

"Not on your life. We're so close to getting Allison back and nailing Sid and Jim, I'm not stopping now."

"Is it worth your life?" Padraic's eyes showed more fear than anger. "I lost your mother, I can't handle losing you, too. I want you off this."

"Is that what you'd do?"

Padraic kicked at the walking stick on the floor. “No, damn it. I wouldn’t stop now.” He turned away from her.

“Then how can you expect me to? How can I just walk away from a little girl who needs me?”

“Very easily. You let me deal with it.” Royce crunched his way over broken glass to her.

“Sorry about the lawn, and the gate, and ah, the windows.”

“I don’t give a damn about any of them. Are you okay?”

“Nothing a hot shower and some ibuprofen won’t cure.” Shana almost melted as he ran his fingers over her face and down her arms. The silent, brooding Royce was gone. Good riddance.

“Why don’t you do that now while I get the story from your father.”

“Oh no. The two of you aren’t going to play he-man protectors while the little woman goes off to lick her wounds.”

Royce and her father exchanged glances. She knew they were thinking the same thing.

“I think we need to bring in the authorities. This has gone far enough.”

“Fine, then we’ll do that. After we do a recon of Jim’s house and make sure Allison is still there.”

“That’s the FBI’s job.” Royce’s jaw clenched tight.

“Yeah, after they have sufficient evidence to get a warrant. By that time Allison could be dead.” Shana gritted her teeth as Royce looked to her father for confirmation.

“She’s right. If they don’t have a warrant signed by a judge anything they find will be inadmissible in court. They won’t take the chance of Sid slipping through another loophole.”

“And while they’re waiting for some judge to decide it’s a worthy cause, Sid’s informants will have alerted him and he and Jim will be long gone.” Shana didn’t mention that they could very well be leaving already.

“If Jim’s behind it, he’s not going anywhere. He’s supposed to be speaking at an Elk’s dinner.”

“I’m an Elk, I can keep an eye on him.” Padraic offered.

“If he’s still there. He may be on his way to Tijuana by now.” Shana was not letting them wrap her in cotton and shove her out of the way.

“If he skips out on the dinner, I’ll tell you and we can call the police to say we suspect Allison is there. We won’t be able to nail them on espionage, but at least we’ll get the girl back.” Padraic planted a kiss on Shana’s head.

“Take a hot shower. I’ll call you from the Lodge. If he’s there we’ll do a recon then bring our evidence to the feds.”

“You promise you’ll call? Maybe I should go with you.”

“Word of honor. I wouldn’t cut you out on the bust after all of this. Besides, it’s the Brotherhood of the Elks, not sisterhood, you can’t get in there.”

It stuck in her craw that he was right, but in all honesty a hot shower sounded like heaven to her battered body. “Fine. But don’t you dare do anything without me.”

“Yes, boss. I better go, have to get changed and find my Elk pin. I haven’t been to an event in years.”

Royce walked Padraic out, and Shana wondered what they were talking about. She watched her father slap him on the back and shake his hand. Probably just thanking Royce for the body armor.

If they were hatching a plan it was a short one because her father got in his car and drove away right after that. Shana headed for the stairs as fast as her weary body would take her. She was so not up for a

confrontation with Royce. Hopefully her father would call and say Jim was doing his thing and she could go to bed.

Too much had happened today for her to process everything. Her brain was fried and if she didn't recharge it with some sleep she'd be no good tomorrow when they made their case with the feds. She just needed to make it until tomorrow.

The bedroom seemed impossibly far away, but she managed to stumble into it and make her way to the bathroom. Turning the water on as hot as she could stand it, she let the bathroom fill up with steam before she climbed in.

The hot needles of water felt fabulous on her aching muscles, although it stung her still healing scrapes. Her neck hurt, probably from her stint as a stunt driver. *Note to self, never operate the gas pedal with your hands.*

She'd had adrenaline crashes before, but this one was the worst. Maybe her body was getting even for the prolonged presence of adrenaline she'd been subjecting it to. What a freaking week.

And tomorrow it would all be over.

Shana felt a lump in her throat and her eyes began to prickle with oncoming tears. This was what she wanted, wasn't it? She'd had a chance to prove herself to her father, and gain a ton of learning experience for when she had her own detective business.

She should be thrilled at how things were turning out. The case would be wrapped up tomorrow, she and her father were getting along better than ever, and the publicity she'd get for nailing Sid would launch her career years ahead of schedule.

Then why was she crying in the shower? Shana put her face under the hot spray to wash away the unwanted tears. Too bad she couldn't wash away the unwanted feelings just as easily.

Why couldn't she be happy with how things were turning out? Why did she have to want more? Why did her heart have to go and fall in love with Royce when she told it not to?

There. She'd said it. The "L" word. There was no denying the jolt of fear that it brought either. *Okay, don't panic.* Shana turned off the water and sniffed back the remaining tears.

So she had feelings for Royce. All right, she loved him. That was no big deal. She could handle it. Just because her heart had the bright idea that it shouldn't listen to her brain and fell hard for a millionaire didn't mean she had to say anything about it and make an ass of herself.

Tomorrow would go on as planned, and if Royce wanted to still see her after all of this, maybe she'd give it a shot. For a little while anyway. After all, it wasn't like she would hurt any *less* if he broke her heart later instead of now. Right?

She wrapped the towel around her body and squeezed the water out of her hair. This emotional crap was more confusing than the case they were on. Saving the free world from greedy bastards was a snap compared to dealing with issues of the heart.

A knock on the door sounded, but before she could call out Royce walked through carrying a glass of milk and a sandwich.

"Come on in."

"I was making myself a sandwich and I thought you might be hungry too."

At the mere mention of food Shana's stomach growled loudly.

"I'll take that as a yes." Royce held out the plate to her.

"I never turn down food I don't have to cook. What is it?"

"Peanut butter and jelly. It was the only thing I had in the house."

"Works for me." Shana took the proffered plate and sat on the bed. A PB and J was exactly the comfort food she needed right now.

Royce put the glass of milk on the nightstand and sat next to her on the bed. “How are you feeling?”

“I’ve been better, my ribs ache and I’ve got a headache the size of Texas, but considering my adventures today I’m doing alright. And thanks for making me wear the body armor. You were right, I did need it.”

“I’m just glad I had it for you to use. That’s a prototype. The real thing won’t be available for years yet.”

“So I gave it its first test run?” Shana took another bite of her sandwich.

“And I’m happy to report it was a success.”

Royce let her chew for a minute then handed her the glass of milk. “So, what’s the plan for tonight?”

Shana wanted nothing more than to sink into the wonderfully soft bed and sleep for a day or two, but that wasn’t an option. “We wait for Dad’s call. If Jim is entertaining the Elk’s, we’ll get our evidence ready to go to the authorities tomorrow. Maybe I’ll have Dad do that while I do recon,” Shana thought out loud.

Her mind was starting to fog a bit, she must be more tired than she had thought. She tried to stifle a yawn before Royce noticed, but it slipped out anyway.

“If Jim’s not there, we hightail it to the Hamptons and grab your niece before they can move her, calling the police on the way.” Her jaw cracked on another yawn. She could barely keep her eyes open.

“Why don’t you rest. I’ll wait for your dad to call.”

“Can’t—rest—yet. Need to get organized and talk to Dad.” Her eyes were so heavy. Maybe if she just closed them for a minute.

“I’ll take care of it. You need some sleep.”

Royce took the plate and glass from her and lifted her legs onto the bed. She knew she shouldn't be this tired, but her thoughts kept drifting and she couldn't pin them down. "Have to get up..." Didn't she?

"You rest, I'll take care of you. Whether you want it or not."

Shana wasn't sure if she really heard that last part or only imagined it, but she didn't care. The bed was so soft, and she was so tired. "Just a little nap. Wake me up when Dad calls."

The room went gray, then black, and then was gone.

* * *

"You drugged me?" Shana couldn't believe her ears. "How could you betray me like that?" Was this the man she was agonizing about loving just last night?

"I didn't do it to betray you, I did it to help you."

"Excuse me if I don't see crushing sleeping pills into my milk as being helpful."

She wanted to throw something. A lot of somethings.

"Shana, your father called and said Jim was at the Elk's, so there was nothing you could have done at home anyway. If I had left you to your own devices you would have been up all night making your case and not resting."

"Or I would have been able to nail Jim if he hadn't been at the Elk's." Was that what this was all about? Was Royce trying to protect his friend?

"That has nothing to do with this. If Jim is guilty, and I'm not completely sure of that now that I've had some time to think about it, then I want him nailed."

"But because you weren't sure, you doped me up so I wouldn't be able to organize my case?" Bastard. She fed her anger to mask the hurt that pounded inside of her.

"No. That's not why I did it. You needed the rest and you wouldn't have gotten it on your own. You're your own worst enemy."

"So you took it upon yourself to protect me from myself? Don't do me any favors." Shana tossed her hair over her shoulder and crossed to the open bedroom door. Could she kick him out of his own guest room?

She was about to tell him where to go and how to get there when the phone on his belt rang. Royce looked at the number before he answered it.

"This better be good, Horton."

Horton? What did he want?

"Don't touch it. Evacuate the building, I'll be there in ten."

Shana pushed away her irritation. "What's going on?"

"There was a package found in my office, from Sid. I told him not to touch it and to get out."

"You think it's a bomb?" Shana slung her holster on and grabbed her purse, following Royce who had loped out of the bedroom and down the stairs.

"I don't think it's an early birthday present, that's for sure. You coming?"

"What do you think? I'll call my dad and have him head to Long Island."

"Then call him quick 'cause we're taking the Harley."

Shana left a message for her father while scrambling to keep up with Royce. She hung up just as he handed her a helmet and kick-started the bike. Climbing up behind him, she wrapped her arms around his waist and prayed for all she was worth.

Royce gunned the engine and took off out of the driveway. Shana clung to him like a burr. The winding hills leading to his mansion seemed a lot steeper without the protection of a car around her.

Trees became a blur as they tore through the suburban neighborhood and onto the highway. Rush hour was in full swing as Royce weaved his way between slowly moving cars. He went even faster once the road cleared up near the Renault building.

"If you squeeze me much tighter I'm going to lose my breakfast," Royce growled through the helmet speaker.

"If you don't slow down, I'm going to lose mine."

"We're almost there. No heroics Shana, I mean it. We'll wait for the bomb squad to check it out first."

"I won't play the hero if you don't."

"That's my building, my people. Everything I've worked my ass off for over the last ten years is in there."

"And if you die with it will that make it any better?"

Royce said nothing as they pulled into the parking lot. It was a scene out of a nightmare. People milled aimlessly about everywhere. Teams of cops cordoned off the entrance to the building, while others herded the employees away from the area. Men in blue bomb squad jackets spoke on radios while dogs sniffed the area. The noise was ear splitting and the tension in the air palpable.

"The cops are going to want to talk to you. We should find out who's in command." Shana climbed off the bike on rubbery legs.

"There's Horton." Royce moved away from the confusion towards the Director of Security.

Horton stood to the side of one of the labs, fiddling with the gun in his holster and not doing much of anything else.

“Mr. Renault. I’m so glad you’re here. They won’t let us back into the building but I’ve got something you should see.”

“I need to talk to whoever is in charge of this operation. What’s so important?” Royce ran his hand through his hair and tapped impatiently on his thigh.

“You’ll see, come quickly. It’s important.” Horton noticed Shana for the first time. “What are you doing here?”

“I came for my last paycheck.” If he was too stupid to see her getting off the back of Royce’s bike then she wasn’t going to fill him in.

“You don’t belong on the premises.”

“She’s with me,” Royce said, cutting off any further argument.

“Fine. Come on.” Horton moved around the corner away from the chaos in front of the building.

Royce looked at Shana. She shrugged and followed Horton. She didn’t know what was so important, but maybe there was a clue or something.

She could feel Royce’s body move in behind her as they rounded the corner. Good, she was supposed to be protecting him, the last thing she needed was for him to jump in front of her and get in the way.

The area behind lab two was almost deserted. A couple bomb squad members walked towards them. Maybe they had found something?

“Hold on, something’s not right.” Shana didn’t like how these guys looked. They had the right uniform, but they didn’t move right. As they got closer, Shana recognized one of them from the bar.

“Go back! Get one of the guys from in front. It’s a trap!” Shana turned and grabbed Royce’s hand, trying to drag him away.

Horton pulled out his gun and pointed it at her. “Not this time, cry baby.”

“What’s the meaning of this?” Royce demanded.

"We're going on a little trip, and these guys are here to make sure you don't try anything." Horton clicked the safety off his revolver and pointed it at Shana's heart.

"So you're the traitor." Royce looked disgusted.

"What, did you think I was going to sit around this place and jump whenever you said jump for the rest of my life? I have plans, expensive plans, and I finally found someone who sees things my way."

"So tell me, did you contact Sid, or did he contact you?" Shana wanted him distracted. If he got a little closer she could kick the gun out of his hand before he got a shot off. Maybe.

"Sid? I don't work for that low life. I've got higher aspirations." He laughed at his own humor.

"You sold out David and helped kidnap a little girl. Those are your higher aspirations?" Royce edged away from Shana.

"If he had taken all the code the first time instead of just the one section we wouldn't have had to do it. Hell, I just about told him I was looking in the other direction so he had all the time he needed."

"That's why you were on the scene the night I caught him. And why you switched me to days, so I wouldn't interfere."

"That's right smarty pants—" Horton made the mistake of lowering the gun and Shana swung a crescent kick to his wrist, knocking the gun out of his hand.

Before Shana could move in for another kick, Royce grabbed Horton by the shirt and punched him in the face, knocking the heavier man to the ground. Royce dove on top of him and rained punches like a mad man.

Shana turned to get the cops. She'd taken one step when she was tackled face first into the ground. Her arms were trapped underneath her

and her legs pinned by her assailant. She tried to squirm her body to free her arms, but the weight was too much.

“Get off him or the girl is toast.” Shana felt the barrel of a gun press against the base of her skull. She stopped struggling and held very still.

Shana watched out of the corner of her eye. Royce got off Horton, and held up his hands to show he was unarmed. His knuckles were bloody and a red mark under his eye showed where Horton had gotten in a shot of his own. The second goon grabbed Royce’s hands and pulled them behind him, securing them with handcuffs.

Horton got up slowly from the dirt. His nose was bleeding and one eye already swelled shut. When he saw Royce was secured, he slammed a punch into his gut.

Shana almost threw up as she watched Royce double over in pain. Horton wasn’t small and that punch had all his weight behind it. He was winding up for another one when the guy holding Royce stopped him.

“We don’t have time for games. We got a long ride ahead of us. Go get the car.”

Spitting in the dirt, Horton shot one last dirty look in Royce’s direction, then went off around the building.

“Get up. And keep your hands in front of you. My buddy has a gun in your boyfriend’s back. One kick out of you and lover boy is history.”

“Christ, do you practice lines like that in front of a mirror or something? You sound like an extra from *The Godfather*.” Shana’s brain spun. They didn’t have much time before Horton got back with the car.

If they got in the car with these guys, their chances of survival went down the toilet. Her options were rather limited at the moment though. Royce was pale from the punch Horton gave him, and still bent over.

“Shut your mouth and get up.” The goon with the gun on her pulled her to her feet with one beefy paw.

As he yanked her arm around her back, she felt the cold snap of a handcuff on her own wrist. She watched Royce's captor pressed the gun even harder into his back to assure her cooperation. Letting that second cuff get snapped on her wrist was the hardest thing she'd ever done.

A black sedan pulled over the lawn. The tinted window rolled down and Horton stuck his head out.

"Let's get a move on. Cops are everywhere."

Shana had one second to wonder about Horton's vengeful smile before a shooting pain sliced through her head and the world went black.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Shana woke slowly. Her stomach churned and her mouth felt like something had died in it. When she opened her eyes a crack, the pain from the muted sunlight speared through her brain, making her regret the action immediately.

Royce was next to her. She didn't know how she knew that the solid thigh pressing against her was his, but she knew. Trying to open her eyes a little more slowly this time, she peeked through her squinted lids.

They were in a car. Going where? Turning her head made the mariachi band in her skull play even louder. They were on a highway, somewhere. Shana turned her head back to Royce. Still unconscious, and his eye was turning purplish. That was going to hurt like the dickens tomorrow.

If they were still alive tomorrow. She pushed that thought out of her head. They'd find a way out of this. All she had to do was stall long enough for her father to get there with help. If he got her message.

Royce groaned next to her. Shana wished she could touch him, reassure him it would be okay. Her hands were still cuffed behind her back and had long since gone numb.

"Anyone get the number of the truck that hit me?" Royce's voice was raspy, but his eyes were clear. Swollen and squinting, but clear.

"Sorry, I was otherwise occupied. How are you doing?"

Royce smiled, then winced. "I've been worse. I've been a lot better too. How long have I been out?"

"I don't know. I just came out of it myself."

"Where are we?"

"On a highway, somewhere."

Royce looked out his window. "Long Island. We're on the LIE."

"I kind of figured, but I wasn't positive." Hell, they'd planned on going to the Hamptons today. Just not as prisoners.

"I am. I was on this road yesterday. In about twenty minutes we'll be at Jim's."

"Don't worry, I'll think of something." She had no idea what.

Royce closed his eyes and rolled his head against the back of the seat. Shana watched the passing traffic and tried to think past the pounding in her brain. Her gun and purse had been taken while she was unconscious. She was out of luck there.

A quick look at Royce's belt showed his phone was missing too. If she had the body armor on she could have called her father on that, but it was hung up neatly in the bathroom. It was going to be up to her wits to get them out of this one. She just hoped she had enough left to do it.

The car cruised along until the houses got further and further apart. Shana could smell the water and knew they must be getting close to the end of the island. Signs for Hampton Bay flashed past her window. Looked like Royce was right.

The car finally pulled into a winding driveway, which lead to a mansion that made Royce's look like a shack. Jim and Mitzi lived here?

Stopping in front of the house, the two goons got out and opened the doors. Shana thought about leaning back and kicking at him, but the gun pointed at her head changed her mind. She'd play docile captive, for now.

The front door opened as the goon pushed Shana up the steps. The mountainous form of Sid filled the doorway.

"If it isn't my dinner companion from the other night. Welcome to my humble abode." He saluted her with the drink he held in one hand.

"You mean Jim's home, don't you?" Royce asked as he was shoved through the door behind her.

"Not for long. Once I get my share of the fee for that code your company is developing, I'll be able to buy this baby ten times over."

"Shut up Sid, you'll spoil my surprise."

Shana's head snapped to the doorway off the foyer to see Pete Downy standing there with a gun, pointing at Sid.

"Don't get a bug up your ass, it'll all be over with in a matter of hours anyway. You have the buyers, and we have Renault."

"But we don't have the code, yet."

"Bah, one call to that brother of his and the code is as good as ours. We'll offer him a two for one special. He can get his daughter and his brother back at the same time. We'll be millionaires in one quick shot." He rattled the ice in his glass then raised it to his lips.

"Funny you should put it that way." Downy fired and shot Sid in the head. The big man dropped with a crash. Downy turned the gun on the two goons staring dumbfounded in the doorway.

"Do either of you have a problem with the change in management?"

A look passed between the two, then the one next to Shana shrugged. "As long as we get paid, we don't care who we work for."

"Loyalty in the workplace is a fleeting thing, isn't it?"

Shana stole a glance at Royce out of the corner of her eye. The good old boy senator was gone. In his place was a deadly cool maniac with a gun and no qualms about using it.

"Dispose of the body before it ruins the floor." He gestured with the gun.

"I thought you were going to let me take care of Sid," Horton whined as he came through the door."

"And I shall. You can help these two take care of disposing the whale in a place that won't lead back to me. Uncuff those two. I wouldn't want to disturb our young guest when she sees her beloved uncle."

"What about the chick? You don't want me to let her loose," Horton cautioned.

"I'm sure I can handle an unarmed woman half my size. Free them, then tell the pilot we'll be leaving shortly."

"But, sir, you don't understand. She's vicious," Horton tried to explain.

"I'm sure. I'll keep my gun trained on her at all times." He waved the gun around in demonstration. "Now go."

Horton shook his head and uncuffed them both, bending back Shana's arms painfully in the process. Downy gestured them into the living room with the gun, and Shana gratefully left Sid's dead body behind.

It was one thing to hit a cardboard cut-out in practice, or look at pictures. Seeing the real thing up close and personal was more than just a little unnerving.

"So sorry about that unpleasantness. Sid actually thought that after I put my career on the line I was going to share the proceeds from the sale of your code with him."

Royce sat on the couch where Downy pointed and rubbed his wrists. "Didn't he do half the work? After all, he was the one who got David in the middle of all of this."

"Ha! Like that was any work. I'm the one who brought David to the casino when he was moping around about losing that harridan of a wife of his. I'm the one who arranged for him to get into the right crowd."

“The right crowd being bookies and loan sharks?” Royce raised an eyebrow.

“That depends on whose idea of right we’re talking about. David’s addiction fit perfectly with my needs. Until he discovered he had a backbone.”

Shana looked at Royce again. Downy was full of himself, bragging about his deeds with his chest puffed out. He had things so twisted around in his own mind that she wasn’t sure what he was thinking.

“Where’s Allison?” Royce asked.

“Sleeping peacefully nearby. You can see her—as soon as you make the phone call to your brother telling him to give you the code immediately.”

“I don’t have the complete code.”

“Don’t lie to me!”

Shana felt her gut clench as Downy pointed the gun at Royce’s chest. After watching him shoot Sid without blinking, she didn’t know what else he would do.

“Just call him, Royce. We can’t play games any longer. He knows you have the code and he’ll kill us if you don’t do as he says.” Shana hoped Royce had sense enough to play along with her. They needed to get Allison and get out of there before the good senator’s grip on sanity snapped.

“I’d listen to your girlfriend, boy. She obviously has a care for her own hide.”

Royce looked at her, his blue eyes blazing into hers, trying to read her intent. Finally he looked at Downy. “Give me a phone, I’ll call him.”

* * *

Shana paced the room where Allison lay sleeping, dead to the world. She winced away from the word dead. The little girl was so still she had to have been drugged. How was she going to get an unconscious child, Royce, and herself out of a windowless room surrounded by three men with guns?

“What did you tell David?” Shana asked Royce, who knelt by Allison’s side. He brushed the hair off her forehead and held her limp hand.

“Exactly what Downy told me to. I gave David the fax number and told him to send the Helen code.”

“Is it enough to put the project at risk?” Shana’s fingers clenched themselves into fists. How could he decide whether to save their lives or his country? He couldn’t give up the code.

“It would be if I had asked for the Helen 2.0, but the Helen code is significantly flawed.”

Relief slid through Shana’s body like a hot knife through butter. He’d bought them some time. It was up to her to do something with it.

The door burst open and Horton pointed his gun at Royce. He had changed into jeans and cowboy boots. His fat rolled over the top of his belt buckle and he looked like Hollywood’s version of a ranching mogul.

“You, take the girl.” He pointed at Royce. “You,” he pointed at Shana, “in front of me. And none of that karate shit. You can’t dance away from a bullet in your back.” She moved in front of him, keeping her eyes open for the other two goons and Downy.

Horton directed her out of the mansion and around the manicured lawn. She’d seen no sign of the other men, but there was a suspiciously large hole in the grass under a nearby weeping willow tree.

As they rounded the house, Shana saw a mammoth helicopter idling on a landing pad. The force of the wind from the propellers blew dirt and leaves around them.

“Get in the back,” Horton shouted in her ear.

Shana climbed up the step into the belly of the copter. Immediately the noise lessened. The interior was huge, obviously meant for ferrying the rich and famous in style. Downy sat in the seat behind the pilot holding his gun in one hand and a glass of champagne in the other.

Royce got in carrying Allison on his shoulder. He looked at Shana, but didn't say a word as he buckled his niece into a seat. Her head lolled forward, but the buckle kept her upright. Once Royce was seated, Horton shut the door and got in the co-pilot's chair. The pilot looked back at the four of them, then faced front and manipulated the myriad controls. Soon the helicopter was airborne.

“Where are we going?” Shana asked, trying to keep Downy's attention on her instead of Allison or Royce.

“Why, if I told you that it would ruin all the fun.”

“What did you do to my niece? She hasn't woken up since you showed her to me.” Royce's face was tight with anger.

“She's been under a mild sedation, nothing incurable. I'm not a monster you know. I didn't want her to be able to identify me. I did have every intention of letting her go once I got my money.”

He really thought he wasn't a monster? He kidnapped a child, killed at least one man in cold blood, set up one of his “friends” and he considered himself humane? Shana'd rather take her chances with an alligator.

“And now?” Royce leaned back, looking relaxed and at ease in a helicopter with a gun pointed at him. Shana wished he'd shut up so Downy would stop pointing the gun at him.

“Well, now I'll have to go to plan ‘B’.”

“What's plan ‘B’?” Shana shot Royce a look, hoping he'd get the message.

“Plan ‘B’ involves me leaving my illustrious political career just as I was hitting my stride, and retiring to the Cayman’s.” His face changed from arrogant to annoyed in a second, making Shana’s heart sink.

“And it’s all your fault.” The gun swung to face Shana. “If you hadn’t gotten involved, none of this would be necessary.”

“None of what?” She did not like where this was heading.

“If Royce had just coughed over the code like a good little uncle, I could have sold it to the highest bidder and made my run for the White House during the next election. I have enough connections from my dealings with the C.I.A. that I could have made a fortune.” He twirled the champagne around in his glass before downing the remaining swallow.

“Now I’m going to have to go into hiding with my fortune, and where is the challenge in that?”

Shana was pretty sure he wasn’t looking for an answer from her. She had to get the gun away from him before he shot it off in the back of the copter and killed them all. In such an enclosed space a single bullet would bounce around like a pinball before stopping.

“What’s going to happen to us?” Royce leaned over his knees. He looked at ease, but his weight was balanced on the balls of his feet, and Shana was afraid he was going to do something stupid.

“You and your charming niece are going to be my guests for a while, an insurance policy so to speak. If your brother tries to pull a fast one on me and give me the wrong code, I’ll have you to help me convince him otherwise.”

Crap. Royce had purposely told David to give him the wrong code. Their time was running out, Shana had to stop this madman before they landed and he figured out he’d been tricked.

“And what about me?” Shana had worked the buckle of her seatbelt until it was loose enough to break when she stood. Hopefully Downy wouldn’t notice.

“You, I’m afraid, have become a liability. I can’t imagine David would give a damn about a low-rate PI. As soon as we hit deep enough water, you are going to take a flight without the benefit of a parachute.” Downy reached back and tapped Horton on the shoulder.

Horton clambered in back, hitching his pants up then cracking his knuckles. Shana got out of her chair and moved in the aisle as far away from Horton as she could get in the tiny space.

Downy pointed the gun at Allison. “Just so you don’t get any heroic ideas, Royce. Should you try to assist Ms. Quinn I’ll be forced to shoot Allison.”

“You’re hot shit in a gym, let’s see how you are in close quarters girlie.” Horton pressed a button and the door to the helicopter opened, sending her hair flying around her head.

Shana knew she couldn’t beat Horton in a wrestling match; he was bigger and stronger. She had to keep his hands off her and keep him between her and the door. He wouldn’t be stupid enough to try to charge her again in such a small area.

“Don’t belabor it, just remove the girl while we’re far enough out so there won’t be any witnesses.”

Holding her hands up in front of her at a guard, Shana waited for Horton to make the first move. There was no way she was going to try to attack him first and have him push her out the open door.

Horton was at a disadvantage because he had to stoop over a bit due to the low ceiling. That should throw off his timing. She turned sideways, giving him a smaller target.

He came at her with a stomp of his foot, then backed off, feeling her out. Her nerves were so tight she almost fell for the trick. She had one, maybe two chances at him before he cornered her and muscle won out over skill.

The evil smile on his face told her he knew it was only a matter of time before he won.

We'll see about that.

"You know Horton, we had a name for guys like you when I was in school." He couldn't possibly be stupid enough to be goaded into attacking her, could he?

"That ain't gonna work, girlie."

It was worth a try.

Horton kept his hands closer to his body this time around, not giving her any easy limbs to grab and twist. Maybe he wasn't as dumb as he looked after all.

Going low, he reached for her, aiming for her waist. Shana snapped out a side kick and connected with his nose, bloodying it immediately.

"Bitch!" Horton wiped his nose on his shoulder and charged in again, using his arms to protect his face.

Shana ducked low and kicked at his knee. Her angle was off and she hit his calf. The cowboy boots he wore protected him from the worst of the shot.

The wind coming into the cabin blew debris around her head, making it even harder for her to dodge the wildly swinging blows Horton aimed at her.

If she could just grab one of those hands she might be able to get a lock on him and pin him down.

Horton's fist connected with the side of her head, and sent her sprawling into the empty chair next to Downy. Her head rang from the

blow but she managed to skip back out of Horton's grip before he caught her.

Getting behind him, Shana landed a roundhouse kick to his unprotected kidneys, which pushed him into Downy.

"Quit fooling around and toss her," Downy shouted, standing up and shoving Horton off his lap.

As Horton caught his balance, Royce jumped out of his seat and hit Downy around the waist with his shoulder.

Shana's gut clenched as she watched Royce struggle with the heavier man, but forced herself to focus on Horton who was back on his feet. Horton faked a swing to her left then darted into the right. She brought her knee up and connected with his chin, but couldn't stop the charge.

Her knee throbbed from the contact, but she had other worries at the moment. Horton's arms were wrapped around her like a boa constrictor and he was moving back towards the open door.

Kicking any available spot, Shana tried to gouge an eye or his Adam's apple, but he'd bent his head out of her reach. Beating on his back was useless, and he was drawing even closer to the door.

Her feet beat uselessly against his shins, and panic clawed its way up her throat. The wind pulled at her the closer she got to the door and her options narrowed in a hurry.

Down to her primal instincts, Shana grabbed at the loose skin of Horton's tricep and pinched as hard as she could.

"Shit!" Horton's grip loosened at the pain and Shana was able to jab the heel of her hand into his throat, crushing his windpipe. He dropped her as he choked for air.

Shana landed less than two feet from the open door. She scrambled backwards on her rear end, trying to get by the still gagging Horton.

Royce and Downy wrestled for the gun, and Downy fell backwards on the bent over Horton, knocking him to the floor on top of her. Shana felt the air leave her lungs as the combination of Horton and Downy's weight landed on her.

It was her turn to gasp for air as Horton shrugged Downy off him and grabbed her by the throat. She couldn't breathe. Scratching at his hands, Shana tried to pull his fingers off her throat before she passed out.

"How does it feel? This is what it's going to feel like when you're at the bottom of the ocean." An evil glint shone in his eyes as he continued to squeeze tighter and tighter.

Her legs felt like dead weights, trapped under his body, and gray was clouding the edges of her vision. She had to do something fast.

Letting go of his fingers, Shana tried to poke at his eyes, but he grabbed her hand and crushed it in his own. Moving his weight forward to slam her hand onto the floor, he shifted off her legs.

Shana ignored the pain of her hand smashing onto the floor and used the heel of her free hand to push up his chin while she kneed him in the groin as hard as she could. As black spots dotted her vision, Horton let out a shout.

He curled into the fetal position, clutching between his legs with both hands while he retched. Shana pushed him off her and gasped for air, her throat was on fire with pain, and she couldn't take advantage of Horton's incapacitated condition.

She managed to push up on her hands and knees before getting knocked by either Royce or Downy. Her chest hit the floor and her chin smashed into the ground digging her teeth into her tongue as she slid towards the open doorway.

Shana grabbed for anything to hold onto. The helicopter circled and she slipped faster and faster. She managed to snag the dangling seatbelt from one of the chairs and clutched it in her fist.

The buckle dug into her hand, but she didn't let go. The momentum of the flight made her legs swing out and her feet actually dangled out of the copter. She scrambled against the smooth metal floor, and tried to find a purchase to get her body back inside.

The wind sucked at her and she couldn't get her other hand out from under her body to help her hold on. Her shoulder screamed in pain as all her weight pulled against it. She swung her leg out to the side and almost caught the door with her heel.

Royce and Downy still struggled, the gun was loose on the floor in between her and Horton. She watched in horror as Horton reached for it. Kicking harder, Shana tried to get a hold on the door.

Suddenly, the helicopter jerked, the gun slid right towards her just as her foot caught hold. She was able to free her arm and reach for the gun.

"No!" Horton dove for the gun, underestimating the pitch of the helicopter. He tumbled over, picking up momentum as he rolled towards her.

Shana twisted, trying to squirm out of the way as the gun flew out the door. Horton slid after it, a look of terror on his face as his fingernails clawed at the floor.

Instinctively, Shana tried to grab him, reaching for the collar of his shirt. Her fingers brushed against his head as he was flung out of the copter.

Screaming, Shana tried to grab him again, letting go of the seat belt and sliding precious feet herself before she was stopped.

"Let him go. There's nothing you can do." Royce held onto her wrist and pulled her into the safety of the cabin.

Shana nodded to let him know she wasn't going to try to dive after Horton, and worked her way into a seat. Royce stumbled to the door and pressed the button to close it.

Downy was on the floor wedged in between two seats; unconscious and bleeding from his nose and mouth. His eyes were almost swollen shut, and his ear was the size of a cantaloupe. The senator wouldn't be doing any photo ops in the near future. Unless mug shots counted.

As Royce checked on Allison, Shana searched for a weapon. She didn't know whose side the pilot was on, but she wasn't taking any chances. Finding a knife in the mini bar next to Downy's chair, Shana limped her way to the cockpit.

Reflective sunglasses shielded the pilot's eyes, so Shana couldn't read his reaction to her waving a knife in front of his face. Slipping a set of headphones on with one hand, Shana pressed the knife to the pilot's neck.

"You have two choices. You can land this bird without any more creative flying, or you can land this bird while bleeding profusely from multiple cuts." Her voice was barely a whisper, but the pilot understood her perfectly.

"I've already circled around. We'll be landing at the New York Port Authority in fifteen minutes."

"Good choice. I'll stay right here and listen in, just in case you get any ideas about notifying any of Sid's employees that we're coming."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

CHAPTER TWENTY

The lights from police cars, fire trucks, and several ambulances made the dismal Port Authority look like a disco. Every flash of light stabbed into Shana's head. The paramedics whisked Allison off with sirens wailing as the police tried to make sense of the situation.

Shana must have looked as bad as she felt, because a paramedic grabbed her and practically dragged her over to another ambulance.

"I'm fine." Shana whispered, her voice barely a croak.

"Yeah, sure, I can see that. You need to get that throat looked at, I could lift fingerprints off the marks on your neck."

Shana looked around for Royce. She hadn't seen him since she sat up front with the pilot. Downy had regained consciousness at one point and now screamed for his lawyer as a police officer read him his rights and cuffed his hands behind his back.

Did Royce go to the hospital with Allison? Two men in FBI jackets spoke to the pilot, who turned and nodded to her. The feds walked up to her as a unit. Could they be trusted? Were they under Sid's thumb? Did they know Sid was dead? Would it matter?

"Are you Shana Quinn?"

Shana opened her mouth, but nothing came out so she nodded.

"We'd like to ask you a few questions."

"You can ask all you want, but she won't be able to answer you for a few days. She's lucky her windpipe isn't crushed." The paramedic tucked her flashlight away and faced down the feds.

“If you want to talk to her I suggest you check out the visiting hours at Saint Luke’s hospital, because that’s where she’s headed.”

Before Shana could do more than shake her head, she was bundled up and strapped down to a stretcher. As a burly EMT helped lift her into the ambulance she saw her father’s car come tearing into the parking lot.

Her father got out along with Jim, David, and Joe Peterson. Shana tried to wave to him to tell him she was okay, but her arms were caught in the sheet on the stretcher. She tried to get the attention of the EMT but he couldn’t hear her frantic whispers.

She was still trying to get their attention when the world around her started to spin. Her head got light and she was so dizzy. What was happening to her? Gray started to creep into her vision for the second time that day and the last thing she saw was the paramedic’s worried face above her.

* * *

What was that beeping noise? Was someone’s car alarm going off? Lord, how she hated those stupid things. Shana tried to open her eyes to read her clock and could barely open them a crack. When they finally did open, it didn’t help lessen her confusion.

The beeping was coming from a blue box on a pole next to her bed. Not her bed, a hospital bed. A tube ran down from the box into her arm, her hand was splinted and resting against her side.

Turning her head very carefully, Shana saw her father asleep in a chair next to her good hand. What the hell was going on? The last thing she remembered was seeing her father flying into the parking lot of the Port Authority. She’d been worried that he wouldn’t find her.

Apparently he had.

The door to her room opened and a nurse in blue scrubs came in. Her eyes widened when she saw Shana was awake.

“Good morning Ms. Quinn. I’m Jane, your nurse. I’ll just shut off this alarm for you.”

“W—what’s going on?” Shana tried to ask, but only a squeak came out of her abused throat.

“Don’t try to talk, your larynx have been severely bruised and you won’t be able to talk for a few days.”

Now that was frustrating. Shana had a million questions and she couldn’t say a word. Royce would laugh his ass off.

“Where?” Shana mouthed.

“You’re at St. Luke’s hospital in New York City. You’ve had quite an adventure and it took a toll on your body. The doctor wants to keep you for another day to make sure that you don’t have a minor concussion or anything else.”

“Royce?” She tried again.

“If you mean that absolutely gorgeous man who came in with you, he’s been wearing a path between your room and that of the little girl who came in before you.”

“How is he?”

“How is he? He was well enough to refuse treatment and raise hell when a reporter tried to get in here to see you so I’d say he’s okay.”

Shana smiled at the image of Royce raising hell. She had many more questions to ask, but her mouth was so dry, and her eyes were so heavy.

“Have a little crushed ice for now and get some more rest. There will be plenty of time to ask questions when you get your voice back.”

She had little choice but to go along with her nurse’s advice because she couldn’t keep her eyes open another second. At least Royce was okay.

* * *

"I don't give a damn who you are, you're not seeing her until she's good and ready for you."

Padraic's voice raised in anger woke Shana out of a trouble sleep. She kept seeing Horton's face as he fell out of the helicopter. Only instead of screaming he was accusing her of letting him fall. She had a feeling she'd be having bad dreams about this situation for years to come.

Shana tried to push herself up into a more comfortable position in the bed and winced in pain. Every muscle in her body hurt, and her shoulder throbbed.

The door to her room opened and her father walked in, slamming it shut behind him.

"Oh, so you're up. Good. Morning's half over. How are you feeling? Do you want some more pain meds?"

She normally hated the dreamy feeling pain meds gave her, but this once she'd take them and be glad. She could feel her pulse beating in her hand for heaven's sake.

"When you're feeling better the feds want to get your side of the story. Jim, David, Royce and I told them what we knew. I gave them the evidence that we had and Royce told them about what happened in the mansion with Sid." He crossed over to the other side of the bed and took her good hand.

"Are you okay? I mean up here." He tapped his head. "I know that stuff like that can give you some rough moments."

Taking his hand, she rubbed it against her cheek and shrugged. She'd be okay, but it wasn't anything she wanted to talk about right now.

"I'll bet it's just killing you not to be able to talk, huh?"

She stuck out her tongue at him.

“Poor kid, and I bet you have a million questions. Okay, I’ll see if I can guess what you’re thinking.”

Shana rolled her eyes and got a drink from the cup of water by her bed.

“First off, I got your phone message probably five minutes after you left it. I was in the john, always happens, the phone rings at the worst time.” He shook his head.

“Anyway, I tried to call you back but you didn’t answer. The whole thing sounded fishy to me so I headed over there too. By the time I found the brother, David, he said he hadn’t seen either one of you there and the cops had called him because they couldn’t get Royce.”

“Bomb?” She’d almost forgotten how this whole thing had started.

“What? No, there was no bomb in the package, just some wires and gunpowder and stuff to get the dogs all juiced up. So, I’m looking for you two and I spot the strap of that suitcase you carry around for a purse under a bush. That thing weighs a ton.”

Shana grabbed his hand and shook it, trying to get him back on the topic.

“Just calm down, I’m telling the story.”

If he took any longer to tell the story she’d be able to watch the made-for-TV movie version.

“Don’t roll your eyes at me. So I find your purse and figure you’ve been snatched. I call some of my buddies and we go after that senator there Jim. Nice guy by the way. I’ll vote for him next election for sure.”

She tugged on his arm again. This was worse than dangling out of a helicopter.

“I go in guns a blazing, telling him we know everything and if he doesn’t let you go I’ll drag him behind my car to the police. He says we

should go to the police right then because he hasn't been to his place in months and wants to know what's going on."

Royce had been right about that. She owed him an apology, probably more than one.

"Meanwhile, David says he's got a call from Royce telling him to fax the Helen code, only he's asking for the wrong one and what should he do. At this point we called the feds and got them involved. Jim, David and I took off for New York hoping to catch him at Jim's house."

Padraic's eyes blinked rapidly a few times, then he cleared his throat. Shana's eyes burned a little too, at the thought of the worry and fear he must have gone through. She rubbed his hand against her cheek again.

"I don't ever want to go through that again. I thought you were dead. Then when I heard on the police scanner that they were looking for a body over the sound, well my heart's not as young as it used to be."

A tear slipped out of the corner of her eye. She'd put her father through so much worry.

"We got to the scene and Jim cut through the bullshit so we could get there, only to find out you'd been taken to the hospital. And here we are today."

"Allison?" she mouthed.

"The little girl's going to be just fine. She doesn't remember anything after being grabbed from behind at the bus stop. The doctor says it doesn't look like she'd been, you know, touched. All in all, she made out okay."

Thank God. The longer it took to find her, the more Shana had worried that Allison would be scarred for life.

"The docs want to look you over a bit more today, but if all is well, they'll spring you tomorrow. Now, if you're up to it, the feds have been

chomping at the bit to hear from you. If they ask you yes or no questions, do you think you can fill them in?"

Shana nodded.

"That's my girl." Padraic gave her a kiss on the nose then went to let the black suited federal agents in.

With the help of hand gestures, lip reading, and a pad and pen, Shana was able to fill the agents in on the pieces they'd been missing. With most of the witnesses dead or missing, they were going to need all the evidence they could get to nail Downy, and Shana's testimony would be invaluable.

After the FBI was through with her, Royce's secretary came in with a gorgeous silk bathrobe and soft slippers. Fawn from the spa stopped by for a visit as did most of the officers who served on the force with her dad. Even some of the guys from Renault came in for a visit.

The only person who hadn't shown his face was Royce.

Shana didn't know whether to be relieved or annoyed. She desperately wanted to see him, to know that he was okay. But, now that the case was over their relationship would be too. That was how she had left things with him. She never had the chance to tell him she'd changed her mind, or that she was in love with him.

If she saw him, would she have the courage to tell him? What if he changed his mind now that the adrenaline rush was over? Worry made her head run in circles when she was supposed to be resting. Why couldn't he just come in and get it over with?

Shana plotted how she could sneak out of her room without one of the eagle-eyed nurses spotting her, when Royce walked into the room carrying a bakery box of cookies.

"I heard you were awake. I thought you might like these better than roses." He pulled his other hand out from behind his back and showed her the dozen roses he was holding. "But I brought both just in case."

Royce crossed to her bed and put the cookies and flowers on the table next to her. A look passed between Padraic and Royce, and her father got up with a quick squeeze of her hand.

"I think I'll get some chow since it looks like you have enough company for right now." He walked out of the room whistling.

"I've been trying to get you alone all day. You're a popular lady."

Shana shrugged, her stomach flipping over in nervousness. He had a black eye and the knuckles on both his hands were bandaged. A huge bruise ran from his temple to his jaw, and he had a wicked cut on his forehead. He looked like he had gone ten rounds with the champ and lost.

And he still was the best looking man she'd ever seen.

"I know you can't talk, and it's probably really unfair of me to take advantage of it, but I couldn't wait to tell you what I'm going to tell you." He got up and started to pace in front of her bed. His hand went through his hair twice before he spoke again.

"You said a lot of things during the time we've been together. Some of them I didn't want to hear but needed to, and some of them I still don't believe." He poured a cup of water and handed it to her.

"There is no way I could ever thank you enough for not giving up, for risking your life over and over again to save my niece."

Shana shook her head and pointed to him. He had been a huge help; she never would have made it without him.

"I may have helped a little, but without your skills I'd have been up the creek." Another trip around the little room, only this time he poured himself a drink of water.

"I know you said after this case was over I'd forget all about you and go on with my playboy life without a second thought."

Her heart sank, is that what he was trying to tell her now? That she'd been right?

"But I think you're wrong. I realize you think we're so different, but I don't give a crap. You're the first woman I've connected with on more than a physical level and I'm not going to give you up without a fight."

He wasn't? Shana's heart burst with joy. He wasn't going to give her up without a fight. She opened her mouth to tell him he didn't need to fight, but he held up his hand and turned his head away from her.

"Just let me finish. I know you want to have your own detective agency. I can help you realize your dream that much sooner. I won't stand in your way, honest. In fact I can even help. All I want is for you to give us a chance. For you to come back to that mausoleum and make it a home."

Royce looked at her, his blue eyes almost melted her into a puddle of mush with their intensity. This strong, successful, stubborn man had laid his heart out on the line for her. Shana Mae Quinn. Who'd a thunk it?

Shana reached for the pad and pen she'd used with the feds and began writing furiously. Royce tried to read over her shoulder but she shooed him away. When she was done, she handed him the pad and waited for his reaction.

A frown crossed his face and then a beautiful smile lit up his eyes. "You really love me?"

She nodded, feeling a jolt of fear in her gut. He hadn't said that he loved her, just that he was willing to fight for her.

"And you'll live with me?"

She nodded again.

"I don't know what to say. I had all my arguments planned for if you fought me. I didn't have anything planned for you agreeing with me."

How about you love me too, you idiot. Shana squinted at him, hoping he'd get the hint.

"You've made me so happy, and you haven't said a word." He laughed at his own joke. "I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. Like I could conquer the world." He came over and leaned down to kiss her.

Shana grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and shook him.

"What? Oh. Oh my God. I love you too. I do, I loved you from the second I saw you. I'd do anything to keep you with me, anything."

Reaching out Shana took the pad from his hand and grabbed the pen off the table next to her.

Well it's about damn time.

EPILOGUE

“Would you relax? It’s not like you haven’t taught this class before,” Royce said as he rubbed Shana’s shoulders in the Renault Technologies gym.

“I know, but I’ve never taught a self-defense seminar that had my father’s girlfriend in it. What if I accidentally flip her or something?”

“Would you stop? Gloria loves you. She was more worried about meeting you than you were about meeting her.”

“I know, but I just want her to, you know, be proud of me too.”

Royce turned her around and hugged her, kissing her on top of her head. “The only person you have to prove anything to is yourself, and I for one think you’ve done that beautifully.”

“I haven’t done half bad for changing my entire life’s plans around and starting my own business in six months.”

“Half bad? You’re booked solid and you’ve become better recognized than I have. How many times have we been out and women have stopped you to say what a difference you made in their lives? That you gave them self-confidence and made them less afraid?”

“And that is so much more important to me than solving crimes or catching adulterous husbands.”

“And getting shot at, run off the road, thrown out of helicopters—”

Shana jabbed him with her elbow and pushed him towards the door. “Go on, get out of here. I can’t start a self-defense class with you in the

room, none of the women listen to me because they're too busy staring at you."

"But I only have eyes for you," he half sang.

"Me too. Now go." She laughed at his wounded look and blew him a kiss as he left.

Straightening the chairs set up in front of the gym, Shana took a look around, and made sure everything was in order. Her life had changed dramatically since the first time she walked into this room.

She'd been so busy trying to prove herself better than any cop, any son her father could have had that she didn't even notice he was perfectly happy with the daughter she was. It had taken almost dying for her to figure that out, but the message eventually got through her thick skull.

Solving Royce's case had taught her that she could be a damn fine detective, but that she didn't want to. That dream was the fantasy of her childhood. A little girl's dream to prove herself to her father.

It took a week for Shana to recover enough to talk again, and during that week of silence she had a lot of time to think. Shana realized the training she'd received in weapons and karate had given her a core of self-reliance that many women didn't have.

An idea had come to her as she watched the news and heard about college girls getting attacked on campus. Once she had her voice back, Shana offered to teach a self-defense course just for women at the local community college. The course was so popular the college asked her to offer another one the next semester.

A few of her students asked her about shooting lessons, so Shana set up extra sessions in responsible gun ownership. The next thing she knew, Royce was telling her she should start her own business instead of

working out of the college. He'd even loaned her space at Renault for her classes.

Six months later she was working full-time teaching classes for corporations, high schools, and women's groups everywhere. She'd been asked to speak at luncheons, commencements, and conferences around the Northeast.

Having the publicity of "rescuing" Allison hadn't hurt her any, but it was her skill, and her enthusiasm that kept people coming back.

Yup, she looked around the room again, hard to believe what could happen just by taking a shortcut to a job interview.

And God help her, she'd never do it again.

ARIANNA HART

By day she's a mild mannered mother and high school teacher, but at night Arianna Hart puts on her mask and cape over her size 4 leather cat suit and saves the world from evildoers.

Okay, in the real world Arianna lives on the East Coast with her husband and three daughters and is most often seen in sweatpants instead of leather. When not teaching, writing, or chasing after her children and the dog, Ari likes to practice her karate, go for long walks, and read by the pool.

She thinks heaven is having a good book, warm sun, and a drink in her hand. Until she can sit down long enough to enjoy all three, she'll settle for the occasional hour of peace and quiet.

To learn more about Arianna Hart, please visit www.ariannahart.com. Send an email to <mailto:ari@ariannahart.com> or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Ari! <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/friendsofari>

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