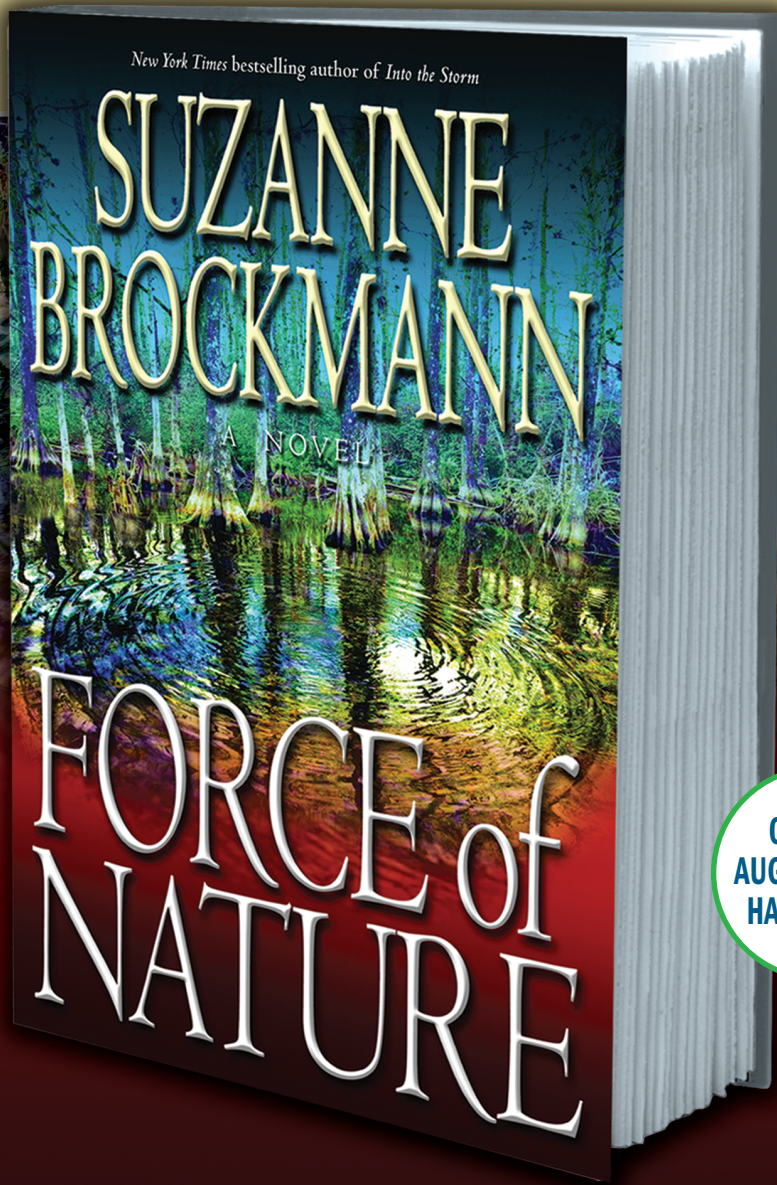


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See page 35 to read an excerpt

SUZANNE BROCKMANN's Extras for Readers

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—————*From the desk of Suzanne Brockmann*—————

Dear Readers,

A few years back, one of my editors at Ballantine had a really interesting idea—put a brand-new, exclusive short story featuring my most popular characters, Sam Starrett and Alyssa Locke, into the back of my upcoming hardcover release.

As I sat down to write that first short story, I have to confess, I was filled with some trepidation. I had something of a reputation for delivering novels that were much longer than the average for a romantic suspense. I really liked writing longer books, and here I was, on the verge of writing something very short.

Luckily, that first story came in at a reasonable length. It did, however, deal with my popular duo's first encounter with a deadly serial killer. Sadly, because, at the story's end the killer remains at large, it read to many people like an excerpt of a coming book. (I still get e-mail asking me in which book that story continues. Oops.)

That first short story, however misunderstood, was so popular, I decided to write another for my next book. And then I wrote another, and another—all featuring characters from my ongoing Troubleshooters series.

I like to think I'm getting better at writing short, although *All Through the Night*, my first holiday novella, in stores on October 30th, 2007, is longer than the category romances I used to write. Not a big surprise. We're calling it a novella anyway, because it's something a little different. It was a fun book to write—there's more info on it later on in this booklet . . .

Anyway, last year, I wrote two stories for my *Into the Storm* Internet countdown, and they're being reprinted here in this booklet.

Tangent alert! If you've never been to my website, www.SuzanneBrockmann.com, you should drop by! Starting August 1, 2007, I'll be counting down the days to *Force of Nature's* August 14th release with something new posted every Monday through Friday. In past years I've included trivia contests with fun prizes, excerpts from the coming book, interviews, recommended reads and blog-type musings. This year, I'm going to try to include a YouTube video or two. (If you get this booklet after August 14th, the entire countdown will be archived on my website, so you can still go check it out.)

Back on subject, I now have to admit that I've regressed a little. This year, I've written my longest short story yet. It's called *Trapped*, and it once again features Sam and Alyssa. And Jules Cassidy. (Funny how Jules always worms his way in there . . .) It's brand-new and it's being published here—exclusively—in this *Force of Nature* Extras booklet for Readers.

You may have noticed that this book has two front covers—that if you flip it upside down, you will find yourself holding the *Force of Nature* Extras for Writers.

I've discovered that many of my readers are also aspiring writers. If you fit that subset, you can find an article on writing, "Going Deep with Point of View," in that half of the book.

Even if you're not a writer, you might find this article interesting. I use examples from many of my books—including *Force of Nature*. You'll find some additional excerpts in there, along with a commentary-like deconstruction of my use of point of view.

Writers who read or readers who write or readers who just read—I enjoy meeting you all. I'll be touring throughout August and September, 2007, to promote *Force of Nature's* release. My East Coast route includes: Burlington, MA; Madison, CT; Concord, NH; Long Island, NY; Northern New Jersey; Wilmington, DE; Rehoboth Beach, DE; Dayton, OH; Cincinnati, OH; Lexington, KY; Atlanta, GA; and of course, Florida (Sarasota, Tampa, and Port Charlotte) where the book is set. You can find a complete schedule on my website appearances page at www.SuzanneBrockmann.com/appearances.htm

For those of you who live out of range of this year's tour route, you can still get a personalized, signed book via mail through my virtual signing. You can find details about that on my appearances page, too.

And please visit my Internet bulletin board at <http://members2.boardhost.com/brockmann/>. I'll be holding a live Deep Point of View Q&A session on my board on September 11, 2007, from noon to 4:00 P.M., eastern time. Feel free to drop in and ask questions, too. And if you've missed that date . . . I tend to schedule day-long general Q&A sessions on my board every three months or so. Again, watch my appearances page for details of my next "chat."

Okay, this letter is getting much too long. (See what I mean?)

Watch for *Force of Nature*, in stores August 14th! In the meantime, I hope you enjoy this collection of short stories.

Love,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Suzanne Brockman". The signature is fluid and elegant, with the first name "Suzanne" being larger and more prominent than the last name "Brockman".

Suzanne Brockman

When Frank Met Rosie

Previously published August 2006 at
www.SuzanneBrockmann.com

November 25, 1999
New Orleans, Louisiana

The music made him stop and turn around.

It was just a solo voice—a man singing the richest, bluesiest version of “Silent Night” that Frank O’Leary had ever heard. It drew him closer when he should have headed away from the French Quarter and back toward his hotel.

Where his damn fool of a half-brother was no doubt still holding court in the lobby bar. Lord Jesus save him from imbeciles. Of course, he himself could be included in that subset, considering he’d agreed to come to New Orleans for the holiday.

It was their mother who’d been the glue that kept them connected, Frank and Casey. Her constant smile and teasing words lightened the years of bad feelings between brothers who’d been born more than a decade apart. Now, though, they had less than nothing in common.

And yet Frank had come all the way from California on one of the busiest travel days of the year at Casey’s request.

Because he’d thought his mother would’ve wanted him to. Because she’d valued her precious family—her two such different sons—so highly.

Despite being just a few blocks down from the whore-house-on-heavy-stun dementia of past-midnight Bourbon Street, this narrow road was deserted. A right turn revealed a street just as empty of tourists, but it definitely brought him closer to that angelic voice.

Not like Frank was in any danger from the flesh and blood demons who crept out of the rotting woodwork of this city at night, no sir.

With his thrice-broken nose, his hair grown out from his usual no-frills tight and square cut, and his PT-hardened body, he knew he looked like the type most folks crossed the street to avoid.

He looked—as Casey had so often scornfully told him throughout his teenage years—as if he had barely

a dime in his jeans pocket. Like a drifter. Like lowlife loser scum. Like his father, who’d cleaned out their mother’s bank account when he’d left, back when Frank was nine and Casey was twenty.

The joke was that Casey had asked Frank to today’s Thanksgiving dinner to borrow money. He’d lost nearly everything in bad investments. And since he knew that Frank still had his share from the recent sale of their mother’s house . . .

And here he’d thought Casey’d wanted his company during this difficult holiday season, the first since their mother had passed.

Happy fucking Thanksgiving to you, too, *bro*.

Yeah, the real joke here was that Frank had left his real brothers behind in San Diego. His SEAL teammate Sam Starrett had hosted a dinner in the apartment he shared with Johnny Nilsson. He’d even roasted a turkey. Nils and the Card were in charge of the vegetables. Jenkins was in charge of dessert. Everyone else brought beer.

Instead of settling in for a day of food, friends, and football, Frank had shared a grim meal with Casey and his current wife (was Loreen number three or four?) up in their hotel suite. He’d escaped as quickly as possible after letting Casey know he’d already earmarked their mama’s money—all of it—for something special. A down-payment on a condo or maybe even a boat.

Still, it didn’t take Casey long to join him in the bar. Could Frank maybe co-sign a loan? Or let him borrow just a bit off that down-payment . . . ? *No, no, no, don’t answer right away, bro. Just think about it . . .*

Fifteen minutes of listening to his brother regaling the waitresses with tales of his own magnificence was all he could endure, and Frank escaped from the hotel bar as well.

But wandering Bourbon Street had been mildly amusing for only a very short time. Preservation Hall was already closed up tight and silent, and the bands playing in the various bars were entertaining only to inebriated ears. Watching grown men acting like frat boys drinking in the street and gazing with calf eyes at

the teenage whores was flatout creepy. And then there was that old woman—probably just an actress wrapped in rags and wearing stage-makeup warts—who'd first enticed Frank closer, offering to read his palm, and then, after only one brief look, had bluntly refused.

She'd shaken her head at him, backing away in alarm.

Which didn't mean a goddamn thing.

Like anyone with eyes in their head and a lick of sense couldn't tell from looking at him that he lived a dangerous life . . . ?

Frank glanced at his watch. If he knew Sam Starrett, the meal would have long since been replaced by a deck of cards and a pile of poker chips. There'd be plenty more beer, lots of laughter, and music on the boom box—although nothing that could compare to this solo voice—the owner of which still eluded him.

"Silent Night" segued into an "Ave Maria" as sung by an angel who'd done his share of hard time on this earth.

Frank rounded the corner, and there the street singer stood. He was a wiry black man in his late fifties, although, on second glance, he might've been younger. Hard living could've given him that antique veneer a decade or two early. He was standing in a store front, the windows creating a makeshift acoustical shell that amplified his magical, youthful voice.

Only a few people had gathered to listen to him sing. A group of older folks—three sets of couples—clearly tourists, laden with Mardi Gras beads, used their cameras to snap his picture. A bedraggled young woman stood slightly apart from them, in a sequin top and tight-fitting black pants, looking like sex for sale.

The singer's voice faltered, and Frank slowed his steps, shortening his stride as all eight of them turned almost at once to look at him. They shrank away as if they all were fortune-tellers and knew that an anvil was on the verge of falling on top of him, out of the clear blue sky.

Cloudy sky, actually. It was definitely going to rain again tonight.

And not all of them shrank from him. The girl—she didn't look more than seventeen—didn't seem too afraid. Probably because she hadn't yet met her

pimp's quota for the night, and saw him as a potential john.

She had to be relatively new to the city, new at her distasteful job. She was still pretty, with long, dark hair, and deep brown eyes. Her skin hadn't yet acquired that unmistakable gray pallor caused by substance abuse and nocturnal living. She gave her top a hike northward as she met his gaze and smiled a greeting.

The Red Hat Club and their spouses weren't quite as friendly. They quickly scurried off down the street.

"Sorry, man," Frank told the singer, taking out his wallet and extracting a twenty. "Didn't mean to chase 'em away."

He dropped the bill in the cardboard shoebox being used in lieu of a hat. The man clearly couldn't afford headwear, dressed as he was in Salvation Army cast-offs, T-shirt dirty and torn, feet shoved into sneakers with the toes cut off.

"S'okay," the singer said, still eyeing him warily. "They were twenty-five cent-ers. It's been that kind of night. Aside from your twenty, I ain't got mor'n a buck seventy-five."

Did he really think . . . ? "I ain't gon' rob you, man," Frank said slipping easily into the molasses thick accent of his childhood.

The singer nodded, but didn't seem convinced. "If you did, you wouldn't be the first. Like I said, it's been that kind of night."

"You take requests?" Frank asked.

"For twenty bucks?" The man's lips twisted in what might've passed for a smile. "Son, I'll perform unnatural acts."

Jesus, he wasn't kidding. "Amazing Grace," Frank said, "is what I'm hoping for."

The singer's eyes were dark with understanding as he looked up from his crouch beside his box. His hands were shaking as he slipped the twenty beneath the newspaper that lined the bottom of his container, and Frank knew the man wasn't going to spend that cash on either food or shelter, and wasn't that a crying shame?

"I guess we all need savin' at some point or 'nother," the singer said, straightening back up.

"Yes, sir," Frank agreed. Some more than most.

The man closed his eyes, took a deep breath and

started to sing.

It was strange hearing that rich voice coming out of that scrawny, dried up husk of a body. Clearly the Lord worked in mysterious ways.

Frank closed his eyes, too, letting the familiar words wash over him, the melody soaring and dipping, carrying out into the unnaturally warm Louisiana night.

He sensed more than heard the girl as she moved to stand beside him, and he mentally inventoried his valuables. Wallet was in his front jeans pocket. It wasn't getting picked without him noticing, that was for damn sure. He wore his dive watch on his left wrist. His hotel keycard was in his back pocket—easy to lose, but not a problem if it got taken. What was she gonna do? Go into the Sheraton and try every room on every floor, looking for the lock it opened? Security would escort her out the back door within thirty seconds.

She shifted slightly, and Frank caught a whiff of her perfume. She actually smelled nice—like vanilla. Mixed, of course, with whiskey. He opened his eyes and as he turned to look down at her—she was about an entire foot shorter than he was—she smiled again.

"He's incredible, huh?" she whispered.

Frank nodded. Up close, she was even prettier than he'd first thought, with clear, perfect skin and lively eyes in a heart-shaped face.

She opened her mouth to speak again, but he spoke first. "Ain't lookin' to get hoovered, Sugar, even by a mouth as pretty as yours. Don't waste your time on me."

She blinked at him, clearly confused. "I'm sorry, I didn't . . . You said, you're not looking to get . . . ?"

Ah, shit. Her accent and words were pure well-educated Northerner. Her voice wasn't that of a seventeen year old, either. She was closer to ten years older. And Frank could see now that her bedraggled state was merely from being caught in the rain that had poured down a few hours earlier, as if someone had pulled the plug in heaven.

"Sorry," he said quickly. "I thought . . . I was wrong."

Just his luck, she wasn't drunk enough to let it slide. He could see her replaying the words he'd said, trying to figure out the ones she'd missed—

or misunderstood.

"Hoovered," she said with a laugh, comprehension dawning. "As in . . . Right. Okay." She quickly turned back to stare, as if fascinated, at the singer, color tingeing her cheeks. "I'm feeling pretty friendly tonight, but not *that* friendly. Wow."

Shit, now *he* was blushing, too. Great. "Sorry," he said again.

She turned to look at him again. "You really thought I was...?" Amazingly, she wasn't offended, just curious. Interested even.

Frank tried to explain. "Most women . . . out alone, this time of night . . ." He shrugged.

She nodded, accepting the misunderstanding as an honest mistake. And if he weren't mistaken, she was more than a little thrilled to have been taken for a prostitute. Go figure.

They stood there then, just listening to the music, to the timeless words. *I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see . . .*

Silence settled around them as the last notes of the song faded away. The singer didn't open his eyes, he just launched into a bluesy rendition of an old torch song. "Crazy" . . . Another of Frank's mother's favorites.

The girl—woman—standing next to Frank cleared her throat. "See, I lost my jacket," she told him, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "I was with a group of friends and . . . It's gone. I don't know where I left it. I went back for it, but . . ." She shrugged, an action which did some amazing things to the plunging neckline of that barely there top.

"They let you come out here, all alone?" Frank had to ask, working to keep his gaze on her pretty face. What kind of foolish friends did she have?

"Of course not. But we only went a block when Betsy felt sick, so Jenn flagged down a cab. She told the driver to take me to the bar and then right back to our hotel, and the first part of that plan worked. But when I came out, the cab was gone," she reported. "It was a toss-up between staying there and trying to flag another while getting hit on by bozos, or walking back. I opted for walking. I attached myself to that group. They were from Ohio."

"You just let them leave," he pointed out, and it was weird as hell, because as he held her gaze, something shifted in his chest, something massive

that hadn't moved in years.

"You know, I definitely look less like a, you know, hooker—with my jacket on," she told him.

"I *am* sorry," he said again, "that I said what I said . . ."

"You reminded me of my best friend's cousin," she said. "Billy. When you walked up, for a second I thought you were him. Which didn't make sense, but . . . He was Marine Recon. What are you? Navy, right?"

How the hell did she know? None of his tattoos showed.

She pointed to his dive watch. "I used to work for a catalogue company, and we sold much cheaper versions. Lots of knock-off K-bar knives, too. And chain mail. You ever need chain mail, I can hook you up with a supplier."

Frank laughed at that. "Thanks." Chain mail. "I probably won't . . ." He shook his head.

"You never know," she said, a sparkle in her eyes. Sparkle and spark.

"I pretty much do." He smiled back. And had to ask. "So, you and, uh, Billy, um . . . ?"

"A thing of the past," she informed him. "And yes, it was tragic. He broke my heart—he went and married someone else. Of course, I was twelve, so within a week I'd moved on to Chandler from *Friends*."

Frank laughed. "Ah."

"How long have you been out of the service?" the woman asked, but didn't wait for him to answer. She somehow managed to read his eyes or maybe his mind. "You're not out—you're still in."

Frank nodded. "You really should've stayed with that group from Ohio."

"And missed the chance to be mistaken for a lady of the evening?"

"What if I was dangerous?" he asked, and there it was again. That spark of heat between them.

"Why *Amazing Grace*?" she countered.

Frank just looked at her, using silence to let her know that he wasn't going to let her change the subject. Damn, but she was pretty, with those dark brown eyes that shone with intelligence, even though she'd clearly had too much to drink.

But she met his gaze steadily, refusing to be intimidated, just letting the singer's beautiful voice wash over them. *Crazy for crying and crazy for trying* . . .

Finally, he spoke. "Got a thing for livin' dangerously?" he drawled, purposely leaning heavily on his accent. But even though her cheeks again flushed, this time she didn't look away.

"Actually, no," she admitted. "I've always been careful. Sometimes too careful, I think."

Frank had always scoffed at the idea of love at first sight. How stupid was that? Giving your heart based only on the way a woman looked, without getting to know her . . . ? But as he held this girl's gaze, he felt that same seismic shift in his chest that he'd felt before. "No such thing as too careful."

"Yeah," she said, dead serious. "There is. If I'd left with the Ohio squad, I would've regretted it. Badly. Maybe I'm crazy, but when I saw you . . ." Her voice trailed off, and she finally looked away. Laughed. "I am crazy. I must be. I just . . . I didn't want to regret not meeting you. Your turn to embarrass yourself. Why '*Amazing Grace*'?"

"My mother passed last spring." The words left his mouth as if on their own volition. What the hell . . . ? There were members of his SEAL team whom he hadn't yet told of her death, and here he was, telling this stranger.

A stranger who'd just looked him in the eye and admitted that she was willing to risk her own personal safety just to meet him.

Like he was something special, like she'd seen his aura or some kind of halo hanging over his head.

Right.

My mother passed last spring really wasn't a complete answer to *Why "Amazing Grace?"* but somehow she understood. Completely.

"Oh, wow," she said, her eyes sympathetic. "Happy Thanksgiving, huh? It must've been such a hard day for you."

Frank felt himself nod. Whatever it was that had shifted in his chest had moved to his throat. He tried to swallow it back down, but it was lodged there.

She put her hand on his arm, her fingers cool and soft against his skin. "I'm so sorry."

She meant it. Frank didn't know what to say.

Across the street, the singer finished his song. He started packing up his box. "Sorry, folks. Gotta run. Shelter starts filling this time of night, weather like this. If I wait too long, I won't get a bed."

Frank hadn't noticed until now, but it had started, again, to rain. It was coming down faster now. Harder.

The singer clutched his box to his chest. "Rosie, can I walk you to your hotel?" he asked.

Rosie. She only briefly glanced away from Frank as she answered the man. "No thanks, Odell. I'm okay."

The singer—Odell—still didn't trust Frank, eyeing him, edging closer, as if he could do some serious damage to the SEAL, who had way more than a hundred pounds on him. "You sure?"

"Thank you, but yes." Rosie was sure.

And as the skies opened up, Odell was gone.

Rosie looked up into the deluge and just laughed. She must've been even more drunk than Frank had thought, so he grabbed her by the hand and pulled her, and together they ran for shelter.

It was pointless—they were already soaked—running wouldn't keep them from getting any more wet. Still, the sound of her laughter made him smile, and—go figure—he was laughing, too, when she finally pulled him into a narrow doorway.

She was breathless and soaked. Her face wasn't all that was glistening wet, but her smile was so damn infectious as they stood there, squeezed together in a space where he'd have barely fit on his own. She was warm and soft against him, the neckline of that clingy top truly amazing from his vantage point.

"This seems like a good time for introductions," she told him. "I'm Rosie Marchado. I'm from Hartford. In Connecticut."

"Frank O'Leary," he said. He couldn't look down into her face without getting an eyeful of her sonnet-worthy cleavage. Sweet Jesus, he loved full-figured women.

"Do you want to . . ." she started, then stopped. She made an embarrassed face. "God, I've never done this before. You're going to think that I'm . . ." She took a deep breath, which completely renewed his faith in a higher power. "I really never, ever do this, but do you want to . . ."

She didn't hesitate for more than a second or two, but that was all the time Frank needed to fill in the blank.

Have sex, right here in this shadowy doorway. He would kiss her, his hands sweeping her skirt up, her

leg wrapping around him as they strained to get closer, even closer. . . .

She was going to ask him for it, and he was going to have to turn her down because she was drunk, except, damn, he couldn't think of anything or anyone he'd rather do.

But then she finished her question with, "Maybe go get some coffee? With me?"

At first her words just didn't make sense.

She wanted hot, steaming . . .

Coffee.

She was looking up at him, her lower lip caught between her perfect teeth. She was feeling trepidation both at the fact that she'd been so bold as to suggest to a near stranger that they go get coffee, and because she thought he might actually say no.

Frank started to laugh. "I know a place we can go." He took her by the hand, and once again pulled her out with him, into the rain.

* * * *

They talked. All night.

And by the time Frank walked Rosie back to her hotel in the French Quarter, he knew that even though she'd given him her phone number—in Hartford Freakin' Connecticut—he wasn't going to call her.

He liked her too damn much.

She'd told him about her fiancé. Ex-fiancé. The sumbitch had dumped her two months before their wedding because—the asshole had claimed—their lives together would be too boring.

Boring? In what dimension? She was funny and sweet and smart and—God *damn!*—sexy as all get out. The entire time they sat there, sipping their coffee and talking themselves hoarse, he couldn't stop thinking about how perfect and soft her lips would feel if he kissed her.

But when he'd told her—just a little—about being a SEAL, about being stationed in San Diego, about going TDY in places where American service persons weren't exactly welcome, Frank knew that even though she claimed to be looking for excitement, hooking up with a man like him, who risked his life as a matter of course, would be too

much for her.

Oh, she didn't say it in so many words. And, in fact, it was just after that that she'd given him her business card with her personal phone number in curvy handwriting on the back.

But Hartford to San Diego . . . ? The sheer distance alone howled of unpreventable disaster.

And now here they were, with dawn lighting the sky behind them. Standing just outside the ornate gilded doors of her hotel.

"So," Rosie said.

Yeah. So. Her flight home wasn't until that evening. She didn't *have* to run upstairs to pack. Not right away.

But she was tired. He might've been used to going without sleep for long periods of time, but she was unable to hide her obvious fatigue.

Still, she didn't move any closer to that fancy door.

She was looking, too, as if she wanted something more from him than a handshake and a "Nice to meet you."

But no way was he kissing her. No way was he stepping hip deep into *that* temptation. Except, damn, he wanted to, and he knew she knew because he could not, for the life of him, stop staring at her mouth.

"Do you want," she started, and he knew she wasn't going to invite him to her room—she had roommates. That just wasn't going to happen. Not tonight.

Not ever.

"I better go." He cut her off, unwilling or maybe just plain unable to turn down whatever she was about to offer.

But she spoke over him. "To meet for a late lunch?"

"I can't," he said. It wasn't a lie. "My flight's at oh-eight-thirty."

"Oh," she said. "Wow. You better . . ."

"Go," he agreed, yet still stood there, like a fool. Wishing for things he couldn't have. Knowing that he had to turn and walk away. He had to go back to the Sheraton and pack—and toss her business card into the trash can under the bathroom counter.

"I know you aren't going to call me," she said softly. "It's okay. Don't feel bad. I know that . . . Well, maybe in another lifetime, you know? I just . . . I loved last night. I loved meeting you."

She touched him then, only briefly, her fingers cool against his face, and then she was gone, the gilded door shutting silently behind her.

It was for the best. It was definitely for the best. Those words drummed through Frank's head as he passed the park where artists and vendors, palm readers and bead sellers had been set up, even after dark, even in the rain. It was empty now, littered with trash from the hardcore partying of the previous night.

It was for the best. For the best.

Motherfucking fool, motherfucking fool. . . .

Frank violently kicked garbage—plastic beer cups—out of his way. One wasn't quite empty and it flew through the air, nearly hitting a woman who still sat by the park's wall, raincoat up and over her head.

Her wooden sign was still out: *Palms read, five dollars. Blind Maggie Sees the Truth* was lettered in smaller print beneath the picture of a hand. She started awake—she'd been asleep sitting there—and even though she wore dark glasses, she turned and looked directly at Frank.

"You don't have much time," she said, her voice raspy either from age or from sleeping in the rain, but probably from sleeping on the street in the rain at her advanced age.

"Not interested, ma'am." Frank slowed down, but only to press his spare change and a few loose dollar bills into her hand.

But she caught his wrist, running gnarled fingers across his palm. "She loves you."

For an old woman, she had a grip of steel. Frank could have pulled free, but not without knocking her out of her seat and dragging her down the street.

"You just met," the old woman—Blind Maggie, presumably—insisted. "Her eyes . . . She has such beautiful eyes."

As did nearly all the women on the planet. Frank was not impressed.

"She sees you," Maggie intoned. "She loves you already—and you would walk away from such a gift?"

It was foolish. He was a fool. He should have thanked her for her advice. She would have let him go if he'd told her he believed her, and that he was going to get her five dollar payment out from his wallet. The dead last thing he should have done was argue.

"She deserves better," Frank said.

And just like that, the old woman kicked him—ow, Jesus! Right on the shin.

"Fool!" she used the same word he'd been using to chastise himself. "What's better than loving and being loved?"

She'd let him go in the course of delivering a kick with that much force, and he backed away.

For a blind woman—right—she tracked his movement with unerring accuracy as he turned and saw—thank you Lord—the Sheraton sign. His hotel wasn't close, but it wasn't that far either.

"You'll break her heart!" Maggie shouted at him. "You're going to break her heart!"

Frank turned the corner, but she kept on shouting.

"You love her, too, and you didn't even kiss her goodbye!"

And he stopped. Just like that. *Fool*. He was *such* a fool. Love her, too? He didn't know. Was that what this was, this tight feeling in his chest, this odd grief at the idea of not seeing Rosie again, Rosie whom he barely even knew. Except . . .

He knew her.

They'd talked for hours, as if they'd been friends for years. He'd told her secrets, things he'd never told anyone else. She'd made him laugh, made him dream of a life he'd never dared dream of before as he'd lost himself in her beautiful dark brown eyes.

And just like that, Frank started running.

Not toward the Sheraton. Away from it.

Toward Rosie's hotel.

He was out of breath and sweating when he pushed his way into the lobby, and the clerk at the front desk looked up in alarm.

"House phone?" Frank panted, and the man pointed to a telephone farther down the counter.

Frank picked it up and dialed zero. "Connect me to Rosie Machado's room," he said when the operator picked up.

There was a pause. "I'm sorry, sir—" Words he didn't want to hear—"we have no guests named Machado."

Perfect. She was staying with friends and had obviously registered under one of their names.

As Frank hung up, he saw in the mirror that two of the bellhops—big, burly fellows—had come to surround him. Shit. Now he wouldn't even be able

to sit in the lobby, hoping that she'd come downstairs early, in the few minutes he had left before he had to catch his own flight out.

"I'm not here to make trouble, boys," Frank told them, turning around nice and slow, keeping his hands up and in sight.

But the bigger bellhop was smiling. "Chief O'Leary?" he asked.

Frank blinked. What the . . . ?

"I served twelve years in the regular Navy," the man said. He was more overweight than muscular, Frank saw now. "I always admired you SEALs." He cleared his throat, holding out an envelope. "Miss Rosie asked me to give this to you. She said you'd be coming by."

Frank took it. Opened it.

Rosie had written him a note in her neat, clear hand. "Suite 312," was all it said. Short and sweet and all he needed to know.

He ran for the elevator, pushed the button. It took too damn long, so he searched for and found the sign for the stairs. He took them up, three at a time.

And there it was. Suite 312. He knocked, knowing that he was probably going to wake up her friends, but he didn't give a good goddamn. He knocked again, even louder, and the door opened.

Rosie stood there, and for several seconds, neither of them moved. And then they both did, both at once, and she was in his arms and Jesus Lord save him, he was finally kissing her.

She was sweetness and fire, kissing him back so fiercely, that his heart damn near exploded in his chest. When he finally pulled away, breathless and dizzy, she was laughing and maybe even crying a little, too.

"I've never done anything even remotely like this before." Rosie told him. "I just . . . I don't do this."

Frank didn't either. Never before this. And probably, in all honesty, never again. "I have to go," he told her. Words she'd hear from him again and again, unless she came to her senses in the next few hours, days, weeks, *months*. It was quite probably going to be *months* before he could arrange a trip to Hartford to see her again. And it would take him far longer, unless he broke into that savings account where he'd stashed his inheritance from his

mother—all nine thousand dollars of it.

Still, he kissed Rosie again, longer, slower, deeper this time, loving the way she melted into his arms.

“My e-mail address is on my business card,” she whispered. “Write me, okay?”

“This is crazy,” he said, touching the softness of her cheek, trying to memorize her face, her eyes.

She laughed up at him. “Good-crazy,” she told him. “*Really* good-crazy.”

He kissed her again, both cursing and grateful for her roommates. If they’d been in her hotel room instead of out here in the hall, their clothes would already be off. And if there was one thing he was certain of, it was that she deserved better than a five-minute fuck, culminating with him running out the door to hail a cab, hauling up the zipper on his fly, shoes in his hands.

But Lord help him, because what he wanted and what he *wanted* were not the same thing.

And she was thinking along the same lines. “Do you want . . . ?”

He waited, sure this time that she was not going to offer him coffee.

“I could . . .” She cleared her throat. “Come with you to your, um, hotel and . . . help you pack your suitcase?”

She actually blushed because they both knew damn well that neither of them would pack any kind of suitcase if they went back to his room. Not that he even had a suitcase. He always traveled with his seabag, a duffel that he could just throw everything into—clean clothes and dirty laundry mixed together, because who the hell cared?

But the thing in his chest was swelling even larger. It was way past his throat now. It pushed on the backs of his eyes, making him feel as if—Sweet Jesus—as if he might actually start bawling like a baby. Because what she was telling him was . . .

“You’re that sure about me?” he asked, his voice coming out no louder than a whisper.

She nodded. She was.

“Let me grab my sneakers,” she told him now, disappearing to do just that.

Sneakers. With sneakers on her feet, they’d both be able to run much farther and faster. They could get to the Sheraton in enough time to spend *ten* minutes . . .

“We should wait,” Frank heard himself saying. “I want to wait.”

She was back in a sneaker-clad flash, looking at him as if he were from Mars, so he tried to explain.

“I want to do this right,” he told her. “How about we meet for Christmas? Right back here, in New Orleans.” He could take her to dinner someplace elegant and romantic. Someplace with dancing and champagne. And only then would they go back to the hotel, where they’d make love—slowly, tenderly—all night long.

“I’d love to meet you for Christmas,” she told him. “And you’re right. We *should* wait.”

And there they stood, staring at each other.

Rosie held out her hand.

Frank took it.

And together, Rosie’s laughter wrapping around them both, they ran for the stairs.

* * * *

“I spent the day in Idaho, so if I burst into tears, well, now you know why.” —Jules Cassidy to hotel clerk in *Hot Target*

Thoughts on When Frank Met Rosie

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www.SuzanneBrockmann.com

It was originally my intention to write only light-hearted stories using popular characters in the Troubleshooters series—and in “When Frank Met Rosie,” I did neither. I mean, Frank O’Leary . . . ? Not exactly winning popularity contests among readers, probably because the man is dead, killed in a terrorist attack in a hotel lobby in *Over the Edge*. That’s the book, remember, where SEAL Team Sixteen goes to dangerous Kazbekistan to participate in the take-down of a commercial airliner that has been hijacked by terrorists.

At the time I was writing OTE, I purposely chose to kill off Frank for a number of reasons—the first being that someone needed to die. I wanted to make sure that my readers understood how dangerous K-stan was. It’s a fact that SEALs put their lives on the line all the time, as do all of our servicemen and women. And it’s also a fact that people die serving our country. This was the third book in the series. It was, I felt, time for casualties.

Okay, so I could’ve killed off anyone—it didn’t *have* to be Frank. But it *did* have to be one of SEAL Team Sixteen’s snipers. See, I wanted a reason for FBI agent Alyssa Locke (and former Navy sharpshooter extraordinaire) to actively take part in the take-down of the hijacked plane. As a point-of-view character, I wanted Alyssa to move from her role as observer to that of shooter.

Now, instead of killing Frank, I could’ve killed Duke Jefferson, who was also a sniper. But I’d only just introduced the Duke in *Over the Edge*. Killing a brand-new character wouldn’t have had the same impact on readers as killing an established one. And thus, I found myself eying Frank O’Leary.

Frank was the perfect character to kill. (Remember, I made this choice long before I wrote the short story you just read!) I’d used his name in a number of books, but I hadn’t spent much time and page space letting readers truly know who he was. I’d revealed that he was a sniper, and he was laconic, and very little else. Killing Frank wouldn’t have been

as devastating to readers as killing off a more established character such as WildCard Karmody would have been. And yet, killing Frank was guaranteed to be way more powerful than killing off a stranger such as the Duke.

So Frank got his pink slip. So to speak.

So there it was. Years later. And I’m wandering around my office, aware that I’d promised readers that my website countdown to *Into the Storm*, where this story first appeared, would include a collection of short stories featuring Troubleshooter series characters, knowing that sooner or later I’d have to get my butt into the chair in front of my computer and get writing.

But Frank O’Leary wouldn’t stop haunting me.

I couldn’t *not* write his story. The man just would *not* leave me alone.

It’s going to sound for a second as if I’m completely changing the subject, but I’m not. See, a few years ago, my editor went to France on vacation and visited the site of the most famous D-Day ever—the WWII Allied invasion of the beach at Normandy. She brought photos back with her, and I was struck by the rows and rows and rows of crosses and Stars of David that marked the graves of the American servicemen who fell in that deadly battle. They stretch out, in a field there in France, as far as the eye can see.

Each one of those markers is a life lost. Each one of those markers signifies a family and friends who mourned the loss of a loved one—a son, a brother, a buddy, a husband—forever gone. It was hard for me not to well up with tears as I looked at those photographs. It’s been over sixty years since those courageous men died, but I am still grateful and awed and devastated by their sacrifice.

Body counts are part of war. But numbers are cold and hard to comprehend. What does it mean, 3,384? Or how about 53,714—the number of Americans killed during the Normandy invasion?

53,714 Americans who never came home. 53,714 lives that did not continue.

53,714 Rosies.

Frankly, I don’t know what makes me more sad—

thinking that each and every one of the brave men and woman who have died serving this country had their own Rosie, who grieves for them, or thinking that they hadn't lived long enough to find their Rosie yet.

So I sat down and wrote *When Frank Met Rosie* because, since we went into Iraq, there have been 3,384 Franks and Rosies. (And I'm updating this in May. That number surely has grown by the time you read these words.) 3,384 should not just be a number that makes us shake our head in remorse as we go about our daily lives. Those 3,384 are people who loved and were loved. They are—each and every one of them—stories cut tragically short.

Frank really wanted me to write his story—the good part. The part that happened *before* he lay dying in helo pilot Teri Howe's arms on that hotel lobby floor. Before he knew that that fortune-teller was right—that he *was* going to break Rosie's heart.

The most important part of Frank's story was that he didn't wait.

He ran—at full speed—into a relationship with a terrific woman who saw him clearly and loved him for who he was. Thank goodness for that because—even though he didn't know it, the blind palm reader hit the nail on the head—he was almost out of time.

Life is way too short, and Frank and Rosie embraced it—and each other—completely.

Since I've written his story, Frank O'Leary doesn't haunt me as much anymore. Oh, he'll pop in from time to time—he wants me to write a major lottery win for Rosie. And he's starting to nudge me to introduce her as a character in the main series of books. He's getting tired of her being so lonely.

He also hopes that you enjoyed reading about the start of the very best part of his too short life.

"So let's get personal now, Alyssa, my pumpkin. You and Sammy drove to Gainesville and stayed *where* last night? You know I love Roger like a brother, but . . . are you out of your fucking mind?"
—Jules Cassidy to Alyssa Locke in *Gone Too Far*

"You may not think of me as a friend, but I think of you as one. You've always treated me with kindness and respect so I'm going to return the favor, whether you like it or not. I'm not going to pretend to know what you must be feeling right now, but Gina was my friend, too, and I *do* know how badly I'm hurting. So go ahead, sweetie. Have at me. Be as rude to me as you need to be. Or you don't even have to talk to me—I won't take it personally. I'll just sit next to you on the flight. I'll handle all the arrangements. I'll take care of the details about where we need to go and what we need to do, so you won't have to. And whether you like it or not, I'm going with you to that morgue. Because no one should ever have to do something like that alone, especially when a friend who loves them is standing by."
—Jules Cassidy to Max Bhagat after receiving news that Gina is dead in *Breaking Point*

"I'm not going to sell myself short again. Not even for great sex. Well, okay, maybe for great sex, but not for great sex with you."—Jules Cassidy to Robin Chadwick in *Hot Target*

Meet Ric Alvarado

Ric Alvarado, the hero of *Force of Nature*, appeared briefly in the fifth book in the Troubleshooters series, *Gone Too Far*. He was the Sarasota police detective who came to Gina's motel room after it had been broken into and her prescription medication and her underwear were stolen.

Here's an excerpt from *Gone Too Far*, when Gina runs into Ric again as she's filling in as a drummer in a local jazz club . . .

* * * *

"Hey. How're you doing? Gina, right?"

She found herself staring up at Detective Soul Patch.

He was holding a beer in his left hand and he held out his right for her to shake. "Ric Alvarado."

"Ric. Right."

"I didn't know you were a musician."

Yeah, sure. As if Max hadn't sent him over here. All of her hopes crashed and burned. He was never going to give in. If he'd gone so far as actually to send over a replacement . . . A real replacement this time—not just Jules Cassidy.

"You okay?" Ric asked.

Gina forced a smile. "Yeah, it's just a little too crowded in here. I get claustrophobic sometimes."

"I know what you mean. Hey, so far no luck in my search for your underwear," he said, and then laughed and rolled his eyes. It was too dark in there to tell for sure, but it was possible he blushed. "Oh, man, I'm such an asshole. I can't believe I actually said that." He looked around the room. "It is crowded tonight. Wow. Hot, too." Another eye roll. "Look, can I buy you a drink? Something frozen, maybe?"

"Actually, because I'm in the band, I drink for free."

"Oh. Well, that's . . . sweet."

"Yeah," she said. "I guess."

Sweet. Her last college boyfriend, Trent Engelman, used to call everything *sweet*.

Ric Alvarado himself was pretty damn sweet—at least as far as replacements for Max went. Dark hair, heavily-lidded brown eyes, killer cheekbones, broad shoulders, trim waist. Younger than Max, but older than Gina. She bet that he was a good

dancer, too.

"Well." Ric looked embarrassed, as if he were about to back away, as if she'd given him a brush-off instead of an honest response about that drink. So she grabbed him by the shirt and pulled him closer to the bar.

"Hey, Jenn," she called to the bartender. "This is Ric. He's going to make sure my wine glass is never empty during the next set, okay?"

Jenn pushed a refill in Gina's direction.

"I think we can take that as an affirmative," Gina said to Ric, whose embarrassment had turned to nearly palpable hope. Oh, come on. Didn't Max mention she was a sure thing? She made herself smile back at him as she took a healthy sip of her wine. "You don't mind being my slave tonight, do you, Ric?"

Someone bumped into her, and she had to hold her glass out to keep it from spilling. Ric steadied her with a hand at her waist. A hand he didn't bother taking away again. "Absolutely not," he said.

"So tell me," Gina said, determined to play this through. If this was really what Max wanted . . . "How far are you willing to go in your search for my underwear?"

"What's that earthy expression you always use? Oh, yeah, *Fuck You*. Fuck you, Sam. You dumped her and married someone else. Remember? Does that ring any bells for you?"—Jules Cassidy to Sam Starrett in *Into the Night*

When Jenk, Izzy, Gillman, and Lopez Met Tony Vlachik

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"Weirdest lesbian encounter ever," Izzy said as he dealt the cards around the desk that he'd helped Mark Jenkins move into the middle of the shabby motel room. "This girl comes up to me. I'm in a bar in Boulder, Colorado, and she is unbelievably beautiful. I'm talking a fifty on a scale of one to ten. Seriously Victoria's Secret gorgeous. Long dark hair, a face like Natalie Portman, a body like a porn star."

Gillman rolled his eyes. "You are so full of shit."

They'd been garrisoned in some low-rent places before, but this one, remote and located in a town that shut down and went to bed at 2030 every night, was about as nasty as Jenk had ever seen.

It did, however, include the essentials: a bathroom, a shower, beds to sleep in, an air conditioner that wheezed and chugged as it cooled down the room, a deck of cards, and a mini-fridge filled with beer.

So okay, the cards were Jenk's and the mini-fridge was Gillman's—one of those insulated coolers you could carry in your truck and plug in when you reached your destination.

Izzy turned to Jenk, injury in his voice and on his face. "You didn't hear me strapping on the bullshit meter when Fishboy here was telling his lesbian supermodels-in-the-airport story, did you?"

Jenk had just been dealt three aces—his best hand all night. There was actually a chance he'd win back the money he'd lost over the past few hours. "Let's just play cards."

Now Izzy's disgusted exhale was for Jenk.

Jay Lopez, as usual, tried to restore harmony. "So she's beautiful and she comes up to you, and says . . . ?"

"I need a huge favor. And I'm thinking, like, Well, it's your lucky night, because I've got a huge favor," Izzy told them. "Only I managed to not say that. Probably because she was stupifyingly beautiful. I think what I ended up saying was *Durh* . . . ? And I probably enhanced it with a little drool, you know, on my chin."

Izzy took two cards from Lopez, dealing him two new ones. Danny Gillman took only one—which meant he either had a great hand or he was bluffing. Jenk stared at him, willing him to do it. Scratch his chin with the back of his hand. Gillman did it every time he bluffed—it was the most obvious tell in the history of mankind.

But Gillman didn't move. Because at the start of the game, Izzy Zanella had let it slip that Gillman *had* a tell. In true Izzy fashion, he'd refused to tell Gillman what that tell was. And no one else was going to let on that they knew, so Gillman had sat, nearly stone still for the entire game.

Except when Izzy pissed him off. Or when he tried to piss off Izzy in return.

Of course, for the first time in all their years of poker playing, Gillman was winning. Big.

"I'm doomed." Tony Vlachik, aka Chickie, aka the New Guy, didn't have a tell. He simply announced whenever his hand sucked. This was his first time playing poker with them, and he'd good-naturedly put up with all of their crap. He had a Pepsi in front of him because they wouldn't let him have a beer, insisting he was too young.

"Maybe next year, when you turn thirteen," Izzy had told him.

Now Chick took another slug of his soda and traded the limit—three cards.

"She goes, *I told my brother you were my boyfriend. Will you help me fool him into thinking we've been together for a while?*" Izzy scooped up Jenk's two discards and gave him two replacements.

A four and a seven, both hearts. Crap. Jenk kept his face carefully blank as Izzy traded three of his own cards for three new ones. "And that, boys and girls, was when she kissed me."

"Yeah, right," Gillman scoffed.

"She *did*," Izzy countered. "Chickie was there. Tell 'em, Chick."

Tony looked up from frowning at his no-doubt unbelievably crappy hand. "She definitely kissed him," he verified. "For close to three minutes, without coming up for air."

"And when she finally does surface," Izzy said, "she goes, *Do you have a car, because I really need a ride*. So I tell her, yeah, I got a truck, is that okay? And she's like, *You really don't mind?* And something's up—I mean, besides the obvious—because she's got tears in her eyes and she's kind of shaking, and that was when I knew. I mean, I'm a good kisser, but . . . So we go out to my truck, and she tells me she's gay, that her parents sent her to this rehab-like place to make her straight, and she had to pretend she was 'cured' in order to get out. The brother follows her around, making it impossible for her to see her girlfriend, who, by the way, is also gorgeous. Long story short, I drove them both to Vegas. I get e-mail from them every now and then. But Maddy, she's the one with the brother, right before she gets out of the car in Nevada, she goes, *I'm definitely gay. Because if kissing you didn't turn me straight, nothing will.*"

"Really," Gilligan said, clearly not believing him. "If I e-mailed her and asked, she'd tell me that wasn't just something you made up?"

Chick raised the bet ten dollars. Was he really going to attempt to bluff after looking at his hand as if it was something he found at the bottom of a year-old dirty laundry pile?

"Why would I make that up?" Izzy asked as Lopez folded. "Now if I told you that with Maddy and Peg, I'd had the best three way I've had in years . . ."

"Yeah, like you've had a lot of three ways," Gilligan scoffed, raising the bid even higher. He didn't look at any of them, definitely afraid his tell was something they'd see in his eyes. He looked at the pile of cash in front of him, or his cards. Nowhere else.

"What, you haven't?" Izzy countered.

"We're not talking about me, asshole."

The not-looking-at-anyone thing was pretty much a tell in and of itself. If Gillman had a great hand, why would he be worried about giving that away? Unless he was bluffing about bluffing, so that Jenk would see his raise and . . .

"You haven't." Izzy just did not know when to let a subject drop. Gilligan was going to knock the table over, and they'd have to start the hand again. Of course, maybe that would be a good thing.

"Just shut up."

"You know, it's okay that you haven't—"

Jenk cut in. "I have," he said. "And it was kind of weird. The other guy had a really hairy back." Yeah, he'd caught their attention. Even Lopez was staring at him. "I'm kidding," he told them.

"You scared me for a second there, M." Izzy tossed his cards down. "I'm out. Too rich for my blood," he told Gillman, adding, "Even though it's obvious as shit that you're bluffing."

Gillman refused to take that particular bait, keeping his eyes solidly on his cards.

It was down to Jenk and Chickie, and it was Jenk's turn to play. See Gillman's bid, *raise* Gillman's bid, or fold . . .

Chick's phone rang. "Shit, sorry, I gotta take this," he announced, standing up and going out onto the motel driveway, which was fine with Jenk. It gave him a little extra stall time to try to psych Gillman out.

Jenk leaned back in his chair. With enough time and a little effort—keep talking on the phone, Vlachic—maybe he could get Gillman to forget about the poker game. "My weirdest lesbian encounter was when I spent Christmas with three drag queens."

Gillman looked up at that. Eye contact. He immediately looked back down, but it was definitely a start. "Drag queens can't be lesbians. Drag queens are guys."

"But they refer to each other as *she*," Jenk pointed out. "And if they're into each other . . ."

"Whoa, good point," Izzy said. "So it's a lesbian-ish thing on the surface, except they're really chicks with dicks. As opposed to guys with a surprise."

"Guys with a . . ." Now Gillman made eye contact with Izzy. He had to in order to give him a properly disdainful WTF look.

"A female cross-dresser," Jenk explained.

"There's no such thing," Gillman said. He actually put down his cards. "I mean, yeah, maybe back in the nineteenth century, when women had to wear hoop skirts, but nowadays women wear pants all the time."

"There's pants," Lopez said, "and there's *pants*." Gillman wasn't convinced. "But—"

Izzy cut him off. "They exist, Wendy. Take my word for it."

"Wendy?" Now Lopez was confused.

"I think it's a Peter Pan reference," Jenk told him.

Gillman was easily outraged, especially by statements made by Zanella. It was interesting, this intense rivalry or personality clash or whatever it was between the two men. Jenk had been out in the real world with both of them, and they worked together in perfect harmony, no hint of any animosity, cogs in a well-oiled machine. But during R&R . . . Look out.

"Now you're saying *Wendy* was a cross-dresser?" Gillman challenged Izzy.

Iz laughed his frustration and disbelief. "I'm saying you're a fucking idiot, and that yes, there are female cross-dressers here where I live, outside of Never-never-land."

"What, do you know this because you're one of them?" Gillman asked, and Jenk cringed because Izzy unfolded, rising to his feet.

But he just stood there, all six plus feet of him, towering over the table. "Yeah, Dan," he deadpanned. "I'm a woman. And this girl needs to whiz, wicked bad." He disappeared into the bathroom.

Jenk exchanged a look with Lopez. *Well, that happened*. Or, more accurately, *didn't* happen. He raised his voice slightly so that Izzy could hear him through the bathroom door. "You know, my three drag queens were at least as tall as you."

Gillman, the fucking idiot indeed, actually looked disappointed that the conversation, so to speak, hadn't been taken outside. He also looked as if he'd completely forgotten about their card game. That was good, and Jenk wanted to continue keeping him distracted. "So I was around eleven years old, it was Christmas Eve. New York was getting hit with the worst snowstorm in something like a hundred years. It was really coming down—like somebody-better-go-find-Rudolph bad. And my dad, as usual, had waited until the last minute to get a gift for my mother—that was his MO. He swore to me, every year, that she would like her present better if he could find it on sale. I was pretty sure she would like it better if it didn't *suck* because he'd gotten it five minutes before the stores closed on Christmas Eve,

but he was convinced he was right."

Across the table, Gillman was engaged. "My dad used to do that, too. Mom had this scary *I can't believe you spent our money on this piece of shit* smile that she gave him almost every Christmas morning."

"So it's four in the afternoon on Christmas Eve," Jenk continued, "and there's already a foot of snow, and my dad and I are in the Honda—Mom's always been into high gas mileage vehicles, so no SUV for us. We're spinning in circles down Route 35, which is okay, because no one else is crazy enough to be out on the road. We finally reach the Jefferson Valley Mall, and to my dad's complete horror, it's dark. The whole mall closed early. On Christmas Eve. So we head into Yorktown Heights, but the only store open is this convenience store, over by the motel. But Dad's desperate, so in we go. And let me tell you, the gift selection was grim. On top of that, the clerk says, *Computers are down, no credit card sales*. But my dad has cash, and he's trying to choose between these tacky votive candles, a Yankees mouse pad, and this disposable toilet bowl brush, and I know he's in serious trouble. I mean, I'm only eleven, but even back then I understand that you don't buy your wife a disposable toilet brush for Christmas. Unless you don't want to get any until Memorial Day."

"Unless, she's got, like, a toilet bowl fetish," Izzy suggested, emerging from the bathroom.

"Have you met Jenk's mom?" Lopez asked him.

"No," Izzy said. "Have you?" He turned to Jenk. "I'm jealous. You bring Lopez home to meet the 'rents, but you don't bring me? What am I to you? Just some cheap, easy plaything that you use and discard?"

"So I'm trying to talk my father into the certificate for a romantic weekend idea," Jenk spoke over him, because sometimes it was best just to ignore Izzy. "I'm telling him there's a program on our new home computer that he can use to make it look like he spent hours designing it. Plus Mom will love the idea. My ulterior motive, of course, is to be allowed to stay home alone with Ginny, my older sister—who had some extremely hot friends."

"Ginny's pretty hot herself." Izzy turned to Gilligan. "You ever meet Ginny?"

"Yeah, once," he said, and it was clear he wouldn't have used the word *hot* to describe her. "She came to San Diego. She was kind of, well . . . large. I mean, short, like Jenk, but . . . round. No offense, Jenkins."

"Yeah," Izzy said. "No offense, Jenkins, but Gilligan thinks your sister is freaking fat."

"She *was* pregnant," Lopez pointed out, ever the voice of calm.

"She was?" Gillman looked to Jenk for confirmation. "I didn't know she was married."

"Yeah. Gin's got three kids," Jenk said. He put his cards down on the table and, stretching, stood up. Chickie was still out in the driveway. Jenk could see him through the window, pacing back and forth out there as he spoke on his phone.

"Wow," Gillman said.

Jenk opened the mini-fridge and pulled out another beer.

"Wow," Izzy echoed. "For someone with three kids, she's not just hot, she's freaking hot."

Jenk popped the top and held the bottle out to Gillman. Who took it, *alleluia*, and took a long swig. "Iz?"

"Nah, I'm good," Izzy said.

"Jay?"

"Thanks." Lopez drained his bottle, and Jenk traded him for a new one, putting the empty in the growing pile with the others.

"So we're in this store," Jenk continued his story, "and these three huge woman—I mean they were really tall. They come in, and they're dusting the snow off their coats and their hair, and they're really disappointed at the no credit card news. One of them—Sherilee—overhears my conversation with my dad."

"Sherilee," Izzy repeated.

"Sherilee, Rhonda and Marcia," Jenk said, sitting back at the table. "Sherilee goes, *Last-minute Christmas shopping?* And my dad takes, like, four steps back. He's staring, and I think it's because, well, he's height challenged, and this woman is about six four. She's also wearing a tiara. How many women shop at the SuperQuick in a tiara? She goes, *Not to be pushy, but I make jewelry.* And I'm looking at that tiara, thinking, *No way.* But she calls one of

her friends over, pulls back the other woman's sleeve. And there's this bracelet that looks as if it were made for my mom. It was silver and turquoise and . . . It was beautiful. It was beyond perfect. And my dad, he's clearly freaked out, but he has to ask. *How much?* She looks at me, she looks at him, says, *A hundred dollars.* She hands it to Dad to look at more closely. Dad goes, *Fifty.* She says *Cash?* And he takes out his wallet. And she says to her friends, *Go, girls.* And they start gathering armloads of chips and Yodels—there's not a lot of real food in that store. Turns out the trains stopped running, so here they are, at the Yorktown Heights Motel, with three dollars cash between the three of them. If my dad hadn't bought that bracelet, they wouldn't have been able to buy anything to eat until the computers came back on line. And from the way the lights were flickering, it wasn't going to be soon."

The door opened, and Chickie came back into the room. But he looked as if someone had jammed a pole up his ass. He made a beeline for the cooler, grabbing another Pepsi, before disappearing into the bathroom.

"So I'm talking to them," Jenk continued, "and they're really nice. They're actresses, and they do a cabaret show, traveling around the country. Marcia plays the piano, and they all sing. And I'm looking at those bags of popcorn they're holding, thinking about the lousy Christmas Eve dinner they're going to have, so I say, *Why don't you come have dinner with us?* And my dad kind of freezes, and I don't know why. We've always had a strays and orphans policy at our house—there's someone outside of the family at all our holiday meals. So I say to my dad, *You know Mom won't mind.* And Sherilee says, *Thank you, honey, you're so sweet, but . . . we'll be just fine.* And Dad's got the bracelet in one hand, and me in the other and he drags me out the door.

"It wasn't until we were in the car, when he goes, *Mark. Those are men in women's clothes.* I think I actually argued with him. You know, *Why would men wear women's clothes?* I remember him saying, *Because they want to.* And I just didn't get it, but I was a kid, so it didn't freak me out the way it did my dad. I mean, I thought it was crazy, but if they wanted to wear high heels, it was fine with me. And I said, *But they're nice. Mom would love them.* And he

didn't say anything. He didn't pull out of the parking lot either. We just sat there, in the car, watching them through the store windows. They were probably trying to decide which brand of beef jerky was the most edible. And I said, *It's Christmas. And they saved your butt.* And he's all pissed, but he hands me the bracelet for my mother, huffing and puffing as he's getting out of the car, muttering to himself about stupid kids and stupid ideas. But he goes back into the store, and when he comes out, Sherilee, Rhonda, and Marcia are with him. We all pile into the Honda, and with the extra weight we don't skid once on our way home.

"It was a great Christmas," Jenk told them as Chick came out of the bathroom and rejoined them at the table. "Mom loved the bracelet, and we had our own personal cabaret show. And maybe I was wrong—I was only eleven—but it sure seemed like Rhonda and Marcia had a thing for each other. Thus, my most interesting lesbian encounter."

"Can we please finish this hand?" Young Vlachic had definitely just had a *Dear John* phone call. He looked at Jenk. "Will you fucking do something besides talk?"

Ouch. Jenk let the harsh words roll off his back, considering the circumstances, as, across the table, Gillman picked up his cards and . . . He scratched his chin with the back of his hand.

Yes! He was bluffing. Or . . . was he? Gillman also sent Jenk what could only be described as a furtive look. It was over almost before it started, but Jenk saw it.

Except it was clearly intended for Jenk to see, which meant . . .

"I'm in," Jenk decided, tossing his money into the pile in the center of the table. Gillman was back to not looking anywhere but at his cards.

"How much to call?" Chickie grimly asked.

"Twenty-six dollars," Lopez said in a voice that recommended Chick fold.

"No, it's only sixteen to him," Izzy said. "Vlachic was the genius who raised the bet ten fucking bucks in the first place."

Chickie put in the cash. And sure enough, Gillman revealed that he was holding a whole lotta nothing. Total train wreck. The highest card was, appropriately, a jack.

"Nice attempt to bluff," Jenk told him, revealing his three aces. "But you know, you tried just a little too hard. You were too obvious with your eyes and—" He was already reaching for the pot when Izzy stopped him.

"Dude." Izzy pointed at the cards Chickie was lovingly placing on the table.

Holy crap.

It wasn't just a winning hand. It was a kickass, once-in-a-lifetime, mother-of-God *miracle* of a winning hand. A straight flush, spades, Queen high.

Even Lopez sat forward and stared.

"No fucking way." Gillman was the first to overcome the shock and put voice to their disbelief. "Dude. You took three cards."

"I guess I'm just lucky," Chick said in that same grim voice. But then he looked up and smiled, and Jenk knew they'd all been conned. By the twelve-year-old new guy. Who'd gone through BUD/S and was probably closer to twenty-three. And completely capable of conning the unconquered. Yeah, Chick was lucky as hell, but he'd totally fooled them into thinking he still held a crappy hand.

"Who was on the phone?" Jenk asked, suddenly suspicious.

"No one," Chick admitted, starting to put the huge pile of bills and coins into neatly organized stacks. "You just seemed as if you needed a little more time to decide to stay in."

"Brilliantly done," Jenk said.

"What I said before," Vlachic started to explain. "I didn't mean—"

"I know," Jenk reassured him. "It was a nice touch. Very authentic."

"Thanks," Chick said. "That means a lot, coming from you."

Jenk was the team's best liar, with the most accurate bullshit meter. Although it was entirely possible that he was now the team's *second* best liar.

"Hey, Iz," Jenk turned to Zanella. He didn't need to say anything more, since Izzy was on the same wavelength.

As Lopez shuffled the deck, Izzy took a beer from the fridge. He opened it. "Welcome to the team," he said.

And handed it to Chickie.

Trapped

Exclusive
Sam & Alyssa story: only
available in this booklet!

Date: Shortly after *Into the Storm*

Location: *Nachtgarten Army Base, Germany*

"So," Jules Cassidy said, as he tried to cover his best friend and former FBI partner Alyssa Locke more completely with his body. Her leg had been broken in the blast that had trapped them here, and she drew in a sharp breath at the contact, but otherwise didn't complain. "I finally got some last Thursday night. Go, me."

She laughed her surprise, her voice rich in the pitch darkness. "Get out of here."

"Sweetie, I would if I could, and I'd take you with me, too." Jules quipped as he flipped on his flashlight, because . . . why not? It was possible their lives were going to end before its batteries wore out. Might as well enjoy the light while they still had eyes with which to see.

"Ben?" Alyssa asked.

"No," Jules said tartly. "Some stranger that I picked up in a bar. What kind of slut do you think I am? Of course, Ben. God."

"About time, my no-longer-celibate brothah," she said.

There was both pain and worry in her eyes, and Jules knew he should continue to try keeping things light, for both of their sakes, but . . .

"Yeah, I don't know," he admitted. "I'm feeling . . . oddly ambiguous about the whole thing." Especially after the surprise weekend visit from his mother.

"Ben's really sweet," Alyssa commented from beneath him.

"Yes, he is." He'd pulled her as far as he could into the corner of this shallow subterranean room that seemed to be the most structurally sound, behind a pile of bricks and rubble as they waited for the bomb's timer to count down the last ninety seconds of a five-minute delay.

Please, sweet baby Jesus, don't let this be their final last ninety seconds. If this didn't work, if they died here tonight, Alyssa's husband, former Navy SEAL and total Texas cowboy Sam Starrett, was

going to follow Jules up to heaven and kick his ass—right in front of St. Peter and God and Jimmy Stewart and whoever else saintly and pure was standing beside the pearly gates.

And please, Jesus, as long as Jules was making a list of demands, let Sam survive the altercation with the terrorists who'd planted this bomb that was about to explode. Wherever the cowboy-booted one was, please keep him safe, too . . .

"I don't know what's wrong with me," Jules admitted to the woman who'd been one of his best friends for years, because although light banter was preferred at times like this, an honest heart-to-heart was better than silently wondering about the fate of the other members of the Troubleshooters team. Sam wasn't the only one out there—Tess, Sophia, and Lindsey were in potential danger from the bad guys, too. "Why haven't I fallen madly in love with him? The whole time we were . . . together—and it wasn't just Thursday, it was Friday night, too—I was . . . I don't know. Waiting for the choir of angels to start to sing." He laughed his disgust. "Ben's into country music. Some of it's not awful—I'll admit that. Some of it's . . . okay, I'll be generous and use the word *good*. But *some* of it . . . ? Kill me now."

That was probably not the right thing to say while waiting for a bomb to go off, but Alyssa either ignored him or didn't notice.

"Okay, so he's not perfect," Alyssa said. "No one is. Sam's not . . ." She swore sharply. "If he gets himself killed tonight . . ."

"Sam'll be all right," Jules reassured her with a hug—careful, though, of her leg. "He's probably going insane, wondering where we are. So tell me this. If Sam's so imperfect, what would you change about him to make *him* better?"

Alyssa shook her head. "Nothing," she admitted. "Sometimes imperfect *is* perfect," Jules philosophized. "It's a personal thing. Sam, with all of his imperfections—things that would drive me mad—is perfect for you."

"So what would you change about Ben?"

Jules didn't have to think about that one. "His parents don't know he's gay," he reminded her. "And

then there's that whole *don't ask, don't tell* bullshit . . . " Their entire relationship would have to be secret. Jules had worked hard his entire life to be open and out about his being gay. This would be a significant step backward—right into Ben's closet. And the man didn't even have a walk-in.

"I think it's a good thing then," Alyssa decided. "A sign of maturity. You know—that you're being cautious with him. You're taking things slowly. You're not just giving your heart away indiscriminately." *The way you usually do.* She left that part unsaid, because she knew she didn't have to remind him.

"So . . . you're advocating casual sex?" Jules needled her. "Ow!"

She'd pinched him. "Don't be an idiot. It's kinda obvious your thing with Ben is serious—it has been for a while—even as . . . sex-free as it's been. Up to now. But there's no law saying that you have to plan to spend the rest of your life with everyone that you . . . make the magic with."

"I know," Jules said. And he did know. The concept, however, was easier for him in theory. He'd been friends with Alyssa for a long time, and she was well aware of his tendency to start planning a lifetime commitment ceremony within moments of a new relationship's first intimate encounter. He was a romantic. A hopeless one. In some circles, though, that was considered a strength, not a weakness. "I'm just . . . I'm tired of not being a *we*. And here's Ben, who's made a point of making sure I know he's looking for something real, and . . ." So what did Jules go and do after spending a few very *we-ish* nights with the man? He ran away to Germany to help Alyssa and Sam with a Troubleshooters Incorporated op that was probably now going to get them all killed.

All but Ben, who was back in D.C.

For now.

In a matter of months, his Marine unit was heading back to Iraq. And wouldn't *that* move their relationship to an entirely new level of crapitation?

Provided, of course, that Jules survived the next few seconds . . .

"What are *you* looking for?" Alyssa asked him.

But before he could answer and say that he didn't know—which wasn't really a lie—the timer buzzed

and the bomb went off.

* * * *

An hour earlier . . .

As far as distractions went, this was working. Mostly.

Slogging through an ancient drainage pipe beneath a military installation made it very hard to think about anything besides the horrific smell.

At least they weren't up to their ankles or knees in water. There were occasional puddles, but it was mostly just mud beneath their feet. At least Jules hoped it was mud.

He crept along, just in front of Alyssa, who was team leader for this little Troubleshooters Incorporated op, venturing into the bowels beneath a U.S. Army barracks that had been built here in Nachtgarten, Germany, just after World War II. The barracks had been built then, that is. This drainage system looked—and smelled—as if parts of it dated back to the days of the Roman Empire.

On point was Lindsey Jenkins, a tiny slip of an Asian American woman with mad tracking skills and a total kick-ass attitude—thanks in part to her years with the LAPD. Apparently, she'd committed to memory the blueprint of the maze of tunnels and she moved surely and silently, leading the way through the dimness, proving to the world that size didn't matter.

Which was something of Jules's own mantra, since he was no hulking giant himself. He still sometimes shopped in the teen boys department in order to find T-shirts that fit him snugly enough to wear clubbing—not that he'd actually *gone* to a dance club in the past few years . . .

But here and now, compared to Lindsey who could move as if she had a note from her doctor excusing her from the laws of gravity, he felt oafish and noisy.

And freaking envious.

Lindsey was the relatively recent bride of Petty Officer Mark Jenkins, an adorable Navy SEAL who'd gotten leave from Iraq in order to meet her here in Germany. Her new husband's transport flight had been delayed, however, and he'd shown up at

their hotel just as the entire Troubleshooters team had met in the lobby for breakfast.

Needless to say, Lindsey and Mark had not joined them for the meal. The SEAL had soul-kissed his spouse, right there in the lobby, thrown her over his shoulder and carried her into the elevator—and that was the last anyone had seen of either of them until they'd all met for this op at 2300.

But no one had teased her about it. Too many of them knew what it was like to have or be a spouse in the military. Time with one's partner was precious—and too often infrequent.

And *that* made Jules think of Ben, which was exactly what he didn't want to be thinking about . . .

Wait, Lindsey hand-signaled now, then vanished ahead into a part of the tunnel that didn't have dim moonlight shining in through heavy cast-iron drainage grates.

Two other Troubleshooters operatives, curly-haired computer specialist Tess Bailey and elegantly blond Sophia Ghaffari, who was clearly in training or at least a rookie, hung back, obeying Lindsey's command, while Jules and Alyssa continued to guard their six.

Even though it was unlikely that there was anything down here to guard them against.

Their mission was to prove that the Nachtgarten barracks were vulnerable to terrorist attack, via these ill-protected tunnels that wound beneath the entire city. Because—as if the idea of tunnels that criss-crossed beneath the military base wasn't enough of a threat—there was also a no-longer-used, buried and long-forgotten, massive oil tank that sat, still two-thirds full, just beneath the facility's main housing.

With some correctly placed C4, aided by that enormous tank of oil, any terrorist with a little Internet-acquired know-how could create an explosion that would take down the multi-story building and make the Khobar Towers bombing look like child's play.

And as far as the Internet went . . .

Alyssa and Sam, acting as agents for the country's most elite personal security team, Troubleshooters Incorporated, had written and submitted a detailed report on this installment months ago. They'd outlined, quite specifically, the dangers of what they believed to

be a serious threat, due to that very oil tank.

But after the powers-that-be thanked them for their time, absolutely nothing was done to safeguard the lives of the thousands of servicemen and women quartered at the base.

And *then*, a few short days ago, Jules had found out that Sam and Alyssa's top secret report had actually circulated the White House via non-secure e-mail—which meant that the barracks at Nachtgarten were now even *more* vulnerable. The report, which mentioned the long-forgotten oil tank, had floated about on the Internet for a solid week before anyone noticed it contained classified information.

Jules had taken the news of the leak up the chain of command to his boss in the FBI, Max Bhagat, who'd been furious about the security breach—enough to get Admiral Chip Crowley involved.

Crowley, a Navy SEAL himself, was a man of action, and before Jules had even left Max's office, a task force had been formed and Troubleshooters Incorporated once again had been hired. This time they were to play the part of the “red cell” in a mock-attack of the military base.

Their job was to get, covertly, into Nachtgarten and once again find said oil tank—which was supposedly “too costly to locate and remove,” and, also according to the geniuses in charge, “too difficult to locate to create any real threat to the army personnel housed therein.”

Yeah, maybe it had been too difficult to locate *until some bureaucrat wrote an e-mail about it, attached Sam and Alyssa's report, and then freaking sent it to all their friends . . .*

God. Nothing pissed Jules off more than stupidity.

Hopefully, after tonight's exercise—complete with weapons that fired only rubber bullets. Hey, Nachtgarten security teams. Think that might be a hint that some war-gaming might be going on tonight?—the stupidity would finally end.

There was, of course, no guarantee of that.

But the Troubleshooters red cell team had been ordered to plant a “bomb” atop that oil tank—which would hopefully help wake people up. They weren't going to use real explosives, of course. Instead, they would affix to the tank an electronic device that was

the equivalent weight of the C4 needed to take down the building. With this device and a nifty computer program that would receive and read the box's signal, analysts would be able to accurately measure the amount of oil that remained in the tank, as well as the effect of an explosion on the barracks above.

Jules had seen this particular computer program in action before. It would create a simulation of the size and strength of the fictional blast, as well as estimate damage and predict body count. It would also—nifty little thing—translate it all into an outrageously huge dollar amount for those bottom-line thinkers who believed that removing an obsolete oil tank was a tad too costly.

But all of that was going to happen *after* the team found the tank and slogged their way back to the much fresher air of the decaying riverfront warehouse, where they'd accessed this gross-as-shit drainage system.

This was *so* much fun.

Lindsey must've returned from her scouting trip, because Tess signaled them forward and they began to move into a part of the tunnel that was pitch-black. It seemed endless, but finally, ahead of them, was another stretch where the moonlight shone in.

And okay, yeah, actually? If he could ignore the malodorous stench? This *was* kind of fun in a twisted way. Jules wasn't quite sure if the idea was Alyssa's or that of the Troubleshooters CO, Tom Paoletti, but one thing he certainly *was* enjoying was the fact that this particular red cell was manned only by women.

Well, except for Jules, who was really only there as an observer.

Still, it felt very Charlie's Angels, which appealed to his inner 1970s-era pop-culture-loving child.

As for his role of observer, he was here because Alyssa had insisted. She'd known how *completely* freaked out he'd been by his mother's weekend visit. Lys had wanted both to hold his hand and to distract him from the craziness that had gone down last Saturday and Sunday.

The funny part of *that* was that Jules hadn't yet told her about Thursday and Friday's drama. God, had that all really been just a few days ago? He glanced at his watch. It was currently early a.m.

Wednesday. Which meant it was now only two days until Friday—which was when he and Ben had planned to hook up again.

Yikes.

And wasn't *that* just peachy keen?

Jules should have been feeling anticipation. He was a fan of anticipation when it came to things like food. And sex.

Instead, what he felt, felt an awful lot like dread.

And guilt. Yup, the guilt sure was a nice touch, swirling around on the top of his mix of emotions about the entire fiasco—ast weekend included.

Jules had actually taken the weekend off because his mother had called to say she was coming to D.C. to see him. She and her second husband, Phil, lived in Hawaii, in a house overlooking the ocean, and Jules usually went there to visit. That was a no-brainer. In the vacation boxing ring, Hawaii could take out D.C. with one solid uppercut, every single time.

And yet his mother had flown all the way to the East Coast, nearly out of the blue and completely Phil-less, which made the trip seem all the more odd.

But when everything was said and done, odd wasn't even close to describing the weekend. Jules's mom had completely caught him off-guard with her news that she and Phil were getting divorced. And—although *she* didn't put it into such glaringly harsh plainspeak – their split was because of Jules. Phil had finally admitted to feeling that their relationship was strained due to his discomfort with Jules's sexual orientation. He'd actually sent away for literature on a variety of ex-gay ministries—programs that Jules could enter to be “fixed” and turned straight.

Linda Cassidy—she'd kept Jules's father's name, even after remarrying—had “fixed” her ailing marriage by lancing the two-hundred pound boil that was Phil.

Jules had never really liked the guy, but it had broken his heart to see his mother cry. Especially when she admitted how much she missed his father, who'd been dead now for close to twenty years.

Alyssa touched Jules now—just a hand on his shoulder. They were being silent, so she didn't say anything, but it was clear that she knew exactly where his thoughts had gone.

She shook her head, as if to say *Don't you be thinking about that right now . . .*

Jules forced a smile as he met her eyes in the dim light. *So . . . I finally had sex with someone who's not Adam. How about that? About freaking time, huh?* What was wrong with him that he finally got the courage to confess *that* breaking news to his best friend now, when they both needed to remain completely silent?

Yup, he was a total headcase, no doubt about them apples.

But then Tess, who was in front of them, lifted her hand, signaling both *stop, quiet* and, then *down*.

Crap.

Jules faded back with Alyssa, even farther into the shadows, getting even more intimate with the stankariffic dankness that hugged the tunnel's sides and floor.

They waited there, silent and still—until Lindsey beamed herself back, directly in front of them.

And okay. It was probable that she hadn't actually used Starfleet technology to get from point A to point B. She'd probably used her feet and walked it, but she'd done so both silently and invisibly. It was damned impressive.

She crouched next to Alyssa, and as soundlessly as possible, gave her report.

"We're not alone down here. Someone else came through, maybe an hour ago," she said. "Five of 'em, probably all male, carrying heavy packs and all going in the same direction. They came in via a different tunnel, but merged with our route about twenty feet back from where we are right now. I followed their trail for about half a klick and the good news is that they went past the turn-off to the oil tank. They either missed it or . . ." She shook her head.

"The bad news?" Alyssa asked.

"The way they went? It dead ends. There's no access to the surface—no way out of here."

Which meant, whoever they were, they were down here still.

"Is it possible they're a second red cell?" Tess asked. She and Sophia had approached in order to hear Lindsey's report.

Alyssa shook her head. "We're not the ones being tested here. Tom would've told me if he were going to

do that."

"Could it be a security patrol from Nachtgarten?" Sophia asked.

"If so," Alyssa asked, "why not guard the tank?"

"They may not know where it is," Jules reminded her.

She looked at him sharply, and it was clear from the expression on her face that she was having a big *eureka* moment. But being Alyssa, she could tell from wherever she was in A-ha!-Land, that Jules hadn't yet reached the same thrilling conclusion. So she explained. "They'll know exactly where the tank is after we lead them to it – and put what's essentially a homing beacon directly on top of it."

Jesus yikes. *That* would be very, *very* un-good.

"Break radio silence," Alyssa ordered Tess, who was carrying their radio. Being a red cell, i.e. a group of make-believe and not necessarily wealthy terrorists, they'd been outfitted with less-than high-tech gear. Instead of equipping each of them with radio headsets, they'd been given a single, crappy Vietnam-era radio.

Tess fired it up, but then frowned. She fiddled with it, then frowned again "Signal's being jammed." Shit.

It was looking more and more likely that their unexpected company hadn't come down here to play games. It was probable their mystery-five had real C4 in their backpacks, and real bullets instead of rubber ones in their guns.

And the consequences of their actions would result in real, horrific death and destruction as opposed to the computer-simulated kind.

Alyssa reached for her cell phone—they all did. Jules's phone had zero bars. No signal. Not down here in the first level of hell. "Anyone?" Alyssa asked.

Tess, Lindsey, and Sophia also shook their heads. Nope.

Alyssa met Jules's gaze. "Fall back," she ordered. "We're going out the way we came in. Lindsey, take the radio and run ahead. As soon as you can get a signal, I want an order going out to evacuate the barracks."

Lindsey vanished as Alyssa looked at Jules and the two remaining Troubleshooters operatives. "Let's move."

* * * *

"Whoa," Dave said, leaning in closer to squint at his laptop's screen, over at the dining table in the hotel suite they'd designated as Troubleshooter's temporary headquarters here in Nachtgarten.

"That's . . . very weird."

"What is?" Sam asked, because knowing Dave, he'd tell Sam anyway. He didn't look up from surfing the TV channels, looking for something even vaguely entertaining and stopping on SpongeBob SquarePants – in German. That was kind of cool.

Guten Tag, Patrick. Wie geht's?

"I'm getting a signal," Dave reported. "But . . ." He hunched over his computer, fingers flying across his keyboard.

Dave Malkoff was something of an oddball. He'd been working for Tommy Paoletti's Troubleshooters Incorporated since nearly its inception, yet remained adamant about not wanting to be a team leader, which was fine but a little mystifying to Sam.

A former CIA operative, Dave sometimes took himself—and life—a smidge too seriously. He was one of those guys whose intellect was too big for his own good. He'd aced every test he'd ever taken—and a hell of a lot of good that had done him when it came down to real life.

He didn't seem to have any family, and although he appeared to be friends with incredibly beautiful Sophia Ghaffari, he wasn't friends in the *Hey, mind if I drop by so we can lick chocolate off each other* sense of the word.

And it was pretty obvious to Sam that Dave wished it were otherwise.

Jimmy Nash—a nutjob in his own right—was convinced that Dave was like that guy in that movie—a forty-year-old virgin—but Sam seriously doubted that. Although he wouldn't be at all surprised to find out that old Dave hadn't done the deed yet this decade.

It was, after all, only 2006. No need to rush things.

"Whoa," Dave said again. "Alyssa definitely just activated the box."

Sam looked up from the TV at the mention of his wife's name. He looked at his watch, too. It was a little too early for her team to have reached the location of the oil tank. No way. Maybe if they'd been moving at a dead run, but . . . That wasn't the

plan. They couldn't have gotten there yet.

"But it's completely in the wrong place," Dave added.

Sam moved his feet from the top of the desk to the floor. "Why would she do that?" he asked, standing up and moving across the suite, to look over Dave's shoulder at his computer screen. His wife—their team leader—knew exactly where that oil tank was. "Maybe the box got switched on accidentally."

Dave scratched his head. "I doubt it, sir. There's a code she's got to punch in to unlock the system. It couldn't have been just bumped and turned on without *someone* knowing."

"Is there a system malfunction?" Sam asked. "On our end?" His voice sounded terse, almost sharp, to his own ears, but Dave didn't so much as flinch.

And indeed, there was concern in Dave's eyes, too, as he glanced at Sam. "No, sir," he answered unequivocally but then back-pedaled. "I mean, okay. Yeah. I suppose there could be, but . . ." He was shaking his head. "No."

The hair on the back of Sam's neck was standing up. Through the years, both as a SEAL and as an operative for Troubleshooters Incorporated, he'd learned to trust his gut instincts—or at least take them extremely seriously. He picked up the hotel phone, dialed Jimmy's room number.

"Nash," the man answered after only one ring. He'd been on edge all night, hyper-aware that his fiancé, Tess Bailey, was out there in the world, without him tagging along as backup. Sam had finally sent him to his own hotel room.

"I need you back in here," Sam ordered. "Decker, too. And see if Mark Jenkins is still in Lindsey's room." He hung up without waiting for Jimmy to respond.

"They're definitely a half a klick from the tank," Dave reported as he checked and rechecked both his computer and the program he was running.

There was a rap on the door, and Sam opened it. It was Nash—with Deck right behind him.

"Situation, sir?" asked Decker, who'd once been a chief in the SEALs. It was hard for him not to address the former naval officers in Troubleshooters with formality. In the same way, it was equally difficult for Sam and Tom not to call Deck "Chief," especially in times of high stress.

"Alyssa activated the box in the wrong location,"

Dave repeated the little that they knew, as Mark Jenkins, too, came into the hotel room, “and we don’t know why.”

Enough was enough. “Game over,” Sam said. “I’m calling this bullshit. Deck, get on the horn with the officer in charge over at Nachtgarten. Dave, break radio silence and raise Alyssa. I want to talk to her.” If this meant that they needed to reschedule this drill, take a do-over on a different night, so be it.

Jenkins looked as if he’d rolled right out of bed, but he was waking up fast. He was still a SEAL with Sam’s old team—Sixteen. In fact, he’d served with both Sam and Tommy Paoletti, often as a radioman.

“I’m not getting through,” Dave reported, and Sam met Jenk’s gaze.

Sam nodded at the SEAL’s silent question. “Let Jenkins try,” he ordered.

One good thing about Dave—there was absolutely no ego involved in anything he did. He relinquished control of their radio without a single word of argument, moving back to his computer.

“Captain O’Reilly over at Nachtgarten insists that all possible entries into the drainage system are under armed guard,” Decker reported.

“Tell O’Reilly he’s a fucking idiot,” Sam shot back, “and that our team is already beneath his fucking base.”

Deck, being a former chief, spoke fluent officer. “With all due respect, sir,” Sam heard him say into the phone, “we’ll need to verify—”

“Can’t reach our red cell, sir,” Jenk announced, pulling Sam’s attention away. “Signal’s being jammed, somewhere on their end.”

What the fuck?

“Dave, call Tommy Paoletti with a code red,” Sam ordered as he broke open the suitcases that were stacked in the corner. Even when they went overseas on a training op or security drill, Troubleshooters Incorporated traveled with enough weapons and equipment to handle an unexpected emergency. “Jenk, I want to know who’s jamming the radio signal and exactly where it’s coming from. Deck and Nash, gear up. You’re with me.”

“I’m coming, too,” Jenkins said, grabbing both a weapon and ammunition.

As did Dave.

“I need you on your computer,” Sam told him.

“You’ll have me on my computer,” Dave told him, readying his equipment for travel, even as he got through to Paoletti on his cell phone. “Commander. Code red. Evacuate the barracks. Sam’s pulling the plug on the exercise. We’re unable to make contact with our red cell, and we’re preparing to go in after them . . .”

If this turned out to be a whole lot of nothing, Sam was going to hear about it until the end of time. But he was okay with that. Please God, let this be a simple communications or computer malfunction.

He didn’t often call upon a higher power for help. But he sent up another quick prayer as he led the other men out of the hotel room and down the stairs. Please God, help Alyssa keep her team safe.

And God? Thank you for making Linda Cassidy see the light and break up with her dickhead of a second husband, Phil McCormack, last weekend, giving her son the impetus to fly here to Germany with them, and to be with Alyssa right now.

No doubt about it. If Alyssa were in trouble and Sam couldn’t be guarding her six, he’d want Jules Cassidy by her side.

Jules would die for her.

Of course, the flipside was that Alyssa would also die for Jules.

Sam kicked up his speed, breaking into a run as he went out the door into the hotel’s parking garage.

* * * *

Three men with M60 machine guns had set an ambush along the route leading out of the tunnel.

Jules and the Angels didn’t walk into it, thanks to Lindsey’s extraordinary tracking skills. She’d picked up the fresh trail—three men, carrying heavy gear—atop the tracks they themselves had made coming in.

That the three men had M60s wasn’t deduced from the fact that they wore American running shoes. Nor was it divined from the lengths of their strides. No, Lindsey had crept toward them, wearing her cloak of invisibility, and she’d gotten a visual of those three weapons—machine guns that were capable of turning human beings into some serious hamburger.

She'd also used her cell phone to snap a few photos of the men who were holding those M60s, zeroing in, in particular, on a swastika-and flame-motif tattoo that they all proudly wore. From this, Jules was able to identify them as members of the New Reich, a particularly loathsome, hatred-spewing group of Neo-Nazis, based out of Dresden.

It was also clear, from the symbols in Farsi that the NR had made on the tunnel walls in green fluorescent paint—go figure—they wanted it to look as if the attack had been made by a local group of Iranian refugees.

Intolerant people could really suck.

But for every Neo-Nazi asshole that was out there, messing up the world with his backward thinking and his stupid plan to kill thousands of American servicemen and women in order to fuel hatred of innocent people who had nowhere else to go . . . For every one of them, there was an Alyssa or a Lindsey or a Tess or a Sophia. Ready to fight—and die—for justice and tolerance, ready to right wrongs and bring the real truth to light.

Alyssa came back toward the shadows where Jules was waiting, near where they'd activated the electronic device.

"They're coming," she told him.

Which meant that she'd been right.

About an hour before Alyssa's red cell had accessed the tunnels via that riverfront warehouse, ten members of the New Reich had entered the same drainage system via an as yet unknown means.

The NR had traveled along a different route in the tunnel system from Alyssa and her team. But the two paths had crossed as they drew closer to the area where the oil tank was buried.

At that point, five of the NR members headed toward the tank, going past it to hide, waiting for the Troubleshooters to arrive and essentially attach a homing beacon to the damn thing.

Three men had hidden near where the two paths met, waiting until the red cell had gone past. They had gone back to set up that M60 ambush on the very route Alyssa's team would be using to exit the tunnels.

Two others had set up a similar ambush along the tunnel they themselves had used to get in.

Thinking they could escape the way the NR had entered, since their own path was now blocked, Alyssa had given the order to fall back along that route. They'd all followed Lindsey, but they hadn't gone far before she'd signaled them to stop, and reported this second ambush site.

In short, they were trapped.

Jules knew that *trapped* wasn't one of Alyssa's happy-fun-time words. He also knew that she was worried about Sam. They'd been down here in these tunnels too long without radio or cell phone contact with the support team on the surface. Sam was, at times, a Neanderthal, but he *could* be patient, and he definitely trusted Alyssa to keep herself and her team safe. Still, Jules knew the man, and it wouldn't be too much longer before Sam called off the drill and came down here, in search of them.

At which point he would run right into that ambush.

It was true, the M60s were pointing in the wrong direction, but they were easy enough to turn around. And Sam and every member of his rescue team could well be killed.

Knowing that there was a time limitation and no real way to communicate with Sam and the support team, Alyssa had decided to give the New Reich what they wanted.

Sort of.

She'd sent Sophia, Tess, and Lindsey to try to find an alternative exit and/or to see if they could find a jam-free place to use their radio or cell phones.

And then she'd placed the signal box in a shallow room off the main tunnel, a full half-klick from both the tank and the barracks. At which point, she'd programmed in the code and turned it on.

Come to mommy and daddy, you darling little Neo-Nazis . . .

The plan was to let the NR "find" the "oil tank"—or at least the signal box that supposedly sat atop it. In theory, they would set their bomb, turn on its timer, and they would leave.

This was, after all, not a group that was big into suicide attacks. Jules was certain that there *would* be a timer. And it would be set with sufficient time to allow them to make a getaway.

They'd scamper out of the tunnels, taking their machine gun-wielding buddies with them.

At which time Alyssa and Jules would creep out from their hidey-hole in the corner of the room, take a gander at the bomb, see if there was a quick, easy, and *certain* way to defuse it, and then either do so or run like hell.

If it blew, it could take out part of the drainage system, causing a cave-in. But without the oil from the tank to fuel it, it wouldn't do much more than that.

Jules hoped.

"Here they come," Alyssa breathed. And indeed, there they came.

* * * *

The base commander finally began the evacuation of the barracks. About fucking time.

But no one with the authority to give an official go-ahead seemed able to grasp the meaning of Sam's report that there were three unknown, unidentified men, armed with three M60 machine guns, positioned about point five clicks inside the riverside entrance that Alyssa and her team had used to access the tunnels.

The unknowns had had their backs to the Troubleshooters support team that went down there for a quick sneak and peek. They'd had no idea the Troubleshooters were there, and it wouldn't take much for them to continue to not know they were there—right up until the moment their weapons fell from their lifeless fingers.

The key word there was *lifeless*.

But Captain O'Reilly, the OIC for the mock attack, didn't want the Troubleshooters to use deadly force. He'd actually suggested that they go down there and shout a warning, maybe start a dialog.

Deck was on the phone with the captain right now, suggesting that the word of the day be *covert*. Shouting a warning meant that those three unidentified men with very big weapons would then know that the good guys were there. If shots were fired—and they would be—that would ruin Sam's chances to infiltrate farther into the tunnels, see how many *additional* men with big weapons might be down there—maybe already having taken certain American hostages . . .

"Sir." Mark Jenkins had news for him. "We've located the origination point of the frequency

jamming. It's down a parallel tunnel. Dave's pulled up a schematic—shortest route is past the three-man ambush."

"Let me see," Sam said.

Dave turned his computer to give him a better look at a screen that was a confusing jumble of lines and blotches.

"Point to it," Sam ordered, and Dave complied, which really didn't help him that much.

"Is it inside the confines of the base?" Sam asked.

Dave was a smart guy, a graduate of some fancy Ivy League school. He knew exactly why Sam was asking that, and, as he met Sam's gaze, it was clear that he knew if any bad shit happened in the next few moments, he'd be blamed for providing faulty information. Still he didn't hesitate. "Yes, sir, it certainly looks to be."

"Thank you," Sam said. Finally. Something they could work with. He took Decker's phone from him, handing him his own cell. "Get me Tom Paoletti," he ordered, even as he put the former chief's phone to his ear.

"They may not even have real bullets," Captain O'Reilly was saying, of the three men in the tunnel. "If you can prove that they do—"

Yeah, by having them unload a full banana clip in their direction? Thanks a bunch, Captain Kangaroo. Maybe you should actually spend some time in Iraq, grow a little battlefield perspective.

"—perhaps then we can consider additional measures," O'Reilly continued.

"There are at least three fully-armed unknowns in that tunnel," Sam reiterated. "They're screwing with our radio signal—and we've located the source of that jamming—it's inside the gates of the base. I'm calling this what it is, Captain—a terrorist attack on a U.S. military installation. We're going in—with force."

"Mr. Starrett," O'Reilly responded, heavy on that *mister*. "I don't have the authority to allow you to do that."

Sam was ready to tell O'Reilly to blow him when Jimmy Nash reappeared. Sam hadn't noticed when the Troubleshooters operative had disappeared, but Nash certainly registered on his attention-meter now, considering that the crazy son-of-a-bitch's

clothing had been sprayed with what looked like blood. He was cleaning off a K-bar knife and the look in his eyes was one Sam had seen a time or two in his own bathroom mirror.

"The tunnel's clear," he reported as he put a handful of extremely non-rubber bullets onto the table in front of him.

Jesus Christ. Three against one, yet Nash had done the job silently, without getting so much as winded.

Except he *was* a little winded, and some of the blood on his shirt was his own.

"Your arm's bleeding," Deck told Nash.

He barely glanced at it. "Just a ding."

O'Reilly was still sputtering on his end of the phone, so Sam just spoke over him. "The bullets are real, the tunnel's been cleared. We're going in—"

It was then, before Sam could end the conversation with a cheery "fuck you," that a bomb went off, shaking the very foundation of the warehouse he was standing in.

O'Reilly even felt it on his end. "What the hell was that?"

Sam didn't answer. He'd already hung up and was down in the tunnel, shouting orders. "Jenkins and Decker—find the radio jammer and make it stop. Dave and Nash—" Crazy and Crazier—"you're with me!"

* * * *

Alyssa was hurt. Badly.

As the dust settled around them, Jules had been able to tell with only a glance that her lower leg was broken.

She was tough, though, focusing on him, urgency in her voice. "Jules. Are you all right?"

"Yeah." He was. It seemed impossible, so he checked himself again. He'd hit his head and his ears were ringing from the roar of the explosion, but he was, miraculously, all in one piece—no unwanted piercings of metal or chunks of stone protruding from him.

The man that the Neo-Nazis had left for dead was, indeed, dead on the floor, his head at an unnatural angle, his hair singed, his face burned from the blast.

Alyssa pulled herself into a sitting position. "The bomb?"

And that would be the *second* bomb to which she was referring.

"They set a timer for five minutes," Jules reported as he ran his flashlight over it. "Four minutes and twenty-two seconds now." Dang, but there was a lot of C4 attached to those blasting caps. He looked at the jerry-rigged thing more closely, wishing Jazz Jacquette were here. The XO of SEAL Team Sixteen wasn't just a wizard when it came to blowing things up. He was also an expert in keeping bad things like this one from going *boom*.

"Which way is out?" Alyssa asked, still focused on the run-like-hell part of their plan. It had been a good idea—before complications such as broken legs and blasted-shut passageways had come into play.

Jules gave her the bad news point-blank, shining his flashlight onto the pile of rubble that had once been the way out of this shallow room just off the tunnel. "That way."

"Plan B?" she asked.

"Grab some wires and pull?" he suggested.

She shifted herself closer, which had to have hurt her leg like hell. As Jules watched, she took note of the amount of explosives that the New Reich had left behind.

This was a tad surreal. Yes, there was a timer on the bomb, as Jules had expected. But he hadn't considered the fact that if the NR was aiming to frame an Iranian group, to make it look as if said group adhered to fundamentalist crazy-ass thinking, then they would have to leave a "suicide bomber" behind.

A man that the NR leader addressed as Heinrich was that unlucky soul. One minute he'd been laughing and joking with the others as they'd set their bomb in place. The next, he'd been elbowed in the nose and kneed in the balls, and left retching and bleeding on the tunnel floor as his esteemed leader had placed a second, smaller bomb and run away.

The detcord on *that* piece of work had given the NR mere moments of lead time to run, but the amount of C4 had been far less. Still the bomb had gone off with an earthshaking boom, caving in part of the tunnel, and effectively trapping them all here.

Not that the New Reich had known Jules and

Alyssa were in here. No, their intention had been to trap old dead Heinrich. They'd probably already planted a Koran and a pledge to al Qaeda in his apartment, for the authorities to find.

"Don't pull that wire," Alyssa warned Jules now. "Look—it's booby trapped. If you pull it . . ."

"I won't," Jules said.

But shit. They had only three minutes and fifty-seven seconds . . .

"Okay," he said, as the sound of machine-gun fire penetrated their enforced seclusion, as beside him, Alyssa tensed. "Here's what we're going to do . . ."

* * * *

The firefight was over before it started.

The enemy, whoever they were, with their fucking swastika tattoos, couldn't shoot for shit. Three were dead, and one was on his stomach, hands on his head in surrender, shitting his pants and crying like a baby.

"Take him to the surface," Sam ordered Dave, because he didn't quite trust crazy Jimmy Nash and his K-bar to get the son of a bitch there alive.

Besides, Jim was already shouting for his freckle-faced fiancé. Damn. That was a match Sam didn't really understand. It was like Little Mary Sunshine hooking up with Count Dracula. "Tess!"

The sound of machine-gun fire echoed from a distant tunnel—Sam could only hope it was Jenkins and Decker taking out whoever was jamming their radio frequencies.

"Jim!" That was Tess, shouting back. "I'm all right!"

Sam shouted now, too. So much for needing the radio . . . "Is Alyssa with you?"

"No!"

"Alyssa and Jules were going to try to defuse the bomb." *Jesus.* Lindsey Jenkins—Mark's wife—was suddenly right there, in front of him, concern in her brown eyes. She was scary good at that ninja shit. "The second bomb," she clarified.

Oh, good. There were *two* bombs . . . ?

"So they hid near where they planted the box. Down this way," she told him, and he followed her farther into the tunnel, Nash on his heels. She glanced at them over her shoulder. "The second bomb's bigger. It has a five-minute timer." She looked at her watch. "A minute thirty-two left, and

counting. Alyssa and Jules are trapped in with it."

Once again, Sam kicked it up into a full-speed run.

It didn't take long for them to reach the spot. A haze of dust was still in the air from the recent blast. Rubble filled the passageway, keeping Alyssa and Jules from getting free, keeping Sam from his wife.

"Get back," he ordered as he shone his flashlight on the walls and ceiling. Structurally, the tunnel still seemed sound. But if there was a second bomb, even bigger . . .

"Fifty-seven seconds," Lindsey announced as no one obeyed Sam. They all got to work and helped him dig—Nash and Lindsey and Tess and Sophia and Jenk and Decker—heaving the bigger stones and chunks of brick out of his way, using their bare hands to scoop away any loose dirt.

As Lindsey kept her countdown going, Sam felt sick because he knew he wasn't going to make it, he wasn't going to break through in time . . .

"Ten seconds," Lindsey said, and he just kept digging. "Six . . . Five . . ."

Nash and Decker each took one of his arms and hustled him back to a safe distance, with the others. No . . .

"Three," Lindsey said. "Two . . ."

"Please God, let Lindsey be wrong," Sophia breathed the words they all were thinking.

"One," Lindsey said.

Silence. And more silence.

Sam kept his eyes shut, not daring to hope . . . *Boom.*

The blast was far noisier than it felt. It didn't shake the ground or even rain dust and dirt on their heads. Of course, they weren't trapped in a small area with it. His wife and best friend could well have just been turned into grease smears on the tunnel floor.

"Help me," Sam said, his voice rough, as he again started to dig.

No one said a word. They just silently got to work. Dave was back by then, too, and he joined in.

Please God, please God, please God, please God . . .

"I think I'm through," Jenkins said, and sure enough, there was a small hole.

"Alyssa!" Sam shouted through it. He could smell smoke and . . . see light? There was light on the other side, and it wasn't fire from the blast.

"Sam!" That's was Jules's voice. "Are you all right?"

Was *he* all right? "Yeah, is Alyssa with you?" Sam reached his hand through the hole, which was crazy—he should have been using it to keep digging. But, God, he just wanted contact.

"She's here," Jules told him—words that made him sag with relief. "She's hurt, but she's all right . . ."

* * * *

"Thank God . . ."

Jules clasped Sam's hand through the hole in the rubble. Thank God, indeed.

"How badly hurt?" Sam asked.

"Her leg's broken," Jules told him, "just above the ankle. I don't want to move her. She's back away, along the far wall. It's pretty smoky in here—we could both use some water . . ."

"Someone get me water," Sam shouted from his side of the rubble.

"She's very happy to hear your voice," Jules told his friend. "We both are. Did you get 'em all? It was the New Reich, Starrett. There were at least ten of them—that we knew about. You need to be careful—they're armed with—"

"We got 'em all," Sam assured him. "How badly is Lys's leg broken?"

"She'll need a team of medics—a stretcher to get her out," Jules told the SEAL.

"I will not," she shouted from across the dusty little room.

Sam laughed. "We'll see about that."

"I can hear you."

"I love you," Sam called to her. That shut her up.

"Any other casualties on our side?" Jules asked, bracing himself for bad news.

"Nothing serious," Sam said the words both he and Alyssa were hoping to hear. "Jimmy Nash got what some folks might call cut, but what he calls a ding—a knife slice in the fleshy part of his arm. But everyone else is okay. Tess is going to bring Jim to the surface to meet the ambulances after we dig you out. Other than that . . . We've got guards posted, reinforcements and medics both on their way."

"There's a shitload of explosives in here," Jules told him. "We couldn't keep the bomb from going

off, but we removed as much of the C4 from the timer as we could." C4 was like putty—he and Alyssa had pretty much pulled the bomb apart, then put the part with the timer and the blasting caps as far away from them and the rest of the C4 as they possibly could. It had gone off with a percussive bang, but had done little damage. "I've got some under my fingernails. I'm going to set off all kinds of alarms when I try to fly home."

Sam laughed. "We'll get you a special Navy SEAL manicure, but first let's get you out of here," he said. "Move back and just . . . sit tight."

"Thanks, SpongeBob," Jules told his friend.

"Thank *you*, for staying with Alyssa," Sam said quietly.

"Like I'd leave her," Jules scoffed.

"My point exactly," Sam said. "You're a good friend."

And okay. Jules had to clear his throat repeatedly as he returned to Alyssa. And it wasn't just from the dust and smoke that still hung in the air.

She was actually crying, which she rarely ever did, tears making streaks down her face.

"Hurts, huh?" Jules sat down next to her and gave her his hand to hold. Now that dying was off the table, he knew she was starting to feel as if she had a broken leg.

She took his hand. Yow. She had some grip there. "Actually," she told him, "I'm feeling really good."

Jules nodded. "You know what I want?" he said, answering the question that she'd asked just moments before the second bomb had gone off. "I want what you have with Sam. I want someone who won't freak out when I have a night like tonight. I want trust and respect and . . . I want someone who'll say *I love you* in front of a crowd of co-workers and friends."

She wiped her face as she laughed. "Yeah, that's pretty nice to hear, huh?"

"Yes, it is," Jules said. "I want to meet someone," he continued, "and not think . . . *maybe*. I want to meet him, I want to look into his eyes, and think, Yes. I don't want to have to wonder. I want to know, right away, that he's the one."

Alyssa was silent. "Unfortunately, sweetie, life's not a Disney cartoon."

Jules laughed. "No shit, Cinderella."

She looked at him. “You know, when I first met Sam . . . Sometimes you meet someone, and you think, *Please God, not him.*”

She laughed, but Jules was silent. He knew, too well, what *that* was like . . .

“And then,” Alyssa continued, “you go from *no*, to *maybe* . . . And then, to *yes*. After, you know, you force yourself to admit that you might’ve been wrong about him.”

“What if you’re not wrong?” Jules asked her quietly. “What if you know that he can crush your heart and . . . destroy you?”

She brought his hand to her mouth and kissed him. She knew full well that he wasn’t talking about Ben. He was talking about Robin—the one man he’d been unable to forget. Jesus, it had been years since he’d so much as *seen* Robin, and he was still thinking, *Please God, not him* . . .

“Then you settle for the *maybe* that you’ve got right now,” Alyssa told him gently. “Ben may not be able to tell you that he loves you, not in front of his Marines, but . . . *that could* change. The same way that the *maybe* you’re feeling could change to a full-throttle *yes*. And if it doesn’t . . . Well, at least you tried, right?”

“Tried what?” Sam appeared in front of them—having dug his way through the rubble, probably by chewing it into molecules with his teeth. He was covered with dust, and was sweaty as hell, but he kissed Alyssa on the mouth. “What are we talking about?” he asked as he handed each of them a bottle of water, then turned his full attention to Alyssa’s broken leg. He didn’t cut her pants leg open, probably because he could see it was holding the broken bone in place.

Jules knew right then that Sam was eager to get Alyssa out of there—he didn’t want to wait for the medics to arrive.

“I was just telling Lys that I’m going to sign up for one of those ex-gay camps and then steal her away from you,” Jules told him.

Sam looked up at him askance. “That shit doesn’t work.”

“I know. I’m kidding,” Jules said. He looked at Alyssa. “Sam loses his sense of humor when you almost die.”

“Besides, Squidward,” Sam spoke over him as he gently lifted Alyssa into his arms, careful not to jar her injury, “we like you just the way you are.”

“Told you I wasn’t leaving here on a stretcher,” Alyssa said as her husband carefully carried her out.

Leaving Jules alone with his doubts—his unsatisfactory *maybe*’s.

And wasn’t that the way the story always ended? He was like that guy in that old song—alone again, naturally.

But then Sam gave a shout from out in the tunnel. “Cassidy. Move your ass. We’re waiting on you.”

In the romance department, Jules’s life may have been a *maybe*, but as far as his friends went, Jules had himself a rock-solid *yes*.

“I’m right behind you, SpongeBob,” Jules shouted back, then followed his two best friends out of the tunnel and up into the clean, crisp, star- and promise-filled night.

Maybe he could live for a while with *maybe*.

At the very least, it was worth a try.

* * * *

As they walked down the hall toward both Frisk and the security guard, Jules couldn’t keep himself completely in line. “So about the promotion,” he murmured in a voice so low that even Max had trouble hearing him. “It’s in the bag, right, crybaby-man?”—Jules Cassidy to his boss, Max Bhagat in *Breaking Point*.

“Don’t ask, don’t tell. But, oh my God.”

—Jules Cassidy to Max Bhagat after meeting Captain Ben Webster in *Breaking Point*

Jules Cassidy quotes compiled by Beki Keene and Stephanie Hyacinth.

Excerpt from
FORCE of NATURE
SUZANNE BROCKMANN

ON SALE IN HARDCOVER AUGUST 14, 2007

It was a hot, humid night. A sweaty night.

A night exactly like hundreds of other hot, sweaty Saturday nights in Sarasota, Florida.

The moon was nearly full and it made the Gulf sparkle. The beautiful, fine white sand of Crescent Beach seemed to glow.

As he walked toward the crowd gathered at the southernmost lifeguard station on the public beach, some of that sand shifted into one of Detective Ric Alvarado's black dress shoes, where it was significantly less beautiful.

"Over here," Bobby Donofrio called, as if Ric could've missed his bald head gleaming in the searchlights that had been set to illuminate the crime scene. He was standing with wiry Johnny Olson, who could've been the department's best detective if he'd cut back on his drinking. "Bout time you showed up."

It had been only fifteen minutes since Ric got the call. He'd made good time on the road. But there was never any point in arguing with Donofrio. "Any witnesses?" he asked.

"None so far," Johnny said, turning toward him. He whistled. "Nice suit, kid."

"We caught you in the middle of a hot date or something, huh?" Donofrio asked.

"Or something," Ric responded, unwilling to rub their noses in the fact that they, unlike the other members of the detective squad, *hadn't* been invited to Martell Griffin's party for passing the bar exam at the Columbia Restaurant out on St. Armand's Circle.

Which was where Ric had been just fifteen—sixteen—minutes ago. Listening to the salsa band his own father put together with only a few hours' notice when the club's regular musicians got stranded at the Key West airport. Flirting with a pretty blond teacher on vacation from Ohio. Celebrating his

best friend's well-deserved success.

It was where Ric had been enjoying himself—before Donofrio had called him in to translate, even though Lora Newsom, who spoke fluent Spanish, was among the uniformed officers on the scene.

“Why am I here?” Ric kept his voice even as he gazed at the heavy-set detective, but he knew his annoyance showed in his eyes.

“Because the victim’s sister don’t speak bueno English and the last thing we need is another weeping female.” Donofrio rolled his eyes toward a woman who was, no doubt, the sister. She’d collapsed in the sand, several of the uniforms keeping her back so that the crime-scene photographer could finish taking pictures of the body sprawled on the beach. “One is bad enough.”

That was crap. Newsom was one of the few women on the force, which meant she’d worked twenty times harder to get there than any of the men. Compassionate yet firm, capable of kicking ass when she had to—she was a rock in a crisis. But ever since she’d broken down in the locker room at the news that her mother-in-law had died in a car accident, she’d been getting all kinds of grief. Especially from Stan and Ollie here.

One incident, one time, and now it was all these clowns could remember.

Thanks to his famous father, Ric knew that he stood on that same shaky ground.

“You don’t think the sister has the right to cry?” Ric asked. He should have just ignored Donofrio, but he was pissed. One of these days, this son of a bitch was going to push him past his breaking point. And Christ, as he got closer, he could see that the victim looked to be no more than eleven or twelve years old. He knew the gangs were initiating ’em younger these days, but this kid was an infant.

“Guess we blew your chances at getting lucky.” Skinny Johnny O. would not let go of the fact that Ric was out of his usual uniform of sneakers and jeans.

“Not necessarily,” Donofrio quipped. “The sister’s a *mamacita*. You could still make time if you play your cards right. Make her think it’s about comfort.”

He wasn’t kidding. Ric had to turn away. One of these days . . .

It was then that he saw them.

Two kids. Older than the dead boy, but not by much. They were separated from the rest of the onlookers by a good forty feet, standing in the shadows outside of the light from the spots.

There was little for him to do until the photographer finished her morbid task. Ric could tell just from looking that the sister wouldn’t be good for questions until after she was allowed to approach the victim. Even then, she probably wouldn’t be up for a police interview until the body was sent to the morgue.

If then.

So Ric sauntered down the beach, careful not to head directly toward the pair of kids. His intention was to flank ’em, to put them between him and the crowd of police officers

and detectives, but he didn't get far before Donofrio spotted them, too.

"Hey! You kids! Come 'ere!" he shouted.

Of course they turned and ran.

Johnny and Bobby D took off after them, but even in his dress shoes, Ric was faster.

He chased them up into the dunes—ecologically fragile areas that were off-limits to the public. They were running full out, and Ric scrambled after them, through the brush that divided the beach from a poorly lit parking area.

He was finally starting to gain on the boys, his lungs burning as he pushed himself even harder, faster, when one of them—the taller one—tripped.

He went down hard, but came up almost immediately, moonlight glinting off of metal in his hand.

The kid had a handgun.

Ric could see it clearly, the stainless-steel slide gleaming. It was a Smith & Wesson nine-millimeter, tiny but deadly.

He had his own weapon out as he shouted, "Drop it! *Suelta el arma!*"

But the kid didn't drop it and the world went into high-def slo-mo.

Details stood out in sharp relief. The black grip of the pistol. The tightness and fear on the perp's face.

He was older than Ric had first thought, probably more like eighteen or nineteen, but small for his age.

The other kid was long gone.

"*Suelta el arma,*" Ric shouted again, the words stretched out long and loud as it took an eternity and then another eternity for his heart to pump his blood through his body, roaring in his ears.

But the kid didn't drop it and still didn't drop it and Ric's weapon was up and he had a clear, easy shot, but God damn it, hadn't one dead boy on the beach been enough?

Apparently not, because the kid fired twice—a quick double pop—and a hot slap to both his side and his left arm spun Ric around. So much for his new suit.

The kid fired again, this time missing him, giving Ric enough stretched out endless fractions of a second to re-steady his own weapon and take the kid down.

He pulled the trigger, and the kid hit the sand, his weapon flying out of his hand.

But damn, Ric couldn't keep himself standing and he, too, fell heavily to his knees just as Johnny and Bobby D crested the dune.

"Officer down," Johnny shouted as Donofrio fired.

"No," Ric said, but they didn't hear him, couldn't possibly hear him as Donofrio unloaded most of his magazine into the scrawny kid. Two, three, four, five, six, seven shots, and the night's body count was doubled.

Son of a bitch.

“Hang on, kid,” Johnny told Ric, leaning close, his breath smelling like lower-shelf whiskey and cigarettes. “Help’s coming. Just hang on.”

* * * *

Annie Dugan was sick and tired of late-night emergency phone calls.

For months she'd lived on the brink of disaster, cursing the inevitable. She was a prisoner of the specter of approaching death, trapped in a corner yet still fighting like hell against the odds—for someone who, in the end, had gone and quit on her.

Pam’s funeral was lovely, of course. Pam had made all the arrangements herself, in advance, and her parents were there to see that it went off without a glitch. Annie had sat in the back of the church, too tired and still too angry at her best friend to cry.

The house—a rustic New Hampshire farmhouse that Pam had renovated with her artistic flair two years before she was diagnosed as inoperable—sold almost immediately, mere hours after the hospice bed was removed from the front parlor.

It had felt as if it were all happening too quickly to Annie, but in her heart she knew it was a good thing. As much as she’d loved that house, as much as she thought of it as a home, it wasn’t her home and she didn’t want to stay.

Annie had gone back to Boston. Templar, Brick and Smith hired her back, just as they said they would. Eunice Templar, known throughout the business world as the Dragonlady, had gotten tears in her eyes when Annie had explained she couldn't just take a month’s leave of absence, that she was moving to New Hampshire for an indeterminate amount of time so that her best friend, Pam, could live out her last months at home, instead of in a hospital, surrounded by strangers.

After Pam died, Annie went back to work at the accounting firm. She found an apartment in Newton, and took her furniture and business suits and shoes out of storage.

This was when, the hospice coordinator and the grief counselors had all said, she would slowly but surely find her life returning to normal. It would take time, though. She should be patient. Expect bumps in the road.

It would feel strange at first, going back to work in a cubicle, after spending so much time outside. It would feel surreal, even. Almost as if she’d never left, as if the past few months hadn’t happened.

She should continue with counseling, they’d told her, so she dutifully went. Once a week, as part of her new/old routine.

But it had been months now, and still none of it seemed even remotely familiar—at least not until the phone rang tonight, interrupting Jon Stewart, at a quarter after eleven.

It was Celeste Harris, the woman who had bought Pam’s house, and she was clearly distressed. Pam’s dog, Pierre, a tiny mutt, part poodle, part mystery, had run away from his new home with Pam’s mom and had shown up again, in Celeste’s backyard. She’d

tried to coax him inside, tempting him with food, but he'd shied away. It was cold out and getting colder. She'd called the town dogcatcher, but he couldn't make it out there until the morning.

Celeste was afraid that would be too late—that Pierre would freeze to death by then. So she'd called Annie, hoping she could help.

And here Annie was. Heading to the rescue. North on Route 3. Shivering as her car took forever to warm up in the cold New England night.

She'd called Pam's mother, who reported Pierre had run away a full week ago—she hadn't wanted to bother Annie with that bad news. That dog was such a trial. Always hiding under the desk in the kitchen. Refusing food. Pooping at night on the dining-room floor.

Pam, who'd arranged every detail before she'd done the unspeakable, had made sure Pierre would go to live with her cousin Clive, of whom the little dog had grudgingly approved. But when Clive was offered a promotion and a move to his firm's London office, Pierre went to live with Pam's mom.

It was nearly 1 a.m. when Annie turned off the road and onto the crushed gravel of the drive that led back to Pam's house. Pam's former house.

The lights were still on, both porches lit up. The kitchen windows glowed, too, and the back screen opened with a familiar screech as Annie parked and got out of her car.

"Thank you for coming." Celeste came out onto the back porch, followed by her two daughters.

Pam would've loved the fact that children were living in her house. She wouldn't have loved the hatchet job they'd done on her beloved mountain laurels, though.

"He's over by the garbage pails," the younger girl announced. "Alongside the garage."

"It's a barn, dimwit," her older sister loftily corrected her.

"Yeah, but we keep our car there, so it's also a garage, *stupid*."

"Girls," their mother chastised.

Annie was already heading—slowly, carefully—around the side of the barn. "Pierre," she whispered, very softly.

Pierre had had a painful past, Pam had once told Annie as she snuggled the little dog in her arms, his head possessively on her shoulder. Long before Pam had met Pierre at the animal shelter, someone had neglected and even beaten him. It was hard for him to trust anyone, but he'd finally bonded with Pam. She'd told him, every day, that no one was going to hurt him, not ever again.

"Pierre, it's me," Annie whispered now. Not that he'd ever deigned to give her his attention before. Of course, back then, Pam was always there—his goddess, his all.

She heard him before she saw him—the tinkling of his tags as he shifted and then . . . He poked his head out into the dim light, wariness in his brown eyes.

He was almost unrecognizable. His hair was matted and dirty. And he was skinny. Skinnier. And shivering from the cold.

"Hey, puppy boy," Annie said softly, using Pam's pet names for him as she crouched down and held out her hand for him to sniff. "Hey, good dog. Everything's okay. No one's going to hurt you . . ."

To her complete surprise, he didn't hesitate. His tail even wagged slightly as he came out of his hiding place and licked her outstretched hand. Looking over his shoulder, as if to make sure that she was going to follow him, he trotted out onto the driveway and over to her car.

Annie stopped short. Did he really want . . . ?

"Wow, she likes you," the littler girl said, admiration in her voice. "She doesn't like us very much."

"*He* doesn't like *you*," her older sister pointed out. "Probably because you can't tell the difference between a girl dog and a boy dog."

Pierre looked at Annie, looked at the car, and then back at Annie, as if to say, *What are you waiting for?*

"I can't have a dog in my apartment," Annie said, as if he could actually understand her words. "Plus, I work full-time . . ."

Celeste opened the screen door. "Why don't you come inside?" she invited Annie. "Both of you. It's too late to drive back to Boston tonight. You can stay over on the couch and we can figure out a plan of action in the morning."

The thought of going into Pam's house was both appealing and dreadful. But it was late, and Annie was exhausted. "Thanks," she said.

Amazingly, Pierre didn't protest as she scooped him up. She followed the smaller of the girls inside, and . . . It was beyond weird.

Because it wasn't even remotely Pam's house anymore.

They'd repainted the walls, muting Pam's bright colors. And their furniture was vastly different from Pam's wicker and white painted wood. It was faux Colonial now—all dark veneers and copper drawer-pulls.

It smelled different, too.

"Bathroom's down the hall, second door on the left," Celeste said. "Of course, you know that. I'll be right back with some blankets."

She disappeared, shooing her daughters along to bed, leaving Annie and Pierre alone in the living room.

"I can't have a dog," Annie told him again, but he put his head down, right on her shoulder, the way he used to do with Pam, and he sighed. His entire little body shook with his exhale, and the crazy thing was that Annie felt what he was feeling, too.

If it wasn't quite contentment, it was pretty darn close.

It was oddly familiar.

Vaguely normal and very right, in spite of the freaky abnormality of their surroundings, in spite of Pierre's unfortunate aroma.

It was far more normal and right than she'd ever felt in her cubicle in Templar, Brick and Smith. Even before Pam got sick.

Celeste came back with an armload of bedding. "Worse come to worst, the dogcatcher'll be here in the morning. I know it's not the best solution, but at least the dog'll be warm in the pound. He'll have food . . ."

"I'm keeping him," Annie told her.

"But you said your apartment—"

"I didn't really like it there," she admitted. She didn't particularly like her job, either. Or Boston's relentless cold—the winters that lasted for nearly half the year. "Thanks for your hospitality, but I'm awake enough to drive. We're going home."

"Are you sure?" Celeste asked, following her to the kitchen door. "Because it's really not an imposition—"

"I'm sure," Annie told her. "Thanks again."

The gravel crunched under her boots as she took Pierre to her car. He didn't seem anxious as she set him down on the passenger seat. He just made himself comfortable, watching her expectantly.

Annie sat behind the wheel, started the engine. "Well," she said to the dog as she backed into the turnaround and headed down the drive, "now we just have to figure out where exactly home is."

* * * *

His team leader, Peggy Ryan, hated him.

It was an inane thing for FBI agent Jules Cassidy to be thinking, considering that a shooter had suddenly opened fire on the crowd of law enforcement personnel, all of whom had just rushed out from their protective cover behind half a dozen police cars.

But to be fair, this entire situation was drenched in extra crazy. It reeked of some serious what-the-fuck, too, starting with the cozy-looking little Cape-style house, located here on what should have been a peaceful suburban D.C. street.

The catastrophuck began ten hours ago, when the report of a hostage situation first came in. Jules's counterterrorist team had gotten a call because the hostage taker was a well-known bubba—a wanted terrorist of the homegrown variety.

They were told that—as best they could allege—there were three hostages being held by that lone HT in this unassuming little house with its flower gardens and white picket fence. As a full variety of police and FBI teams arrived on the scene, surrounding the structure and setting up the cars as a barricade to keep them all safely outside of Bubba's

rifle range, negotiations had been started.

After hours of standoff, to Jules's complete and utter surprise, the bubba had surrendered.

He came out of the house and into the yard with his hands up and empty—no weapon in sight.

At which point, Peggy gave the order to take him into custody. She and the local police chief—a bear of a man named Peeler—led the charge into the yard as Jules and the rest of the team headed for the house to see to the safety of the hostages.

The game was finally over.

Except, not so fast there, you.

Apparently, the *real* game was just beginning.

Because no, that wasn't just one shooter firing at them from that Cape, making them scatter. There were at least two. *Crap*, make that three. As Jules looked up at the house, he counted, yes, three different shooters—all firing rifles from the second-story dormer windows.

"What the hell . . . ?" Jules's FBI team member Deb Erlanger said it all as she and Yashi and George scrambled, pulling Jules with them, back behind one of the state police cruisers.

"Our radio's hit," Yashi announced.

Of course it was.

It was times like this that reinforced the importance of law enforcement personnel giving heavier weight to the presence of the word *allegedly* in the facts surrounding the decision-making process. *Allegedly* was a lot like assume, but in this case it didn't just make asses out of their team leaders, it made people dead.

Apparently, there wasn't one hostage taker and three hostages. Instead there were at least three hostile gunmen, apparently all determined to commit suicide-by-SWAT-team, while taking as many FBI and police with them as possible.

From Jules's new proximity, he could see that Chief Peeler had been shot. How badly he was wounded, Jules didn't know, but Peeler lay motionless in the Cape's front yard, protected only marginally by the garden's flimsy picket fence.

All but one of the shooters had what looked to be terrible aim—a clue that probably meant two of the three were amateurs.

Most of the FBI and police had made it safely back to cover behind the cars, with limited casualties—except for Peggy Ryan, who hated Jules and was pinned down in the yard, behind a small outcropping of rocks. She was plastered flat against the ground, weapon drawn, halfway between Peeler's sprawled body and the full cover of a neighbor's garden shed.

She'd dropped her radio. Jules could see it near Peeler's leg.

"Center window," Jules told Yashi, Deb, and George as he reached into the cruiser and grabbed the medical kit. He was going to take it with him just in case he and Peeler got pinned behind Peggy's rock. "Whoever's up there's the only one who can shoot worth shit. Focus your fire there. Keep it up until I get the chief back behind that shed."

George expressed his incredulity. "*You're* going to move Peeler?"

Yashi had a far more pertinent question. He held up his regulation sidearm. "Range on this thing's too short. It won't—"

"Just do it," Jules ordered. With luck, it would cause the shooters to take cover. It was hard to aim and shoot to kill whilst ducking.

"Yessir."

"Now!" Jules said, and medical kit slung over his shoulder, his own weapon out, he ran out into the street, toward the yard. Deb and Yashi and George's sidearms roared behind him, and as he headed straight into what could potentially be a hail of bullets from the holed-up gunmen, he realized he'd blown the perfect opportunity to say, *Cover me, I'm going in.*

Bullets from the shooters in the house hit the ground around him, sending puffs of dirt into the air. But there was no turning back now.

Jules fired his own weapon—not easy to do while running full out—aiming as best he could for that center window. He slid to a stop in the grass near Chief Peeler, tearing out the knee of his pants. Dang, this was his favorite suit, but perspective was important here. Last time he'd looked, Men's Wearhouse didn't sell internal organs.

The chief, however, hadn't been as lucky. He was lying with his head in a pool of blood. Expecting the worst, Jules felt for a pulse. To his surprise, he found it, steady and strong—and he realized that the chief had merely been grazed. A bullet had creased his hairline, over his left ear, hence the copious bleeding. It had knocked him out, but the man was alive.

For now, anyway.

Jules covered Peeler with his own body as a new rain of bullets pinged the ground around them.

He grabbed the radio that Peggy had dropped. "Cover me," he ordered whoever was listening on the other end. "I need some weapons with real range aiming for those windows. Keep it going while I pull the chief to the shed."

He didn't wait for confirmation—he pitched the radio over to Peggy and grabbed Peeler beneath his massive arms.

Jules may have been small of stature, but he was strong. He dug in his heels and dragged, but sweet Jesus, why couldn't the chief have taken a trip or two to the salad bar over the past few years instead of relentlessly supersizing the cheese fries?

But then Peggy was there, helping him, and together they pulled the chief all the way to that shed, where a medical team was already standing by.

"You hit?" one of the medics, a woman with her hair swept back into a tight ponytail, asked him.

Jules shook his head no. Miraculously, he wasn't. "Peg, you okay?"

She was already barking orders into the radio, calling in the SWAT team. If she was bleeding, she wasn't letting it slow her down.

"Man, you got balls," the other medic said. "And a shitload of luck. You know, Channel 4 news got it all on camera. You're going to be a hero. People 'round here love Chief Peeler, and you saved his life."

Great. Jules was going to have to call Laronda—the boss's assistant—and get her on top of smothering *that* merde cream pie as quickly as possible. Last thing he needed was his face on the evening news.

But it wasn't until later, until after the SWAT team sang and the dust had settled around the body bags being carried out of the newly secured house, that Jules was finally able to reintroduce himself to his cell phone. And even then, he had to pocket it when Peggy Ryan approached him.

Peggy Ryan—who hated him. Who probably wouldn't give a hoot if his name and likeness were plastered all over the national news.

In fact, she would use it as reason number 4,367 why he should quit.

It was then, as she was heading toward him, wearing her official business face, that Jules realized that by saving Morgan Peeler, he'd been saving Peggy Ryan.

"This doesn't change anything," she told him, trying to wipe the ground-in dirt from her starched white blouse. Her helmet-hair was messed up, too, but her eyes were just as they'd always been. Cold and distant. "Between us, I mean. I still don't think you belong in the Bureau."

"Gosh," Jules said, unable to keep his temper under check. Not that he'd expected a total change of heart, but was a simple "Good job" too much to ask? Or how about "Thank you"? "In *that* case, I guess I just should have let Chief Peeler die." He shook his head in disgust. "Believe it or not, *ma'am*, I didn't help him because I thought you would approve. I did it because someone had to help Peeler and you sure as hell seemed to have lost control of the entire situation. You had no radio and, frankly, until I went out there, you didn't seem to be concerned with much more than saving your own ass."

She flushed. "How dare you!"

Okay, so maybe that was a little harsh. Things had happened fast, and she *had* been pinned down. But he was sick of her crap, of her refusing to admit—even now—that he was an important player on their team. He'd tried winning her over with humor, but that hadn't worked. He'd hoped that today's heroics would at least gain him her grudging respect, but now he finally had to admit it. She was never going to accept him.

"I don't give a shit whether or not you think I belong here," he told her quietly. "The only two opinions I care about are mine and the boss's. And we both think I'm doing fine."

If you don't want to work with me, lady, *you're* going to have to put in for the transfer. Because I'm not going anywhere."

She wasn't listening. She never did. "If you think—"

Jules cut her off, got even farther up in her face. "I saved your soul today. You were team leader. You gave the order. If Peeler had died, you'd have had to live with that forever. That must really gall you, huh, Peg? The gay guy rescued you. That must really grate."

She spun on her heels—or heel, rather. One of them had broken off in the brouhaha. As Jules watched, she stalked away.

"You're welcome," he called after her, but she didn't even so much as look back.

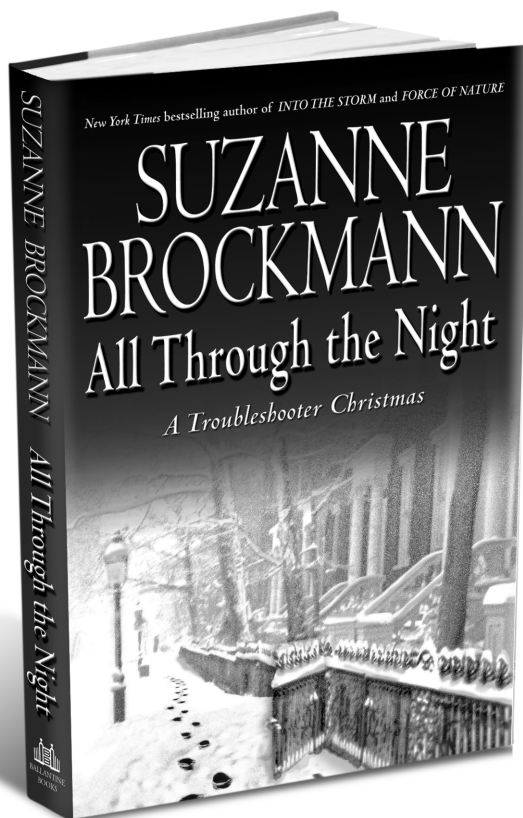
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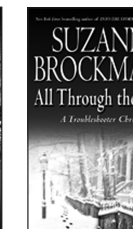
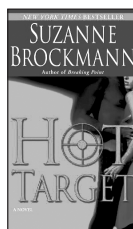
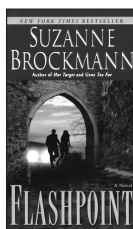
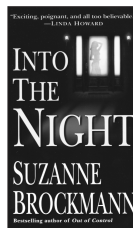
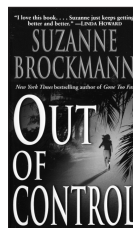
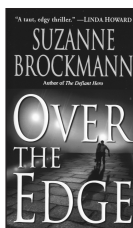
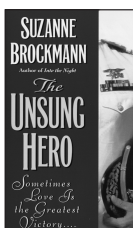
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From a writing workshop presented by
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“Did you get a chance to see what was wrong with the car?” Mama Bear called as she turned up the heat on the stove. This porridge just wasn’t thickening fast enough this morning.

Its current consistency made her feel queasy. Don’t barf. Don’t barf. She closed her eyes as she stirred.

“What? You mean, between midnight, when I finished doing the taxes, and six a.m. when Baby Bear woke me up?” Papa Bear didn’t sound in any better a mood this morning.

How was she going to tell him? He was always so worried about money—this was going to be the last straw. Another mouth to feed.

And lately he’d been so distant—as if he were . . . No. No. The bear she’d married would never cheat on her. Mama Bear refused to believe that possibility.

Finally—thank God—the porridge was ready. She quickly spooned it into three bowls, giving herself far less than usual. She wouldn’t be able to keep it down, and Baby Bear was in the middle of another growth spurt.

“Breakfast is ready,” she called, and Baby came running. She started to put the bowl on the table in front of him, but stopped short. “Go and wash your paws.”

He looked up at her with his dark brown eyes—so like his father’s—as if he were considering telling her he’d already done so. But he scampered down the hall to the bathroom. He knew better than to lie to her.

Papa Bear hadn’t come into the kitchen, so she went into the living room and . . .

He was on that blasted computer again. Surfing the Internet when he should have been out fixing their car.

“Breakfast,” she said again, impatience sharpening her voice, and he looked up, guilt on his face as he quickly clicked the e-mail shut—e-mail from someone named . . . Goldilocks?

And the queasiness she’d been fighting for the past few days hit her hard. She ran for the bathroom, pushing Baby Bear aside as the bile rose in her throat.

That look on Papa’s Bear face combined with that e-mail could mean only one thing—that the only bear she’d ever loved was having an affair.

Let's take another look at this exact same scene, this time from the hero's POV:

"Did you get a chance to see what was wrong with the car?" Mama Bear called from the kitchen.

Papa Bear scrolled quickly through the listings on Jobs dot-com. Jesus, these days everyone was looking for rabbits. No one wanted a bear. Oh, yeah, except for the Yellowstone Park Department. Like he was going to take a minimum wage gig, wearing that stupid hat and walking around saying: "Only you can prevent forest fires," after being featured in the center ring at Barnum & Bailey.

"What? You mean, between midnight, when I finished doing the taxes, and six a.m. when Baby Bear woke me up?" He closed his eyes. Damn it, that came out nastier than he'd intended. Mama Bear wasn't feeling well. He'd heard her get up last night, three or four different times, to go to the bathroom.

But maybe she hadn't heard him. She didn't say anything and . . .

Papa Bear sighed. He had to tell her. He just had to go in there, eat his breakfast, then look her in the eye and tell her. He'd been laid off.

Again.

"Breakfast is ready," Mama Bear called.

Wait. Whoa. He'd gotten an e-mail from Goldilocks, who'd said . . . Yes! She had a lead on a modeling job for a children's book. They needed a big bear, someone his size . . . Ah God, if that came through he wouldn't have to tell Mama Bear about . . .

"Breakfast."

Shit, she was standing right behind him. He clicked his e-mail shut, and quickly signed off.

"I'll look at the car right after we eat," he was just about to say, but she bolted. She flat out tore down the hall for the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind her.

What the hell . . . ?

Same scene, same dialogue, same action—but two different points of view.

And two very different sets of secrets revealed to the reader, don't you agree?



Point of view is a tool—one of the most important—that writers use to tell their stories. Like most writing tools, there is a wide variety of types of POV to choose from.

Let's get basic for a moment: Point of view (or POV) can best be described as a movie camera through which a reader can see and hear a story unfold.

Omniscient point of view is the equivalent of a security camera, hanging overhead, recording the action that takes place within range of its lens. It reveals information to the reader impartially, without taking sides or having any opinion. It's objective.

Subjective point of view is when the camera is attached to the top of one character's head. The readers see and hear the action from that character's perspective. We also can hear that character's thoughts, if the writer chooses to share them with us.

But if the writer moves the camera deeper—way down deep inside of that character's head—we can not only see and hear what that character sees and hears, we not only know what he thinks and what he feels as he's thinking and feeling it, but the writer also uses his words, his descriptions—his very voice—to tell the story.

I call this *deep point of view*.

The deep POV that I used in the examples above is extremely subjective—it's opinionated, if you will. It's one individual's perception. The reader sees and hears the first example through only Mama Bear's eyes. The reader gets deep inside her head and finds out everything that this character is feeling, thinking, worrying about.

But here's the catch: When I'm writing in Mama Bear's deep POV, both Mama and the reader have no access to the multitude of things that Papa Bear is feeling, thinking, worrying about. The reader (and Mama Bear) can only guess. And the reader has the additional challenge of having to wade through

Mama Bear's interpretations of what Papa Bear is feeling. (And Mama Bear may be wrong at times!)

Using deep POV is like writing a first person book in the third person. Although, unlike most first person stories, which usually have one single POV throughout the entire book, I've written books that have two, four, even six or more different and equally deep POVs.

Some writers choose to use multiple first person POVs in the course of a single book. I've read plenty of stories where this works quite nicely. I've also read books where the first person POV was regularly interrupted by a third person POV of the antagonist—usually a gruesome serial killer. Again, if done right, this can work really well, too.

There are many POV options in the writers' toolbox, most falling somewhere between extremely subjective and extremely objective points of view. Here's how I would list some of those many choices:

- first person (completely subjective)
- deep third person (as completely subjective as first person)
- third person (slightly subjective, with some distance created by a narrator's objective voice)
- narrated third person (formal and only rarely subjective, with reader kept at arm's length from characters by the narrator's clear and objective voice)
- omniscient third person (formal and completely objective)

One of my favorite romance novels—*The Night Drifter* by Susan Carroll—is an historical paranormal. In the prologue, Susan uses a mix of omniscient and narrated third person point of view

quite brilliantly to set the mood for the entire book.

Prologue from *The Night Drifter* by Susan Carroll, published by Ballantine Books:

It was the kind of night when anything could happen. Magic. Moonlight. The sea roaring like a dragon, breathing a soft mist that was slowly enveloping the land. The stalwart figure who drifted along the rocky shoreline materialized like an apparition in his glinting chain mail and dark tunic. A ghostly knight from King Arthur's court who had wandered into the nineteenth century by mistake and couldn't quite find his way back to Camelot.

But Lance St. Leger was merely a man attired in the costume he had worn to the Midsummer's Eve fest and had not yet troubled to remove. He had far weightier matters on his mind.

He scanned the dark and silent beach ahead of him, his face anxious and tense. He was possessed of strong handsome features: a square jaw, a hawklike nose, and a deeply tanned complexion framed beneath a sweep of raven-black hair.

Okay, it's clear we're not inside Lance's head—correct? People don't self-describe that way—they look into a mirror and see their faults and flaws.

Going on . . .

But a certain cynicism already marred the velvet darkness of his eyes, despite the fact that he was a relatively young man, only twenty-seven. The disillusionment that tugged at the full curve of his lips made him seem older, giving his mouth a hard cast except when he smiled.

So whose POV is this?

We've agreed it's not Lance's—he's not watching himself walk down the beach. And yet he's the only person in this scene.

This is omniscient point of view.

Whose voice is it? It's a narrator's voice. Lance isn't telling us his story—someone else is. Someone who's not emotionally connected the way Lance is. Someone who's reporting the action, describing what is in front of the so-called omniscient camera's lens.

Now take a look at another example of deep point of view from my book, *Gone Too Far*. In this scene, we're deep inside the head of the heroine, Alyssa Locke:

Alyssa nearly jumped through the roof when Max knocked on the side window of her car.

"Where did you come from?" she asked as she popped the lock and let him in. She honestly hadn't seen him approach. And she'd been watching.

Her heart was still racing as he sat down next to her and closed the door.

Her heart was still racing—there's no way a camera hanging overhead could know that—or that she honestly hadn't seen him approach. These are things that we know only because we're inside Alyssa's head.

Here's yet another example of deep point of view from my soon-to-be published book, *Force of Nature*. This scene is from the deep POV of Robin Chadwick, an actor with whom one of the book's major characters, FBI agent Jules Cassidy, has shared an on-going attraction over the course of a number of installments in my Troubleshooters series:

Robin was dressed and pouring himself the evening's first drink when someone knocked on his hotel-room door.

It probably wasn't Dolphina or another of his handlers—there was still a solid hour before he had to leave for . . . whatever event was happening tonight.

Well, maybe it was Dolphina, who'd recently decided she no longer hated him and that she'd rather be his mother. Over the past few days, she'd made sure he ate right, found time to exercise, and, if he drank a little too much, she got him safely back to his room—all without ending up in his bed.

Although, that might no longer be true. Last night he'd been particularly shit-faced, and as he'd stumbled over the seam between the suite's living-room tile and the bedroom carpeting, she'd caught him and kept him from breaking his nose. He'd repaid her by dragging her back with him onto his bed, because she was not unattractive, and when he got skunked, sex of any kind seemed better than no sex at all.

As so often was the case when he drank too much, that was where his memory went from murky to dark.

Okay, this scene takes place several chapters into the book. It should be clear to the reader from the first few lines that these are Robin's observations, Robin's thoughts and feelings.

Now, remember that I said that deep POV is like writing a first person book from the third person? First person is I, me, mine. Third person is she, her, hers.

If a scene is truly written using deep POV, you

can substitute first person pronouns, read the scene using **I**, **me** and **mine**, and still have it make total sense.

In fact, if you're trying to write in deep POV, but you're having trouble doing so, I recommend that you write the scene in first person, using those words—I, me, mine. After you've finished the scene you can go back and switch to third person pronouns.

Look at the words highlighted in the excerpt above. These are the **only** words that would have to be switched to change this into a first person POV scene.

Let me show you exactly what I mean, going on with the excerpt:

So yes, it was probably Dolphina a-knockin' on his door. She knocked again—louder this time.

Robin looked through the fish-eyed lens of the peephole and . . .

Holy dancing Jesus. **He** almost dropped **his** drink. **He** looked again.

He took off the chain and opened the door, and yes, it definitely was Jules Cassidy standing in the hotel corridor.

Dressed in eveningwear similar to the tuxedo that **Robin himself** had on.

Here's this exact same section, in first person point of view:

So yes, it was probably Dolphina a-knockin' on my door. She knocked again—louder this time.

I looked through the fish-eyed lens of the peephole and . . .

Holy dancing Jesus. **I** almost dropped **my** drink. **I** looked again.

I took off the chain and opened the door, and yes, it definitely was Jules Cassidy standing in the hotel corridor.

Dressed in eveningwear similar to the tuxedo that **I** had on.

The next few paragraphs of this ongoing scene would not require a single word change to work either in deep POV or first person POV:

Other than the tux, Jules hadn't changed at all in the past few years. Same short dark hair, same trim, compact body, same handsome face, same warm brown eyes.

Same molten attraction in those eyes that didn't fade even when he smiled.

The man had a ridiculously sweet smile, even when it was tentative, as it was now.

We're in Robin's head. This is not an objective description of Jules. This is what Robin sees when he sees Jules—molten attraction and a ridiculously sweet smile. Then Jules speaks, which Robin reports rather objectively—again, no changes necessary to make this work in the first person:

"Sorry to surprise you," Jules said. "I called your cell, but you didn't pick up."

Going on, as written in Robin's deep POV:

Robin didn't answer. He couldn't. He no longer spoke English—it had been flabbergasted out of him. Instead, he stepped back and gestured for Jules to come inside.

Jules, of course, hesitated. "I was actually thinking we could go down to the bar."

A stiff drink would be great right about now. But then Robin realized he was holding a glass of rum in his hand. He hadn't yet added the Coke, but what the hell. He took a healthy sip, and his ability to speak returned. "I'll be mobbed. Down there. I can't just go to a bar anymore. Well, I can, if I grunge up, but not on the opening night of a film festival like this."

Jules nodded. "I should've realized. I'm sorry, I'm . . . Congratulations. I've heard great things about the movie and . . . Your career's really . . . Congratulations."

He was as flustered as Robin was. Maybe even more so. And he'd known who was going to be on the other side of the door before it had opened.

"Please come in," Robin managed.

Jules looked past him and into the suite. It was huge—and set up as a living room. Sofa and chairs, and even a full-size dining table. No king-size bed for them to have to pretend not to notice. That was on the other side of French doors that Robin kept tightly shut, mostly due to the fact that he was a slob.

"Thanks," Jules said as he came inside, as Robin shut the door behind him, putting the chain back on—which Jules noticed. Of course, FBI agents tended to notice everything.

But God, he still smelled exactly the same. And suddenly Robin went from just barely able to speak to unable to shut the fuck up. "Jesus, I've missed you," came spewing out just as Jules said, "I'm here on business."

And that wasn't just disappointing, it was also as

awkward as shit.

* * * *

Okay, so that's how it works. With deep POV, the writer is channeling the character rather than being the narrator of the story. In deep POV, there is no narrator.

Let's go back to *The Night Drifter*. You can't just switch this prologue into first person. It doesn't work to do that, because the point of view isn't that of one of the story's characters. The eyes and the voice are that of the narrator.

And yet, as you read this next excerpt from *The Night Drifter's* prologue, you'll see I've put some words and phrases in bold font. In most cases, this marks where the author dipped down into a subjective point of view—into Lance's point of view. But it's not deep POV. It's something in between omniscient and deep POV.

He (Lance) *wasn't smiling now as he studied the overturned hull of an abandoned fishing boat, the sea raking cold fingers of foam across the sand, obliterating all traces of any footsteps. But Lance **was certain** this was the place where he had been attacked only an hour before, surprised by some hooded brigand and rendered unconscious.*

Was certain. That's something only Lance knows—a security camera wouldn't be able to report that Lance was certain of anything.

When Lance had awoken, he had found his watch and signet ring missing. But that had not been the worst of it. The thief had also taken his sword, the one that had been in his family for generations, a weapon as steeped in mystery and magic as the St. Leger name itself.

When the sword had first been handed down to Lance on his eighteenth birthday, **he had sensed** the power in it. **Merely touching the hilt had somehow made him feel stronger, better, more noble.**

He had earnestly recited the pledge that all St. Leger heirs were required to give:

I vow that I will only employ this blade in just cause. That I will never use it to shed the blood of another St. Leger. And on the day that I marry, I will offer this sword up to my bride as a symbol of my undying love along with my heart and soul forever.

But that had been a long time ago. Back when Lance still believed in such things as just causes, magic, and true love. Back when he still believed in himself . . .

Lance **desperately** circled the area around the boat, but he didn't know why he had bothered to come back here, what he was hoping to find.

Again, here the author dips down into subjective point of view. The omniscient eye would simply say, "Lance circled the area around the boat," not "Lance **desperately** circled . . ."

But the author still keeps the language formal, and by doing this, she is keeping the reader at a polite distance. It's a style which, in my opinion, works really nicely with this genre of romance.

Going on—we're still in that same slightly formal subjective point of view as the narrator shares Lance's thoughts with us:

That the thief had experienced a change of heart? That he would suddenly reappear to return the stolen treasure to Lance, scraping and bowing while he babbled, "Oh, here you are, Master Lance, here's your ancestral sword. Please forgive the impertinence."

Lance's lip curled in contempt at his own folly. He swore beneath his breath, cursing both the unknown brigand and himself. He had certainly made mistakes in the past, brought enough disgrace to his family's name, but allowing that sword to be stolen was by far the worst thing he'd ever done.

Not true, a sad voice whispered in his ear. The worst thing was what you did to your brother, Val.

But Lance refused to think about Val. He was already racked with enough guilt over the disappearance of that infernal sword.

Despairing of finding any clue to his attacker on the beach, Lance turned and headed up the path toward the village instead. Despite the fact that he had recently cashiered out of the service, Lance still moved with the military bearing of a man who spent nearly nine years as an officer in Wellington's army.

Again, we're back into heavy omniscient POV. We're once again watching Lance move—we're not inside of his head and moving with him. He wouldn't think this about himself. The narrator is giving us this information.

And it works wonderfully, again, to set the mood. This entire prologue drips with both a sense of magic

and the formality of the past.

Slipping quietly alongside the forge next to the blacksmith's shop, he peered toward the line of white-washed cottages. Earlier Torrecombe had been a riot of noise and laughter, alive with all the excitement of the Midsummer's Eve festival. But the village slumbered now, not a soul stirring across the green in the center of town.

Lance **thought briefly** of conducting a house-to-house search, **only to discard the notion**. He **doubted** that anyone from the village would have dared to attack him. The local folk were too much in awe of the St. Legers and their legends. Legends of a family descended from a notorious sorcerer. The mighty Lord Prospero might have come to a disastrous end, burned at the stake, but he had passed on a legacy of strange talents and powers to his descendants, of which Lance had inherited his share.

No. Lance was convinced. No one from the village would have trifled with a St. Leger. The thief had to have been an outsider, a stranger, and there had been plenty of those wandering through Torrecombe tonight because of the fair. Many of them were stopping over at the inn, and that seemed the most likely place for Lance to begin his search.

He stole across the village square until the Dragon's Fire Inn loomed over him. **A quaint building, it still bore traces of its original Tudor construction, with mullioned windows and overhanging eaves.**

An ostler bustled about the stable yard, attending to the horse of some late arrival. Lance watched, keeping to the shadows. Long ago, he had promised his father that he would never reveal the secret of his own peculiar and frightening power to anyone outside of the family. And one did not lightly break promises given to Anatole St. Leger, the dread lord of the Castle Leger.

Lance was **deeply grateful** that at this moment his father was far from Cornwall, traveling abroad on an extensive holiday with Lance's mother and three younger sisters. He'd already proved enough of a disappointment to Anatole St. Leger, **Lance reflected grimly**. With any luck at all he would be able to recover the sword before word of this latest escapade reached his father's ears. He had to.

Huddling behind a tree, Lance wished that he was merely a clairvoyant like his second cousin Maeve. It would certainly make his search for the sword easier . . .

and safer. The ostler was taking a damned long time about disappearing into the stables. The blasted fool was doing more stroking and talking to that horse than he was attending to it.

Lance cast an uneasy glance toward the sky, trying to calculate how much time he had left until dawn. It would not do for him to be caught abroad exercising his strange gift when the sun came up. That could prove dangerous. In fact, deadly.

He was filled with relief when the ostler moved on at last, leading the horse into the stables.

The author made a choice to use mostly omniscient POV in this prologue for a really good reason. *The Night Drifter* has a hero who has magical powers and Susan Carroll hits us with that at the very end of the prologue when she writes:

Stealing from his hiding place, Lance drifted toward the inn. After a moment more of hesitation, he braced himself.

And shimmered straight through the wall.

Whoa. Really?

This startling revelation is far more effective when seen through that objective, omniscient point of view, don't you think? The camera is overhead rather than inside of Lance's head.

Think about this.

Lance is the only character in this scene. If Susan Carroll had chosen to write all of this prologue using deep point of view, it would have lost its impact. Lance already knows he can dematerialize and shimmer through walls. It's no surprise to him.

Because Susan wrote using omniscient point of view, the reader is allowed to watch Lance go straight through the wall without any warning—and his action has quite a bit of dramatic impact!

Again, writing is all about making choices—making the right choice for the scene or the book or even the character.

I like writing in deep POV, and I've chosen to use it in my books since the very beginning of my career. In fact, when I started using it, editors sometimes didn't understand what I was doing, and they tried to dilute it by adding distancing words like "she thought" or "he thought." (More about that in a moment . . .)

But for about eight years now, I've been something of a deep POV purist. I've chosen to

write books that contain six or more different deep POVs, but *only one point of view per scene*.

Do I do this because it's the "right" way to write? No. My point of view choices are just that—*my choices*. I write with only one POV per scene because I like the way it feels to write this way, because—to me—it feels as if it works best for my books, my characters, my subplots and my stories.

Earlier in my career, when I wrote category romances—books with only two different POVs—that of the hero and the heroine—I often flipped point of view mid-scene, sometimes even two or three times. I'd start the scene in the hero's deep POV, switch to the heroine's equally deep POV halfway through and then flip back to the hero's to end the scene.

That worked, too. I simply choose not to write that way anymore. (And who knows? I may choose to go back to that at some point—if I feel a book will work better with that device.)

Personally, I usually don't enjoy books in which an author pops into many different characters' heads seemingly randomly—something that's called head-hopping. I find that, for me as a reader, it can be jarring and disruptive to the storyline. But there are wonderful authors who can really make this work. And they make it work using deep POV, too.

So here's a rule about point of view: Do whatever you want—just make it work!

Let's go back to a statement I made earlier: **Point of view is a tool writers use to tell their stories.**

Let me add to that. Point of view is a tool writers use to tell their story *in the most exciting or interesting way possible*.

Every time I sit down to write a scene for one of my books, I do a little prep work first. I ask myself:

- Which characters are in this scene?
- Whose POV should I use to make this scene as exciting for the reader as possible?
- And whose POV should I *not* use to keep from revealing too much information to the reader?

Writing a page-turner means that there is always a question that the reader is burning to have answered. You-the-writer are keeping secrets from the reader—secrets that you will reveal—slowly—

throughout the story.

But with deep POV, you're so solidly inside a character's head, there are some secrets you just can't withhold from readers without leaving them feeling cheated.

Let me give an example of what I mean.

Say you're writing a scene in which the hero of your book—let's call him Hank—puts himself in harm's way to keep the heroine, Linda, from getting hurt.

Let's be more specific—Hank happens upon Linda being hassled by a thug. Hank steps in and things escalate—he ends up in a physical fight with this thug.

So that's the scene you need to write. Whose deep POV are you going to use? Hank's or Linda's?

Well, it depends on what you want to reveal to the reader. What questions will remain questions, and what questions will be answered right away by using that one character's deep POV?

If you use Linda's POV, you can describe Hank—you can give us a physical description of the hero—that's always worthwhile information, particularly if this scene takes place near the beginning of the book. You can also show the reader Linda's emotional reaction to being rescued. (Is she relieved, is she upset, is she frustrated, is she angry at Hank . . . ?)

If you use Hank's POV, you can describe *his* emotional reaction to the heroine being in danger—as well as his reaction to realizing that the thug is capable of kicking his butt.

Oh, here's something you need to consider. Is this scene really going to be a fight scene, or will the thug run away? If it is a fight, do you really want to describe it blow for blow, from the POV of Hank, who's doing the fighting? Do you have the knowledge to do that?

Or do you want to use Linda's POV? Even when she jumps in to help Hank, she might not know a left hook from an uppercut—and might describe the action instead as a "flurry of arms and legs," or as garbage pails being knocked over.

So, okay—let's take this scene a step further. Let's factor in information that these characters already know by the time this scene occurs in the book.

What if Hank is an undercover cop and he recognizes the thug as an ex-boxer who works for a

local loan shark as a money collector/knee breaker.

What if Linda also recognizes the thug—he's a man she's seen recently, harassing her father. She suspects her father is in trouble—but her dad's reassured her. He tells her the thug mistook him for someone else. And let's assume that you've shown all this to the reader in earlier scenes in the book. But now Linda realizes, when she encounters this thug again, that her father was lying to her. He *is* in serious trouble. She's upset and disappointed and frightened.

In other words, both Hank and Linda recognize the thug—and they both have reasons to hide that information from each other. But once you get inside their heads with deep POV, the *reader* will have access to their secrets.

Now. What if, at the end of the scene, after the thug has finally run off, Hank makes sure Linda is okay, and vice versa, and he asks, “Do you know that guy?”

And Linda lies. Right to his face. She says no—she's never seen him before in her life.

Again, whose POV do you want to use to write this scene?

- What do you want the reader to know?
- What will you *need* to reveal if you are in Hank's head?
- What will you *need* to reveal if you're in Linda's head?

Also, what *can't* you reveal by being in Hank's head, instead of Linda's? And vice versa?

Let me explain. If you write the scene from Hank's deep point of view, the reader will know that Hank recognizes the thug. The reader also knows that Linda recognizes the thug—because she was in an earlier scene with the thug and her father.

When Linda tells Hank that she's never seen this thug before, the reader will know that she is lying. Hank might not, but the reader will.

Now, you might want to use this to keep the reader asking questions like, “What's going on with Linda?” and “Why does she feel the need to lie?”

Or you might want to get inside Linda's head instead of Hank's—so that when Linda *is* forced to lie, you can explain to the reader her reasons for doing so. Your heroine is supposed to be a

sympathetic character—you might need to make sure the readers understand why a likable character will do something like lie.

And those reasons might be that she's scared, she's worried that her father will be in trouble, she's worried that Hank will be hurt or killed. You can reveal to the reader that she hates that she has to lie, that she's never lied before. With deep POV you go into Linda's head and let the reader see exactly what she's thinking. You have the opportunity to explain her less than heroic behavior.

* * * *

There are some rules that I recommend you follow if you use deep POV to tell your story.

Deep POV rule #1: Don't cheat the reader.

If a character has a secret, and you use deep POV to get inside his head, and you *don't* reveal that secret at a time when he'd be thinking about it, your readers are going to get annoyed with you.

Take care how you handle characters' secrets. It is possible both to use deep POV *and* keep a major secret from the reader, but you need to reveal bits and pieces along the way.

I once wrote a book in which the heroine—and the readers—believe that the hero might be a serial killer. In order to keep the readers thinking that he might be the killer, I did two things. The first was that I didn't spend very much time inside his head! Most of the scenes were from the heroine's POV. But the second thing I did was to give my hero a violent and traumatic backstory (a murdered girlfriend dying in his arms) that he frequently remembered in bloody snippets—and always tried to push out of his mind.

The reader gets these glimpses of violence and death while inside of the hero's head, but the full backstory isn't revealed until the end of the book.

Another example of using POV to keep (or reveal) secrets is from the fourth book in my Troubleshooters series, *Out of Control*.

In this book, the heroine, Savannah, goes to San Diego specifically to find the hero, Navy SEAL Kenny Karmody. She intends to ask him to go with her to Indonesia, to help her deliver a suitcase of cash to her uncle, who's in trouble. Savannah's scared—she believes she'll be safer with a SEAL as

a traveling companion.

Savannah had met Ken several times when she was in college—he was hot and heavy with Adele, a senior at Yale when Savannah was a freshman there. Savannah doubts he'd remember her. Adele barely remembers her—still Savannah gets Ken's address and phone number from Adele, who had an extremely rocky breakup with Ken several years earlier. In fact, Adele warns Savannah not to tell Ken that she got his phone number from her. He's still very angry with Adele.

Early in the book, Kenny comes to Savannah's rescue when she has a flat tire near his house. He doesn't realize she was in his neighborhood looking for him. There's an instant attraction, they hit it off, and almost before either of them know it, they're in bed together.

And the next day, when Ken finds out Savannah's connection to Adele, when her secret is revealed—he's stunned—and extremely upset.

And I should probably say when her secret is revealed **to him**—because the readers already know Savannah's secret. Since I was writing from Savannah's deep POV, I couldn't keep her connection to Adele a secret from them. If I'd sprung that on them after spending all that time in Savannah's head, they wouldn't've believed it.

But that doesn't mean that the scene had any less emotional impact! In fact, I think it had more. Because the readers knew Savannah's secret right from the start, the question they were asking as they read this book was: "Uh-oh, how is hot-tempered Ken going to react when he finds out about *this*?"

Let's back up just a bit. I'm not saying as soon as you decide to write using deep POV that you should do an instant information dump on the reader and reveal every single one of your character's secrets!

In fact, you need to reveal information to the reader that makes sense—information that the character would naturally be thinking about, depending on whatever situation he or she is in.

You need to have that character think thoughts and notice things that he or she would notice—mental reactions that relate both to their world and to their immediate surroundings.

I wrote a book called *Stand-In Groom* (being re-

issued by Bantam this summer!) where the hero is a chef. His world is all about food and the restaurant business. When the heroine tells him she's getting married and that it's going to be a huge, formal affair with over five hundred guests, his first thought is, "Whoa—who'd she find to cater that?"

Another example: Say you had a hero with a close relative in a wheelchair. While someone else might not even realize that three little steps up to a front door make it impossible for some people to enter a building, your hero might focus for a pissed-off moment on the fact that the place isn't wheelchair accessible.

But that's all your hero might be thinking at that moment—you don't need to go into detail about the tragic car accident that killed his sister and crippled his niece for life—at least not in the first few chapters of the book.

Save that reveal for a moment with far more emotional impact. (Let the hero haltingly tell that story to the heroine, much later in the book.)

* * * *

Deep POV rule #2: Make sure your characters don't notice things they would miss.

An example: If you're in your Navy SEAL hero's head, and a shady character comes into the bar that he's hanging out in, your SEAL is going to be able to tell from one glance if your bad guy has had any military training. Your hero will know this just from the way Mr. Bad walks and stands.

But if you're in your SEAL hero's head and the heroine walks into the bar that he's hanging in, you *may* want to focus on the fact that her sweater hugs her curves and not the fact that her shoes and handbag are designer. UNLESS that's part of his backstory.

It's an entirely different story, of course, when you're using omniscient point of view.

Let's return for a moment to Susan Carroll's *The Night Drifter*. There's a highlighted sentence in the excerpt from the prologue that reads:

A quaint building, it still bore traces of its original Tudor construction, with mullioned windows and overhanging eaves.

Again, this is the narrator reporting with that

omniscient security camera POV. This is not Lance's observation. And yet it helps add to the mood of the scene and the entire book. It works.

* * * *

Deep POV rule # 3: No unconscious thoughts.

If we're deep in Frank's head, none of this:

Frank didn't notice as, across the room, Howie poured himself another drink.

Frank didn't notice is someone else's observation, not Frank's. It works with omniscient. Or it could be Howie's POV:

Howie glanced up, but across the room Frank was deep in his book. He didn't notice as Howie poured himself another drink—a double this time.

* * * *

Deep POV rule # 4: Don't use distancing words.

He thought

He reflected

Using these tags pushes the reader away, to at least an arm's length. If we're inside a character's head, everything in the entire scene is his thought or reflection. You don't need to say "he thought."

And I'm talking only about the use of **he thought** as if it were **he said**.

Example:

*She was going to die. This bus driver was obviously the spawn of Satan, determined to take them all to hell as he rounded the corner on two wheels. **She thought** of all the times her mother had urged her to go to church, to get on God's good side . . .*

This is deep POV. Obviously **she thought** works here.

As opposed to:

*She was going to die, **she thought**, as the bus driver took the corner going much too quickly.*

Any time you interject **she thought**, **she reflected**, **she guessed**, and so forth in this way—that's you speaking, taking on the voice of the narrator, and your doing this takes the reader outside of the character's head.

Take that last example—does it work if we read it in the first person?

*I was going to die, **I thought**, as the bus driver took the corner much too quickly.*

Eh. It doesn't exactly not work, but it's not very compelling, considering. It distances the reader from the POV emotions of the moment.

As opposed to:

*I was going to die. This bus driver was obviously the spawn of Satan, determined to take us all to hell as he rounded the corner on two wheels. **I thought** of all the times my mother had urged me to go to church, to get on God's good side . . .*

See the difference?

* * * *

Deep POV rule # 5: Use "anchoring" words to maintain deep POV.

In other words, throughout each scene regularly remind readers of the scene's POV character by using strong POV establishing words.

For example, take the following statement from Sam's POV:

Alyssa was angry.

That could be Alyssa's POV right? It's what's she's feeling. But it could also be Sam's POV—he's describing her and he knows just from looking that she's angry.

But there are ways to say this from Sam's POV that won't leave any doubt in the readers' minds that we're still firmly in Sam's head.

Alyssa seemed to be angry.

Alyssa clearly was angry.

Alyssa was obviously angry. Sam took a step back, just in case she was angry enough to smack him.

Seemed to be, clearly, obviously—these are all POV anchoring words you can use to be sure there's no question that we're still in Sam's head.

Another anchor word to maintain your deep POV is **watched**. *Sam watched . . .* Again, think of POV as the camera lens.

Sam watched Alyssa as she tied her sneakers, her movements jerky. She was angry—no doubt about it.

We're firmly in Sam's head.

Another anchor word: **Knew**. *Sam knew . . .*

*Alyssa tied her sneakers. Sam **knew**, just from the set of her shoulders, that she was angry.*

Again, no question that we're in Sam's head. **Saw** works, too. (*Sam saw*, just from the set of her shoulders, that she was angry.)

Wanted is another anchor word that helps maintain deep POV.

Alyssa tied her sneakers, her movements jerky. Sam wanted to apologize, but as soon as he opened his mouth, she shook her head. "Don't say a word," she told him.

Okay, look at that one again.

Alyssa tied her sneakers, her movements jerky.

The camera lens is watching Alyssa—this isn't her POV. It's not how Alyssa would describe herself as she tied her shoes.

From Alyssa's POV I would write:

Alyssa tied her sneakers, trying desperately not to let Sam see that her hands were shaking. God, he made her so angry. He was sitting there, his long legs stretched out in front of him, relaxed and calm, as if nothing at all was wrong.

Use description of other characters—*his long legs stretched out*—to maintain deep POV. We know we're in Alyssa's head because she sees Sam—the POV camera lens is through her eyes.

But a description doesn't have to be visual to maintain deep POV. A POV character could also describe the sound of a voice.

"So you're just going to leave," Sam said, and his voice gave him away. It was tight, clipped, and Alyssa knew that he was as upset as she was.

* * * *

Setting POV

Oftentimes I'll start a scene with the character's name. Right up front.

Example:

Frisco's knee was on fire.

This is the very first sentence of *Frisco's Kid*, the third book in my Tall, Dark & Dangerous series.

Bang, just like that, we're inside Frisco's head. This couldn't be omniscient POV—a security camera wouldn't be able to report the way Frisco's knee feels. (And this would be a very different book if this character's knee actually was on fire!)

Another way to establish deep POV is by using your character's voice.

Here's the start of a new scene and a new POV from *Gone Too Far*:

As if his plaid sports jacket wasn't bad enough, Jon Hopper of Harrison Motors had a comb-over that was

distracting as hell.

Sam followed Hopper and Alyssa to the back of the car lot, unable to think of anything except, what the Jesus God did this guy look like in the morning, fresh out of bed? His hair above his left ear probably hung down to his shoulder.

That's Sam Starrett's voice—it's clear we're in his head.

It's important not to keep readers guessing though. Use anchor words like the ones I mentioned earlier to make the POV very clear. "*Sam followed . . . unable to think of anything except . . .*" Bang, we know we're in his head. (If we didn't know already!)

Here's another example from the start of Jules Cassidy's first POV scene in *Force of Nature*:

His team leader, Peggy Ryan, hated him.

It was an inane thing for FBI agent Jules Cassidy to be thinking, considering that a shooter had suddenly opened fire on the crowd of law enforcement personnel, all of whom had just rushed out from their protective cover behind half a dozen police cars.

But to be fair, this entire situation was drenched in extra crazy. It reeked of some serious what-the-fuck, too, starting with the cozy-looking little Cape-style house, located here on what should have been a peaceful suburban D.C. street.

Jules Cassidy is a recurring character in my Troubleshooter series and he's back in his full irreverent glory in *Force of Nature*. Although he's appeared in nine out of eleven Troubleshooters books, I didn't write from his POV until book # 8, *Hot Target*:

Jules Cassidy hated L.A.

He hated it for the usual reasons—the relentless traffic jams, the unending sameness of the weather, and the air of frantic, fear-driven competition that ruled the city. It was as if all four million inhabitants were holding their breath, terrified that if they were on top, they'd fall; if they were climbing, they wouldn't make it; and if they were at the bottom, they'd never get their big break.

It was called the City of Angels, but the folks who gave it that name had neglected to mention that the particular angels who lived there didn't answer to the man upstairs.

Jules could almost hear one of those satanic types laughing as he gazed at his current number one reason

why he hated L.A.

A kid, barely out of his teens, was pointing a handgun at Jules's chest. "Give me your wallet!"

Jules also appeared as a POV character in book # 9, *Breaking Point*. Here's the start of his first scene in that book:

It was a fabulous day. Blue sky. Low humidity. Not a lot of traffic this time of morning. Green lights at every intersection. A parking spot within javelin-throwing distance of the office building.

The elevator opened at the touch of the button and he rode it, express, all the way up to his floor. The doors opened again, and he got a good look at himself in the foyer mirror.

Dressed to shine in his favorite black suit, with a new shirt he'd bought himself as a present, Jules Cassidy was not your average, run-of-the-mill FBI agent, that was for sure. He pocketed his sunglasses and adjusted his tie, then headed down the hallway with a spring in his step.

My goal in each of these scenes was to introduce Jules, to let the readers know that he's an FBI agent—and in the example from *Hot Target*, in which Jules is held up at gunpoint, I go on to show him overpowering and arresting his mugger.

But even more important than that, in each of these scenes, I'm introducing the readers to Jules's voice: his irreverence, his humor, his generally upbeat attitude. I want the reader to be able to quickly identify Jules from his voice, to know instantly whenever a scene is written from his deep POV.

(You can read the rest of the Jules POV scene from *Force of Nature* in the excerpt featured in the flip side of this booklet!)

* * * *

Switching deep POV mid-scene

Early in my career, I wrote category romances, and only used two points of view—the hero's and the heroine's—throughout the entire book. I would often start the scene in the hero's POV, then move directly into the heroine's POV without a scene break.

My goal was always to make this POV switch as seamless and smooth as possible, and I had a method to how I did it.

I would start the scene and anchor it solidly into one character's POV. Then, when the time came to

make the POV switch, I would move into a more shallow or even omniscient POV by describing action only, without any subjective observations, introspection, or opinions. And then I would pass the point of view. I'd establish the new POV by using some of those anchor words I've mentioned and then go deep inside that new character's head.

Let me give you an example. This, again, is from *Frisco's Kid*.

Frisco awoke to the sound of an electronic buzzer. It was loud as hell and it was right in his ear and . . .

He sat up, wide awake.

It was the sound of the booby trap he'd rigged to the front door last night before he went to bed. Tasha was AWOL again, dammit.

As the scene starts, we're in Frisco's POV. I use his name right up front, describe a sound that he's hearing, and then I clearly establish his voice.

The scene continues—Frisco's five-year-old niece, Tasha, is staying with him and she has a habit of leaving his apartment whenever she feels like it. Skipping a bit ahead in the scene, Tasha and Mia—Frisco's next-door neighbor and the heroine of the book—come to his door.

Frisco glared at Tash. "Where the h—"

Mia cut him off. "Tasha was coming over to visit me," she told Frisco, "but she remembered that she was supposed to tell you first where she was going." She looked down at the little girl. "Right, Tash?"

Tasha nodded.

Tasha remembered? Mia remembered was more like it.

We're still deep inside of Frisco's head here.

Mia mouthed positive reinforcement over Tasha's head.

Frisco swallowed his frustration. All right. If Mia thought he could get through to Tasha this way, he'd give it a shot. Somehow he mustered up far more enthusiasm than he felt. "Excellent job remembering," he told the little girl, opening the screen door and letting both Tasha and Mia inside.

He forced himself to smile, and Tasha visibly brightened. Jeez, maybe there was something to this.

Still deep POV. But now I begin to back away and describe action only.

He scooped the little girl into his arms and awkwardly spun her around until she began to giggle,

then collapsed with her onto the couch. “In fact,” he continued, “you are so amazingly excellent, I think you should probably get a medal. Don’t you?”

She nodded, her eyes wide. “What’s a medal?”

This description—**she nodded, her eyes wide**—could have been from the security camera overhead.

“It’s a very special pin that you get for doing something really great—like remembering my rules,” Frisco told her. He dumped her off his lap and onto the soft cushions of the couch. “Wait right here—I’ll get it.”

More impersonal description and dialogue.

Mia was standing near the door,

That could be more security camera, but it’s not because of the strong POV establishing words that follow . . .

and as she watched, Frisco pushed himself off the couch and headed down the hall to his bedroom.

Bang, we’ve switched POV. But I still keep it pretty shallow for a while.

“Getting a medal is a really big deal.” Frisco raised his voice so they could hear him in the living room. “It requires a very special ceremony.”

Tasha was bouncing up and down on the couch, barely able to contain her excitement. Mia had to smile. **It seemed** that Frisco understood the concept of positive reinforcement.

Yes, we’re in her head! **It seemed** . . .

“Here we go,” he said, coming back into the living room. He caught Mia’s eye and smiled. He looked like hell this morning. He looked more exhausted than she’d ever seen him. He’d clearly been sound asleep mere moments ago. But somehow he seemed more vibrant, his eyes more clear. And the smile that he’d sent her was remarkably sweet, almost shy.

Describing Frisco as Mia sees him . . .

Mia’s heart was in her throat as she watched him with his little niece.

We’re now deep in her POV in a scene that started deep in Frisco’s POV.

* * * *

Another trick I frequently used was to pass the point of view with a look.

In other words, we’re solidly in Frisco’s POV, yada yada yada, he looks at Mia, Mia looks back at him and describes him and bang, we’re in her POV.

Again, I’ll often move to a more omniscient POV before the actual point of view switch.

Here’s an example:

“Don’t run too far ahead.” Frisco called out a warning to Tasha, pulling himself to his feet. He tightened his mouth as he put his weight on his knee, resisting the urge to wince, not wanting to show Mia how much he was hurting. “And do not step off that sidewalk.”

Okay, I use the word **wanting**—we’re in Frisco’s head.

But Mia somehow knew. “Are you all right?” she asked him, no longer ignoring him, her eyes filled with concern. She followed him after Natasha, back toward the parking lot.

“I’m fine,” he said brusquely.

I’ve begun pulling back into a more shallow POV here—just providing a security camera report. The objective description and dialogue continues:

“Have you been chasing around after her all day?”

“I’m fine,” he repeated.

“You’re allowed to be tired,” she said with a musical laugh. “I baby-sat a friend’s four-year-old last week, and I practically had to be carried out on a stretcher afterward.”

Frisco glanced at her.

And he passed her the POV.

She gazed back at him innocently. She was giving him an out, pretending that the lines of pain and fatigue on his face were due to the fact that he wasn’t used to keeping up with the high energy of a young child, rather than the result of his old injury.

“Yeah, right.”

Mia knew better than to show her disappointment at Frisco’s terse reply.

Bang—if there was any doubt, there’s none now. **Mia knew**—we’re in her head. And the scene continues from her deep POV.

* * * *

Obviously, like much of writing, you can mix and match different types of POV. Think of the reason why POV is such an important tool—because you can use it to tell the story in the most exciting and interesting way possible.

If you need to write one scene in omniscient

POV when the entire rest of the book is deep POV, go for it. Just make sure it works.

In *The Unsung Hero*, after hundreds of pages of deep POV, I made the choice to write a scene using omniscient POV—right at the emotional climax of the book. You'd think that it might be better to use deep POV for an emotional climax—but I truly believe that my use of omniscient POV at that point made this a stronger and even more emotionally satisfying book.

The most important rule of writing is this: write your book the way your heart tells you to write it. Don't get bogged down in trying to write the way you think you *should* be writing. But I also believe that knowledge is power and you can make better choices if you're aware of what your choices are!

Okay, let's end with one more example of deep POV from *Force of Nature*.

I start the scene with the POV character's name: Annie.

Annie didn't understand much of what was going on inside this limousine, but she did learn one thing pretty fast: Speaking would get them hit.

"Who's Mr. Burns?" Annie had asked Ric, and the goon named Foley had slapped her.

And that had made Ric lunge for him, which was totally insane, considering that the second bodyguard—the one built like a refrigerator—was holding a gun on him.

I'm recounting events that happened several moments earlier, and the point of view is somewhat shallow. Annie was slapped, but I don't take the time to get deep inside of her head about how much it hurt, because I'm trying to get to the action/reaction part of the scene.

There is a comment, *which was totally insane*, which is from Annie's deep POV, as is the observation that one of the bodyguards is built like a refrigerator.

Thankfully, he didn't shoot Ric with his gun, but he did hit him with it, opening up a nasty-looking cut on the arm that Ric had thrown up to block it. But despite that, Ric still bristled. "Don't you dare hit her! I fucking saved your boy, and you hit her?"

The skinhead named Gordie Junior, the one with the

leather jacket and the foul mouth and the enormous gun that screamed of compensation for feelings of physical inadequacy, was looking at Annie now, disgust in his eyes. "Who's Mr. Burns?" He repeated her question as if she were an idiot. "What rock you been living under, bitch?"

Ric answered for her. "She's new in town. She works for me." He wasn't talking to Junior, he was focusing his words on Foley and Refrigerator, who were both significantly older than Junior and his friends, and seemed to be in charge. "If you let her out at the corner, she'll go back and get her car from the Gardens. She'll go to my office and wait for me to—"

"Shut up," Foley said.

But Ric wasn't done trying to get Annie out of that limo. "Just let her go, and Mr. Burns doesn't have to know that you treated us like this, after we—"

"Ow!"

Foley slapped Annie. It wasn't particularly hard, but her head knocked into the side of the car, which rattled her teeth.

"Now shut the fuck up," he told Ric, "or I hit her again."

Ric fell silent, shooting her a look of apology and misery that was almost as palpable as that kiss he'd given her, back in the Palm Gardens parking lot.

Again, because of the pacing, I've kept it fairly shallow up to this point, reporting action and reaction. But now we go deep into Annie's POV.

God, but Ric Alvarado knew how to kiss—no big surprise there. Annie let herself think about it, about his mouth, his hands, his incredible body beneath her hands. God knows it was better to do something more positive with her time than soiling her pants as they drove north on Route 41, curving around past the festive lights of the harbor.

She held Ric's gaze across the spacious expanse of the limo, remembering the look in his eyes just before he kissed her. She'd made him laugh with her silly rhyme, but his smile had faded until there was only heat. And for that instant, as he gazed down at her with the vertigo-inspiring bottomless midnight of his dark-chocolate eyes, she'd actually felt . . . beautiful.

And okay, yeah, it was all just pretend. Annie knew that. He'd kissed her because they'd needed to stall.

There's one of those big anchor words. Annie

knew . . . We're deep in her POV.

But there was pretending, and there was the kind of pretending that was inspired by the reality of living out a longtime fantasy—and she was not the only one who'd been doing that. They'd both gotten undeniably lost in the moment.

And that look in his eyes, when he'd pulled away from her . . . ?

He'd been shaken up. Scared to death. Conflicted.

And despite stammering something about a kiss like that never happening again, he'd definitely wanted more. If they survived this meeting with this mysterious Mr. Burns, Annie was going to kiss Ric again. She was just going to do it. Just grab him and . . .

The limo was slowing, turning down a side street, heading toward the water. Most of the properties in this area were in the filthy-rich price range, many of them gated estates. They turned again, indeed, waiting for an electronic gate to open, then continued down a brick driveway, through lushly landscaped grounds lit by pretty solar lanterns.

Here's where the external conflict/situation interrupts Annie's thoughts about kissing Ric, and again, there's description, but it's from Annie's POV. I describe this new location from Annie's eyes, with Annie's voice. *Filthy-rich price range*. I could have made a more objective description such as: *The limo was slowing, turning down a side road, heading toward the water, huge, expensive houses lining the street*. But more objective often translates to less snappy, less interesting.

I'm also using deep POV here to help the reader get to know Annie a little better through her word choices, and by letting them see the things that she notices, such as *pretty solar lanterns*.

Going on:

Ric, too, was looking out the window, trying to get a glimpse of the house—a garishly baroque palace, right on the bay.

The limo stopped. Someone from the outside opened the door nearest Ric, and light poured in.

"I want to talk to Mr. Burns," Annie heard Ric demand as he was dragged out, onto the well-lit driveway.

Annie heard. I'm reminding readers here that we're in Annie's POV, and I do this by using a strong

anchoring word.

Junior had Annie roughly by the arm, and he pulled her toward the same side of the limo. He swore at her as she skidded before she reached the door. She went down, hard, on her knee.

"I'm sorry," she gasped, sharp pain mixing with fear. But then she pushed herself back up and realized that it was blood that she'd slipped in. It was on her sneaker and all over her jeans and both her hands and oh, dear God, it was Ric's blood.

He'd been shot, back at Palm Gardens.

He'd been shot, and he'd just sat there in the limo, bleeding, and he hadn't said a freaking thing.

. . . sharp pain mixing with fear . . . realized . . .

We're deep in Annie's head. The exclamations are all hers—oh, dear God and he hadn't said a freaking thing. Annie is telling us this directly—we're seeing this scene happen through her eyes, using her words. We're getting her interpretations, we're discovering things as she discovers them.

My goal as a writer is to hook readers into the story—to try to make them fall in love with my characters and yearn to accompany them on their journeys through each book. I want to let readers crawl around inside of my characters' heads. Yes, this means that readers are privy to all of my characters' less-than-gracious and sometimes unkind thoughts—it's true. But I can also reveal, through my characters' own words, those characters' deepest fears and their oh-so-human vulnerability, their hopes and dreams, their unique senses of humor and their courage as they take that terrifying leap of faith and open themselves up to potential rejection, in the name of love.

And I can do all this simply by using deep point of view.

Any questions?

I'll be holding a live deep point of view question and answer session on my Internet bulletin board on Tuesday, September 11th, 2007. Post your questions about this deep point of view workshop on my message board at <http://members2.boardhost.com/brockmann/> and I'll answer as many as possible between noon and 4:00 p.m., eastern time!

See you then!