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SUZANNE BROCKMANN'S INTO THE FIRE

EXTRAS FOR READERS AND WRITERS | 2008

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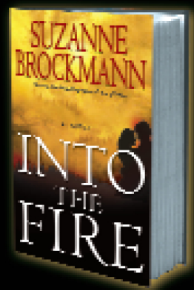
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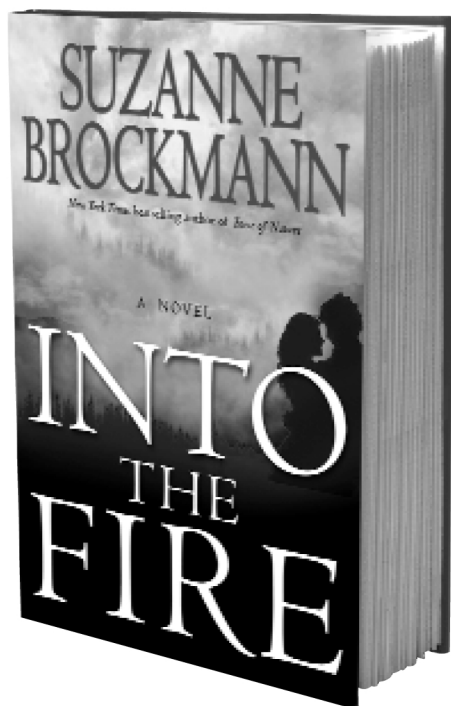
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—————*From the desk of Suzanne Brockmann*—————

Dear Readers (and Writers!),

Into the Fire, the thirteenth installment in my Troubleshooters series—Murphy's story—is in bookstores right now!

If you remember, Vinh Murphy's the character that I badly mistreated in 2005's *Hot Target*. He was the friendly, upbeat, happy-go-lucky former Marine introduced as part of the very first Troubleshooters Incorporated team in *Flashpoint*. He was injured by a car bomb in that story, but survived and went home to marry his fiancée, Angelina.

He returned from his honeymoon in *Hot Target*, whereupon I thrust both Murph and Angelina into the line of fire during a sniper attack by a member of the neo-Nazi Freedom Network.

And yeah. I kind of killed off Angelina.

Murphy, of course, spun into despair. He left Troubleshooters Incorporated and disappeared.

But in *Into the Fire*, Murphy is back. He's ready to return to the world of the living after years of stumbling through the darkness, trying to numb himself with alcohol and drugs. Murph's finally found some peace, and seeks out his (and Angelina's) old friend, Hannah Whitfield, to continue his recovery at her remote mountain cabin.

When Murphy becomes the primary suspect in the shooting death of Freedom Network leader Tim Ebersole, the gang at Troubleshooters Incorporated—Lawrence Decker, Jimmy Nash, Tess Bailey, Sophia Ghaffari, and good old Dave Malkoff—make the scene.

Their goal is to find Murphy before the FBI does, and encourage him to turn himself in. (They, too, take a journey in this book, after years of carrying around their own feelings of guilt and responsibility for Angelina's death. Decker, in particular, must confront some of his own extremely heavy baggage . . .)

There's also a subplot in *Into the Fire* with reader favorite Izzy Zanella. And of course, wherever Izzy goes, his posse of Navy SEAL teammates follows. So yes, you'll be seeing more of Jenk, Gillman, and Lopez in *Into the Fire*, too.

Cameo alert! Navy SEAL Senior Chief Stan Wolchonok makes a brief but important appearance in this book!

There are a number of excerpts from *Into the Fire* in this booklet of Extras—along with an exclusive, never before published short story, *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, featuring characters from my Troubleshooters universe.

And for those of you who are writers (or readers interested in the writing process), check out my *Tall, Dark, and Believable* writing workshop on creating "perfect" romantic heroes.

Appearances alert! Or maybe that should be non-alert, because I don't have many booksignings scheduled for the near future. In fact, I'm not going to be touring for *Into the Fire*. As much as I enjoy hitting the road and meeting readers, I'm going to be spending this summer writing the fourteenth Troubleshooters book, *Dark of Night*.

This book is going to be something a little different for me, since the action in *Dark of Night* starts on the same day that *Into the Fire* ends. It's more of a direct sequel than any other book in the series. (And no, I'm not going to tell you whose story *DON* is, but I'm pretty sure you'll have it figured out by the time you get to the end of *ITF*!)

Dark of Night has a tentative release date of February 2009, but stay tuned to my

website, www.SuzanneBrockmann.com, in case that date changes.

After *DON*, I'm planning to write a book featuring reader-favorites Sam Starrett and Alyssa Locke—and a certain serial killer named “the Dentist,” whom Alyssa's been after for years. (I have plans for Kenny and Savannah Karmody to return in that book, too.) We've got a tentative late summer 2009 release date for that book. (It's as yet untitled.)

So that's all the news on the writing front!

In terms of personal news—I've got something terrific that I've got to share with you! You may remember that a few years ago I helped spread the word about the need for people to register as bone marrow donors. You see, a young Navy SEAL had a rare form of cancer and his only chance at survival lay in a bone marrow transplant, for which he needed a volunteer donor with an exact bone marrow match. The odds of finding such a match were one in twenty-five *thousand*.

Many of my readers got involved in setting up bone marrow donor registration drives. One brave reader helped me set up mini-drives at some of the bookstores along my tour route. And another set up an impromptu drive at my reader event in Atlanta.

Long story short, lots and lots of people got involved in getting out the word for the need for bone marrow donors to register, and lots and lots of new people from all around the world did just that. The young SEAL was lucky enough to find a match. He had the transplant and, thankfully, is doing well.

As if that weren't enough to celebrate, I *just* received an e-mail telling me that one of the attendees of my Atlanta reader event went above and beyond, and asked her husband to register as a donor, too. It turns out that *he* recently got a phone call telling him that he's that one in twenty-five thousand match—that his bone marrow could help save the life of a twelve-year-old boy.

He's going in for further tests, and if everything is okay, he'll donate the bone marrow for the transplant later this spring.

Can you *imagine* being that little boy's mother and receiving this wonderful news? Because a stranger stepped forward and signed up with the bone marrow donor registry, her son now has a fighting chance!

So I'm going to say it again, and say it often! Please visit www.marrow.org for more information on how to register (it's easy!) and give the gift of life.

With love and hope,

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

Suz

P.S. Readers are welcome to visit my internet bulletin board at <http://members2.boardhost.com/brockman/>. I'll be holding a live “Tall, Dark, and Believable” Q&A session on **August 14, 2008, from noon to 4:00 p.m., eastern time**. Feel free to drop in and ask other 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. Watch for details of my next chat on my website appearances page—www.SuzanneBrockmann.com/appearances.htm

SUZANNE BROCKMANN's *Into The Fire Extras*

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Home Is Where the Heart Is

An exclusive short story featuring characters from the Troubleshooter Universe

It was surreal, being home.

Of course, this apartment wasn't really home. It was kind of half-home, but half-not, which added to the weirdness.

When Arlene Schroeder's reserve unit had gotten called up, she'd given some of her furniture to her brother, Will, but had put most of it into storage, into a self-service, garage-sized room.

For twelve dollars a month—special military rate, set up by a friend of a friend—the antique desk and bed frame her grandmother bequeathed her, her dresser and formal dining room set, all of her books and clothes, and her precious box with Maggie's baby shoes would be safe and dry and waiting for her, upon her return from Iraq.

Over the long months—two separate tours—that she'd been gone, she'd frequently wished she'd been able to put her now-thirteen-year-old daughter into similar storage. Instead, Mags had moved in with Will. Instead, she'd kept growing and had gotten even taller than Arlene, beginning the permanent transformation from sweet-faced child to this remarkably self-reliant, beautiful young woman who now stood in the kitchen of Will's shabby Newton apartment, cutting vegetables for some kind of exotic, Indian-spiced dish that she was cooking for dinner.

Arlene's baby girl was cooking dinner.

She wasn't just cooking dinner, she was cooking dinner while wearing a bra.

As Arlene watched, Maggie added the vegetables to what looked like some kind of dangerously delicious stewing chicken, and put the cover securely on the pot.

"In an hour, when the dinger dings," her daughter commanded, "turn on this burner over here. When the water boils, add the rice, lower the heat and—"

"I know—" How to cook rice. Arlene bit back the words that were coming out of her mouth much too sharply. It wasn't Maggie's fault that she felt like an outsider here, like a stranger in a strange land.

"It's basmati," Maggie told her as if that meant something special. "It only needs to simmer for fifteen, sixteen minutes, okay?"

She was so excited that Arlene was home, so

excited to be showing off her cooking skills—skills she'd needed to develop because her mother had been sent to serve for much longer than they'd all expected, way over on the other side of the world. She was showing off the skills she'd learned from Will's latest girlfriend, who no doubt had also taken Maggie bra shopping.

Will's latest girlfriend with the ridiculous name—Dolphina—who was petite and perfect, like some Bollywood movie star with her long, shimmering, straight dark hair, her perfect, freckle-free skin, and her big, brown, Bambi eyes.

Every other word out of Maggie's mouth was "Dolphina." Dolphina said this and Dolphina said that and, God, Arlene was beyond grateful that Maggie was happy and healthy and that she clearly felt loved and supported, particularly while her mother was stuck in a place where death by mortar fire was common and unpredictable, but *enough* already.

"Go to your rehearsal," Arlene quietly told her daughter now. "I got the rice—I'll make us a salad, too."

Maggie hugged her, giving her a noogie atop her head—the way Arlene used to do to her. "Little mommy," she teased.

"Go," Arlene ordered in her best military sergeant, afraid Mags would see the sudden rush of tears to her eyes. She didn't want her daughter to be taller than she was. She wanted her monkey-girl back, but that Maggie was gone forever—the anxious little girl she'd left behind when she boarded that first troop transport all those endless months ago. Arlene had done her duty and gone to Iraq—and she'd lost those last precious few moments of Maggie's too-short childhood. She'd sacrificed those last few chances spent with her daughter curled up, gangly arms and legs and all, on her lap. A lap which now felt achingly empty.

"I'll call if I'm going to be late." Maggie grabbed her bookbag and her jacket and bounded out the apartment door.

Leaving Arlene alone for the first time since Maggie and Will had met her plane at Logan, yesterday morning.

Will and the perfect Dolphina were having dinner out tonight. That had been Dolphina's idea—arranged to give Maggie some alone time with her mom. Yeah, didn't it figure? The betch was as nice as she was beautiful and smart.

She also had the extremely glamorous job of personal assistant to a movie star. Well, TV star now. Actor Robin Chadwick Cassidy and his FBI agent husband Jules lived in a chichi part of Boston. Maggie and Will both had visited them at their townhouse. Many times.

Arlene paced Will's little living room, pretending to look at the photos and artwork on her older brother's walls, but in truth restless—and not quite sure what to do with herself. In Iraq, she was either working or sleeping. Mostly working. If she ever found herself with two full hours on her hands, she'd immediately retreat to her quarters and fall unconscious on her bunk.

After first hitting the computer tent, waiting on line to connect to the internet, to send her daily, cheerful "everything's all right" e-mail to Maggie and Will.

Even if—as was so often the case—she wasn't feeling cheerful or as if *anything* there in the sandbox was good or right.

She circled the room one more time before deciding to go out for a walk—something she'd never been able to do in besieged Baghdad—when the doorbell buzzed.

She glanced through the door's peephole, certain it was one of the neighbors, or maybe the FedEx delivery person. Will was writing a book, collaborating with a former special forces soldier who lived in Florida, who preferred working with hard copies. As a result, Will now knew all of the various delivery people by their first names.

But the man standing in the hall wasn't wearing a delivery uniform. And he certainly wasn't old Mrs. D'Oretti from next door.

It was Jack Lloyd—but it was a Jack Lloyd the likes of which Arlene hadn't seen very often.

Normally dressed in sneakers and jeans, shabby button-down shirt, sleeves rolled up, tie loose around his neck, this alternate-universe Jack Lloyd was wearing a suit.

A very nice suit that fit his tall, lean frame very, very well.

Last time she'd seen the man in a suit had been that night. . .

Arlene opened the door. "Will's not here," she said in lieu of proper greeting. *Hey, Jack, how are you? It's been a long time. Two years, three months and nineteen days, in fact. You never did return my phone call—and I really was only calling to find out if you'd found my favorite pair of panties in the mess we'd made of your bedroom, that night you rocked my world three different times . . .*

"Yeah, I know," Jack said, in his familiar whiskey-flavored voice. "I'm not here to see Will."

She'd always thought that that was stupid—voices couldn't have flavors. But then she'd met Jack.

"I'm kinda here to see you," he told her, actually physically bracing himself—as if he expected her to slam the door in his face.

Or maybe it was his eyes that reminded her of whiskey—an intoxicating swirl of brown and gold, in a face that wasn't exactly handsome, yet still managed to make women swoon in the street as he passed by.

It was his smile. Boyish. Mischievous. Warm. Inclusive. When Jack Lloyd smiled, even the wary way he was smiling now, it made people feel as if he were sharing a private joke, only with them.

And yes, she *was* standing there, transfixed, like some hapless rodent mesmerized by a king cobra.

She found her voice, which, if it had a flavor, would no doubt be something stupid, like mustard. The bland yellow kind. Not the spicy brown stuff that you got in a good New York-style deli.

"It's really not a good time," Arlene told him, even as he pushed past her and walked into the apartment. Which was when her famous redhead's temper flared. "I have *nothing* to say to you, Jack. And there's absolutely nothing that you could say to me that would—"

"Maggie e-mailed me, about a month ago," Jack told her, which worked to shut her up. *Maggie* e-mailed him? "She said you were coming home, but only for a short time—that you were going to have to go back almost immediately. What's up with that?"

Arlene struggled to make sense of his words. *Maggie* e-mailed him? His smile was gone, and his eyes were void of amusement—this wasn't some big funny that he was trying to pull on her, the way he and Will used to do, back when they were in college and she was barely older than Maggie was now. She focused on his question, and tried to explain. "It's a new program. We get to come home for a relatively brief visit, with the

understanding that we'll have significantly longer than the usual six months between our next tours. People were running into trouble in terms of finding short-term employment, knowing they were going to re-deploy, so. . ." She shook her head. "Why did Maggie e-mail you?"

"She doesn't want you going back to Iraq," Jack informed her—as if Arlene didn't know that. "And she's a pretty smart kid. She figured out a way that you won't have to."

Oh, Maggie. She shook her head. "There's *no* way that—"

Jack cut her off. "Yeah, actually, Leen, there is. I did some research, and Maggie's right. Regulation 635-200. You won't go back. In fact, you can get out for good." He cleared his throat. "If you're pregnant."

And there they stood, in Will's living room—Arlene stunned into silence, Jack waiting, patiently, for her to regain use of her vocal cords. *Pregnant?*

"Oh, God," Arlene said. "Please tell me that Maggie didn't—"

"Yep. She did." He smiled, but it was tight. "It was one hell of an e-mail. Thank God I was sitting down at the time."

She knew the feeling. Her world had tilted, and she now fumbled for a seat. "I'm so sorry. Oh, my God, she is so dead."

Jack sat on the other end of the sofa—her sofa that had once filled the tiny Cambridge apartment that she'd shared with a much shorter Maggie. He sank back into the soft cushions, yet still managed to look too big to fit there comfortably. "Give her a break, Leen. She doesn't want you coming home in a box."

"How did she . . .?"

It didn't make sense. Maggie had never known about the night—singular—that Arlene had spent with Jack. It had happened while the girl was visiting her grandparents. And God knows Arlene had never spoken of it to anyone, never so much as whispered Jack's name in Maggie's presence.

But her brother and Jack were close—although no longer as close as they'd been as roommates at Boston University. They both currently worked as reporters for the *Boston Globe*, so it made sense that Maggie would've met Jack at *some* point, but still . . .

"I met Maggie at the wedding," Jack explained.

"Robin and Jules. Last December? I told her I knew you, and . . ." He shrugged. "I kinda let slip the fact that you and I had, um, a thing."

"A thing," Arlene repeated.

"Yeah," Jack admitted, making an *oops* face. "And I also may have said something about, you know, about, well, kinda *still* having a thing. You know. For you."

* * * *

Jack was totally screwing this up. Considering he was an award-winning journalist, he'd just delivered *the* lamest, vaguest declaration of love in the entire history of the world.

And he could see from the disbelief in Arlene's eyes, that she was seconds from losing it and kicking his well-dressed ass out the door.

"You *told* my daughter—"

"That I haven't been able to stop thinking about you," he finished for her, afraid to be more precise in defining exactly what he was feeling and had felt for going on over a decade now, because it was clear that Arlene wasn't going to fall into his open arms in the immediate future. He'd had that chance, two years ago, and had completely blown it back then. "Yes. We were talking and . . . I wanted to know how you were."

"I'm fine, thanks," she shot back, "although still missing my favorite pair of underpants."

And there it was—the moment of truth. "Okay," Jack said, trying to sound matter of fact and calm. "Good. Let's put everything out on the table. Let's talk about that night. I want to tell you about what happened to me the day after."

She shook her head, vehemently. "Let's not. Let's stay on topic and . . ." He could practically see the wheels turning in her head. "Will told me he saved your life," she said. "Last November. That you were in Afghanistan and—"

"He's got nothing to do with this." Jack knew where she was going. She assumed Will was the mastermind of this crazy plot. Truth was, he hadn't even mentioned it to Will. Probably because Will would have shut it down, fast, and Jack had had this completely insane spark of hope that Arlene would welcome the chance to stay home—after getting over the initial shock that her daughter had approached Jack for stud services.

"This was all Maggie's idea."

Arlene wasn't convinced. "Why are you dressed up?" she asked suspiciously.

He looked down at his wool-covered legs, at the bright silk of his tie. "I wanted to, I don't know." He shrugged. "Look nice?"

"So that I'd have sex with you," she concluded. Good old pointblank Arlene. Why couldn't he be attracted to the shy, reserved type? "You wore it because you were wearing a suit that night."

He had been. He'd just won an award for a newspaper story he'd written on the health-care crisis. He'd been giddy, not just from the award, but because he was being recognized for writing about something that mattered.

After the award dinner, purely by chance, he'd run into Arlene downtown, near Copley Square, getting out of work from what she said was a temporary second job, filling in for a waitress friend at a local restaurant. She'd been wearing jeans and a clingy tank top, sandals on her feet, her red curls loose around her shoulders, her smile filled with sunlight and . . .

But he couldn't for the life of him remember the underwear she'd had on that incredible night. Black or purple. He'd have thought the color would have been permanently burned into his brain. Black—or purple—against the paleness of her smooth, perfect skin, as she'd tumbled back with him, onto his bed.

As he'd done what he'd been dying to do for years and years and *years*—to bury himself inside of her, to see her beautiful hair spilled across his pillows, to know that the smile that sparkled in her eyes was just for him.

Her eyes weren't sparkling now. In fact, they were narrowed. She was looking pretty grim. And tired. Haunted, no doubt, from all she'd done and seen over the past long months, living in a war zone.

And Jack knew that if he had any chance at all here, it would come because he told her the truth, so he said, "Yeah. I wore the suit because you told me that night that I looked good in a suit, that it made you want to, you know, take *off* my suit and—"

"I remember what I said," she cut him off, then swore, because her redhead's complexion made it impossible for her to hide a blush. Yeah, she not only remembered what she'd said, she obviously remembered what they'd done after she'd said it.

Jack remembered, too. Vividly. In glorious technicolor. Except for the color-of-her-panties part.

"I didn't call you back," he told her quietly, "because Becca threatened to kill herself. I made a really bad mistake, a few nights before you and I hooked up. She came over to my place, and . . . I thought it was . . . you know, once more for old times sake? It was stupid. I was stupid—I'll be the first to admit that. I should have known better. But then when she . . ." It had been a nightmare—his ex-wife's phone calls, her threats, his fear that she just might be crazy enough to do it. His twisted reasoning that she truly must've still loved him . . . "She's the mother of my kids, Leen. I thought I needed to give it one more shot—regardless of what I really wanted. Which absolutely was you."

She didn't believe him. He could tell from the way she was nodding her head. "You could have written a note. Sent my panties back."

Crap. "Would you believe me if I told you I wanted to keep them?"

She laughed in his face. "For Becca to find? No."

"Yeah, that would've been bad," he admitted. "But I did. Want to keep them. That's not why I didn't send them to you, though. It's actually . . ." He just had to say it. "See, I, um, found *two* on my floor. Black and purple. I didn't know which was—"

"That," Arlene interrupted him, standing up and crossing toward the door. "I believe."

Jack stayed in his seat, determined that she hear him out. "The others were Becca's, and . . . I swear, Arlene, that night? I was certain my marriage was over and done. We'd been separated for six *months*. I spoke to a lawyer earlier that week—"

"Thanks for dropping by."

He tried a new tack. "Maggie says you're home only for a month."

She opened the door. "Perhaps I wasn't clear enough. It's time for you to go."

"You know, if we worked hard at it, I'm pretty sure I could get you pregnant in that timeframe."

"Joke's over, Jack." Arlene was getting seriously pissed.

But he still didn't move. He couldn't. He wouldn't. "I should have called you," he said. "I was wrong, and I regret it. If I could do it over, and do it differently, I

would. I would call you and I would explain, and I would . . ." He had to clear his throat. He closed his eyes and he just said it. "I would tell you how much that night meant to me, and how badly I wanted to have other nights, just like it, for the next fifty years."

She shook her head, unrelenting, but then said, "You broke up with Becca a year ago. It never occurred to you to call me then?"

Hope shifted inside of him, just the slightest spark of life inside a miniscule seed, ready, with the least bit of encouragement, to grow. She'd obviously kept track of him. Asked Will for information.

"You were seeing what's-his-name," he pointed out. "Peter. The idiot."

"If you thought he was such an idiot," she countered, hands on her hips, "why not kick down my door and—"

"I thought you were in love with him. Will told me it was serious."

She laughed her surprise, turning it into a scoff. "It wasn't."

"Yeah, well, Will told me it was," Jack was unable to hide his frustration. "He told me you were happy and I . . ." He held her gaze, imploring her to believe him "I wanted you to be happy, Leen, so I stayed away."

That shut her up. In fact, she shut the open door, too, coming back to stand in the middle of the living room. But now her arms were folded across her chest—he was far from winning.

"So when you found out that Peter was a thing of the past," she finally said, "you immediately e-mailed me . . . ? Except, wait, you didn't."

"I found out that Peter was a thing of the past," he told her, a touch testily himself, "when Maggie e-mailed me, asking if I was interested in *knocking* you up." He glanced at his watch. "She's going to call, in about two minutes, to tell you to have dinner without her—that her rehearsal's going to run late."

Arlene was horrified. "You didn't actually tell her that you'd—"

"Yeah, right."

She was apparently unable to process sarcasm right at that moment, so he clarified. "Of course I didn't. But I did tell her I was going to come here and . . ." The ring he'd bought was burning a hole in his inside pocket, but he wasn't supposed to throw the damn

thing at her. He was supposed to go heavy on the romance, get down on his knees. No, there was a time and place for everything, and that ring box was staying deep in his pocket. At least for now. "Talk to you," he finished, since she was waiting, impatiently for the end of his sentence.

"Hey, how are you. It's been awhile. Let's have sex so I can get you pregnant, because a thirteen-year-old thought that would be a good idea."

Okay. Apparently he was wrong. Arlene was completely capable of dishing out the sarcasm, even if she wasn't able to take it.

"No, actually, my plan was to say *Hey, how are you? It's been a while. I'm still as crazy about you as I've always been and for the first time in what feels like forever we're both single at the same time, so what do you say we put a new spin on the relationship thing and see if we can't get it to work by getting married—to each other this time.*"

And that had done it—Jack had completely stunned her. He'd managed to stun himself, too, having all but resolved, mere seconds ago, not to mention the M-word.

But now that he had, he might as well go big. He reached into his jacket pocket for the ring box, opened it and set it on the coffee table, in front of her.

She slowly lowered herself into Will's ugly-ass Barcolounger, her eyes huge in her too-thin but still beautiful face. She didn't say anything, she just stared at him.

And okay. If he were going to be rejected, he might as well make his humiliation complete. He got down on his knees on the carpeting in front of her and took her hand. Her fingers were cold as he interlaced them with his own. "Marry me, Arlene," he whispered.

"That's crazy," she breathed, but she didn't look away. And he knew, just from gazing into her beautiful eyes, that she was still as attracted to him as he was to her. That spark that they'd flamed to an inferno that amazing, unforgettable night was still ready to ignite. "*You're crazy.*"

Jack shook his head. "All these years, our timing's been off—"

"And you don't think it's a little off *now*?"

"No," he said. "I think it's perfect."

"In less than four weeks, I'm going back to Iraq."

"Maybe not," he pointed out.

"No," she argued. "I am. I definitely am."

“Arlene—”

“Jack.” She was holding tightly to his hands now as if trying to squeeze some sense into him. She was gazing into his eyes, too, to make him understand. “I have to. If I don’t go back, they’ll send someone else. Someone who hasn’t been as well trained, someone who hasn’t learned how to keep the kids in my unit safe. And even if that didn’t matter to me . . . ? God, I’m not sure I want to have another baby. And I’m certainly not having one unless I’m married to someone I *know* is going to be there for the next twenty years.”

He opened his mouth to speak and she cut him off again. “I’m not going to have a baby just to . . . have a baby. So, nice try. Good attempt. I don’t know what Will is blackmailing you with, but you can tell him you did your best.”

“Leenie—”

“Shhh.” She reached out and brushed his hair back from his face, her fingers cool against his skin. “Let it go, Jack. That night? The sex was great, but . . .” She shook her head. “We’d drive each other nuts.”

It was then that the phone rang—Maggie, right on schedule.

Arlene let go of Jack’s hands, and pushed herself out of the chair, stepping over him to go into the kitchen. She picked up the phone and didn’t even bother to say hello. “You get your butt home, young lady. *Right now.*”

She didn’t wait to hear any excuses or counterarguments. She just hung up the phone with some force.

“You should *definitely* not be here when she gets back,” she called to Jack.

* * * *

“Huh,” Robin said. “That was weird.”

As Jules Cassidy inched his way out of the busy airport parking lot, he glanced at his husband of less than a year, who was staring at his cell phone, his movie-star perfect brow furrowed in puzzlement.

Robin’s hair was jarhead short. Apparently Joe Laughlin, the character—a closeted gay A-list actor—he played on his hit cable-TV series, *Shadowland*, was “starring” in a war movie as an enlisted Marine.

As usual, Robin had been nervous about Jules’s reaction to the crew cut, since he’d had it buzzed while

Jules was away. But, also as usual, Jules loved it, just as he’d loved every haircut and style—long, short, in-between and a multitude of colors—that Robin had ever had.

His spouse was freakin’ gorgeous—and a full triple screaming-bejeezus hot. And it had been eons since Jules had kissed the man, let alone . . .

The car in front of him was stopped by the car in front of *them*, and on and on it went, out of Jules’s line of sight, and probably all of the way out of Logan and right to the front steps of their South End of Boston home. Still he tried to mind-control the car at the front of this mess, no matter that it was miles away, willing whoever-it-was to put the pedal to the metal.

“I just called Will’s, to see if Dolphina was there,” Robin was explaining, “and I’m pretty sure Maggie’s mother answered.”

“Arlene, right?” Jules said, as the solid, endless minute they’d been sitting in this exact spot turned to two and began working its way to three. “Does she go by Bristol, or—”

“She’s Schroeder, like Will,” Robin reported.

Jules nodded. That was what he’d thought. Ted Bristol, Maggie’s dad, not only lived across the country in Seattle, but, according to Will, the man was a textbook functioning alcoholic. Despite being capable of holding a job and paying his rent, his was not the household that Arlene had wanted Maggie to live in for a week, let alone a year.

Years plural, now—because Arlene was being sent back to Iraq for her third tour. Which made Jules’s impatience about the traffic seem petty and selfish, but for the love of God, was he the only one here who was in a hurry to get home?

“She didn’t sound happy,” Robin was telling Jules now—she being Arlene, whom he’d just spoken to on the phone. “And she didn’t wait to find out that I wasn’t Maggie before she *young-ladied* me and ordered my butt home.”

“You better call back.” Jules was in four weeks and three days of a hurry to get home, to be accurate. Which was four weeks longer than he’d expected to be gone when he’d packed his carry-on bag last month.

Yeah, kids. Last *month*.

His meeting in Washington had turned into a meeting in London, which had morphed into an FBI

assignment in Afghanistan. Which was not the kind of place where Robin could join him for a long weekend.

Jules had more than half expected Robin to meet him here at the airport with a limousine and driver. If he had, this traffic wouldn't matter. They'd be in the back, with music playing and the privacy shield up.

"I'm getting one of those circuit's-busy-signals," Robin reported, and then smiled ruefully as he met Jules's gaze, as he accurately read Jules's mind. "Sorry about—"

"It's all right." Jules took his life partner's hand, intertwined their fingers. Robin had broken the no-limo news to him mere seconds after they'd first embraced.

I couldn't get a limo at such short notice, but Jesus, I'm glad you're home.

Jules had laughed at the time, thinking that Robin was just being Robin—the king of immediate gratification. When it came to expressing the physical side of their love, *here and now* was Robin's mission statement, and Jules often found himself being coerced into receiving and/or giving some of that immediate gratification at times he normally would have considered inappropriate.

In the middle of the day, when they were already both late for work.

In the bathroom at a friend's house, during a party.
In the back of a limo.

And okay, *coerced* wasn't really the right word. He'd never needed much convincing. And, as Robin often pointed out, Jules always had been something of a Yankee in terms of his definition of *inappropriate*.

Had been.

But right now, as they sat and sat and *sat* in traffic, Jules realized that somewhere over the past year or so, the idea of sex—with his wonderful, fabulous, lovely husband—in the very private back of a limo had become not only entirely appropriate but eagerly anticipated.

"God, babe, I missed you," Robin breathed, as Jules lost himself in the warm ocean-blueness of his eyes.

And even though kissing this man to whom he was legally wed could be dangerous while trapped in a parking lot with lots of other cars and drivers who were also trapped and no doubt angry at the world, Jules leaned forward and caught Robin's mouth with his.

Because, fuck it. They kept a tire iron under the

front seat, and Jules and Robin both knew how to use it. Not only that, but there were additional items that could be used as weapons in the back of the car. A military entrenching tool, with a little shovel that unfolded, that was allegedly kept in the car in case they got stuck in snow and ice, but was heavy and could do some serious damage if slammed into an attacker's face. Plus he had his sidearm. Yeah, it was locked in a travel case but he could open it quickly enough and *what* was wrong with this world that he was sitting here, mentally taking inventory of weapons that he might need to defend both Robin and himself, merely for publicly expressing their eternal, committed love?

Jules shut off his internal FBI agent—well, as much of it as he could—and cleared his mind of everything but the softness of Robin's lips, the sweetness of his mouth, the love he could practically taste, and God *damn*, it *was* good to be home.

* * * *

"I mean it, Jack," Arlene came out of the kitchen, temper blazing. "You do *not* want to be here when Maggie gets home."

Jack settled back in the chair she'd recently vacated, ready to argue, but the phone rang again.

Arlene was still holding the cordless handset, and she forcefully clicked it to *talk*, and put it to her ear. "I don't care if your rehearsal's not over yet, you *get* yourself *home*." She looked surprised, then, as she listened to whoever was on the other end of the phone—it was probably not Maggie, judging from the heightened color along her delicate cheekbones.

She was beautiful, and Jack knew full well that the gorgeous red hair and charming freckles, the big green eyes and gracefully shaped mouth, and the lithe, athletic body were just the outer package. He'd fallen in love with the funny, sharp-witted, often sarcastic, sometimes tough and always kind girl—and yes, Leenie had been a girl when he'd fallen for her.

And Jack had been an idiot, because he'd run away from her, because along with everything that he found attractive about her, she was also messily emotional, always getting into trouble, too much of a tomboy, too freaking independent, and yet way too vulnerable and shockingly naive.

Home Is Where the Heart Is

And instead of waiting for her to grow up, and then kissing the hell out of her and marrying her ass, he'd convinced himself that Becca—cool, aloof, mature, with handbags that always matched her expensive shoes—was the kind of woman he should want.

Should.

But didn't.

Yes, he was an idiot.

"I'm so sorry," Arlene was saying into the phone. "No, Dolphina's not here. She and Will were going to dinner—she was going to meet him downtown at the Globe office and . . ." She cleared her throat. "I have to tell you how much I enjoyed *Rip Tide*. And *American Hero*. I think that one's still my favorite. You were amazing."

Okay. That had to be Robin Chadwick Cassidy on the other end of the phone. And now Arlene's cheeks were tinged with color for an entirely different reason, her anger at her daughter momentarily forgotten as she had a fangrrl moment.

And as she continued to speak to the movie star, she smiled, which made her look young and sweet, and Jack's heart lurched in his chest, and he knew—without a doubt—that he was *not* going to leave here without at least a promise that she'd think about giving the two of them a solid try.

"Okay, maybe the ring was too much too soon," Jack told her as she hung up the phone. "We've got a month. Let's see each other."

"See?" she asked, eyebrows raised. "Or have sex?"

"The two are not mutually exclusive," he pointed out. "Frankly, I'd like very much to take you to dinner every night and then back to my place to—"

"And you seriously think it's just the *ring* that's too much too soon?"

"I'm just saying," Jack confessed. "If I had my way, we'd be on a plane to Vegas tonight and you'd be my wife before I—"

"Stop." She cut him off again.

"I know the attraction's still there," Jack pushed harder. "You can pretend all you want that it's not, but I know, Arlene, so—"

"I'm not denying the attraction. I'm just . . ."

"What?"

"The timing's not right." But now Arlene wouldn't meet his gaze. In fact, she turned away. "I need to call

Maggie, and tell her to get home."

"You want to take it slowly," Jack persisted. "We'll take it slowly. Although not too slowly, because you've only got a month and—"

But Arlene had apparently dialed Maggie's cell phone, and she now spoke to the girl. "Get home."

Jack could hear the higher-pitched sound of Maggie's voice, coming through the speaker of the phone. Arlene cut her off. "This isn't a game, Maggie. This is my life. And Jack's life. And you had no business . . ." She shook her head. "No. No. I'm *not* going to argue with you. You get home and—No, you can't speak to Jack," she exhaled on something that sounded like laughter but was, in fact, disbelief. "Get. Home. *Now*."

She cut the connection, turned back and aimed her fury at Jack. But it was mixed with despair and that was what came out when she spoke. "Please," she begged him. "Please. Just . . . go."

He nodded and got to his feet. "Can I see you tomorrow?" he asked. "See. Not have sex. Although do let me know if you change your mind."

The look she gave him was so black, he immediately backpedaled. "I'll stop with the teasing," he said. "I'm kidding when I say things like that, okay?"

She shook her head, half laughing again, but also rolling her eyes in exasperation. "There's no point in—"

"Spending a pleasant afternoon with a friend," he finished for her. "There's always a point to that. Let's have lunch. We can drive out to Baldwin's Bridge, eat down by the marina."

"Don't you work?" she asked.

"All the time," Jack said. "In fact, I'm writing an article on Governor Patrick's reinstatement of the Massachusetts Film Council. I'll finish it tonight, have tomorrow completely free. Come on. We can walk on the beach, stick our feet in the ocean . . ."

She was wavering. "I don't know . . ."

"Say yes," he whispered, his hope growing into something real, taking root in his stomach, in his soul. It was that hope that made him reach for her, and he slid his hand into her hair, his palm brushing the smoothness of her cheek, her curls soft between his fingers as he held her there, leaning in to caress her lips with his own in the briefest of kisses.

He wanted, more than anything, to crush her

against him, to kiss her the way he'd kissed her that magic night in Copley Square.

But he didn't. He stepped back. He let her go.

"I'll call you later," he said. And he made himself walk out the door.

* * * *

Jack had left that stupid diamond ring behind.

As Arlene stood in Will's living room, waiting for Maggie to come home, she knew she couldn't leave that jeweler's box sitting there, open like that. It would only fuel her daughter's fantasy.

And at the same time, she didn't want to touch it. She didn't want to get a closer look, and be tempted to do something stupid. Like try it on.

She picked it up, briskly snapped it shut and was trying to figure out where to stash it when the door buzzer sounded again.

She jammed it into one of the deep recesses of her slouchy, oversized carry-all, then went to the door, hoping that Maggie had again forgotten her keys, but knowing that . . .

Yeah. It was Jack standing out there again. No doubt he'd come back for his ring.

But when she opened the door, he apologized. "Sorry to . . . I just, uh, I wasn't even down the stairs when Maggie called. She asked me to give you a message—to tell you that she's not coming home, and I told her I wouldn't, that she was going to have to talk to you herself? But then she texted me and . . ."

He held out his phone.

Maybe mom wont have 2 go back if =I= get pregnant. Tell her ill b back in the morning.

Arlene shifted her horrified gaze from Jack's phone to his worried eyes. "Oh, shit," she said, as he tried calling Maggie back.

He shook his head—she wasn't picking up. "She's not serious," he reassured Arlene. "We'll find her—we should start by calling her friends."

But Arlene shook her head. "I don't . . . Her friends—they're just names to me. I don't have . . ."

"I'll call Will and Dolphina." Jack flipped through his phone's address book. "We're going to find her, Leen. She's just . . . This is a threat—her way of holding her breath 'til she gets what she wants."

"You don't know her," she said, and as the words left her mouth, her heart clenched because the truth was, Arlene didn't know her own daughter anymore.

"You gonna let me in?" Jack asked, and as she stepped back, opening the door wider, she felt the last of her control slip and she burst into tears.

* * * *

Before tonight, Jack had never seen Arlene Schroeder cry. Not like this, with deep, body-shaking sobs, as if her world were coming to an end.

He'd seen her damn near frothing at the mouth with anger. He'd seen her frustrated and humiliated and joyful and proud and giddy with laughter. He'd seen her fight not to cry, furtively wiping away any moisture, so that no one could see her tears.

He'd seen her green eyes filled with passion and, damnit, love—that *was* love he'd seen that night—as she'd pulled his head down to kiss him, their bodies moving, straining together.

"I got maybe thirty seconds, Lloyd, so make it fast or I'll talk to you later," Will's voice was loud and clear through Jack's phone.

"I'm at your place," Jack informed Arlene's brother as he put his arms around her still-shaking shoulders. "Maggie's in trouble. Arlene's melting down. You and Dolph need to get over here—now."

He didn't let his old friend reply, he just hung up his phone, tossing the damn thing onto the rug, so he could wrap himself more completely around Arlene.

Who slapped him away. "Don't touch me!" She was now trying—and coming close to succeeding—to stop her tears, to jam her emotional outburst back inside. But the look on her face broke his heart, and he couldn't keep himself from reaching for her again.

"We'll find her," he promised her again. "Will and Dolphina are on their way home. We'll make a list of all of Maggie's friends—"

Again, she pushed him away, striding into the living room where a box of tissues sat on Will's computer desk. "None of whom I've met. Lizzie, Beth, Paloma, Inez, Keisha, Jason, Mike." She blew her nose forcefully. "I don't even know their last names."

"Will and Dolphina will know."

"I'm her mother." Despite her best efforts, Arlene's

tears again overflowed. "I should know. I should be here."

"Yeah," Jack said. "You should."

And there they stood, looking at each other.

"I don't want to go back," Arlene whispered. The tip of her nose was pink, which made her attempts to wipe away her tears rather useless. But she straightened her shoulders and kept her lower lip from trembling. "But I have to. I made a promise."

"But when's your debt repaid?" Jack asked her quietly. "This war's gone on too long. And I've read the reports. Your being over there—*our* being over there—it isn't making things safer here, for Maggie, for any of us. How do you reconcile that?"

"I don't," Arlene admitted. "And I hate being there. I *hate* it, Jack. But I made a promise. If called upon, I would serve."

"The government made a promise to you that they haven't kept," he pointed out.

"That's a matter of opinion," she countered. "For the sole sake of argument, let's assume—I don't believe you are, but let's assume—you're right. They broke their promise, not just to me, but to everyone in the Reserves and the National Guard, by extending our tours, by creating the stop-loss program that says we can't leave, even if we want to. Okay, great. It sucks. I'm with you, there. But nearly everyone overseas has someone who is growing up without them, Jack. Everyone has *someone* they miss with all of their heart. Every one of us wants to come home." She shook her head. "I made a promise to serve," she said again, her green eyes filled with conviction.

And now Jack was the one fighting his tears. He held out his hand to this woman who awed him despite their disagreement, this woman who took the lofty ideas of honor and duty and lived them, every day, with every breath she took.

"Will and Dolphina will be here soon," he tried to reassure her. "We'll find Maggie."

"And then what?" Arlene asked, sadness in her eyes. "After we find her? How do I make her understand that I have to go back?"

* * * *

They were four blocks from home, stopped at a

traffic light, when Robin's cell phone rang.

"Hey, thanks for calling me back," he said, and Jules knew it was Dolphina, his personal assistant, on the other end. "You changed the password on the office computer without telling me—" He laughed. "No, I'm not going to go in there and mess up your organizational—No, I just needed to check my schedule because I got asked to fill in, last minute, as the host of Sundance Channel's indy film awards and . . . Yeah. No, Art called me directly. They called him and . . . It's a week from Saturday and . . . *Yeah*, I want to do it."

The light turned green and Jules tried not to burn rubber as he hit the gas.

But then Robin said, "Oh, crap. She's not serious, is she?"

Jules glanced at him, and he mouthed the word *Maggie*, then *we need to go to Will's*, then said into the phone. "No, we're still in the car. No. No, Dolph. Really. Jules won't mind—he loves Maggie, too. This falls under *emergency*. The more people you've got looking for her, the better. We'll be right there."

He snapped his phone shut as their driveway came into view.

And Jules did indeed love Maggie, too, but *damn*.

"What's going on?" he asked as he drove past their house and headed west, to Newton.

* * * *

Will and Dolphina were helping—and yet really not helping.

Jack watched Arlene as Will pulled a list of Maggie's friends—full names, cell phone numbers, parents' names and phone numbers and addresses—up on his computer. She was beyond grateful that her brother had kept such close tabs on Maggie while she was gone, but Jack knew that she also hated the fact that Will had the information that she clearly felt she should've known.

They went down the list quickly—with Will and Arlene calling the parents and Dolphina, who'd recently taken Maggie and her friends out for pizza and a movie, calling the kids.

Jack took the opportunity to send another text to Maggie. He'd been firing them off ever since he'd

gotten her alarming message, hoping to get a response.

Halfway down the list, Jules and Robin Cassidy showed up and joined the effort—Robin helping with the calls, and Jules doing his best to hack into Maggie's e-mail account out on the living room computer.

But none of Maggie's friends knew where the girl was. Even more disturbing was the fact that there was no play rehearsal scheduled for today.

"When did she start lying?" Arlene asked her brother, who shook his head.

"Maggie doesn't lie," Will said.

"Well, she did today," Arlene pointed out sharply. "Clearly you've been setting a *great* example."

"You have no idea how hard it is," Dolphina was quick to defend Will. "How hard Will works to—"

"I have no idea how *hard* it is?" Arlene bristled, her fear for Maggie combining with her frustration and, yes, her jealousy, and expressing itself as anger at Dolphina—this stranger who she felt knew her daughter better than she did.

Jack was on the verge of throwing himself on that grenade when Robin beat him to it. The movie star slipped into the seat next to Arlene at the kitchen table.

"She's an amazing kid," Robin told her. "I think we're all in agreement about that, all right? And okay, maybe she went a little too far, drama-wise, tonight. A little too *Parent Trap*, but you've got to give her props for creativity. And you've got to love her ability to hope. She still believes in fairytale, happily-ever-afters, but she's also willing to fight—a little dirty, okay, that's true—but remember she's trying to win that perfect happy ending. Not just for you, Arlene, but for herself, too."

And the last of Arlene's anger deflated, leaving behind only sadness. "I'm sorry," she said to Dolphina. "I really do appreciate everything you've done for Maggie. I do. I just—"

"It's okay," the younger woman reassured her. "I can't imagine how difficult it must be for you. I do know how rough it is for Maggie, though. I can tell you with complete conviction that she would *never* do something like this when you're gone. She lives each day, trying so hard to make you proud of her. She's careful never to do anything that might even remotely get you upset. She doesn't want you distracted when you're out there."

"She crosses off the days on the calendar," Will quietly told his sister, coming out of Maggie's tiny bedroom, holding a *Battlestar Galactica* calendar—Lieutenant Starbuck on the front in a devil-may-care pose. "Like she's in prison, counting down the hours until the end of her sentence—until the day you get to come home. Only here it is. You're finally home. And look." He opened the calendar to May—holy shit, was it already May?

"She's still crossing off the days," Will continued, "but now she's counting down to the day that you're going to leave again. You're safe—but it's not going to last. There's an end date, Leenie, and she's gotta be dreading it. God knows I am."

"Let me tell you what it's like," Robin told Arlene, taking her hands because, once again, her eyes had filled with tears. "Jules just spent four weeks in Afghanistan, and while he was gone, Arlene, I swear to God, I didn't breathe. There was not a single second of that entire time that I wasn't hyper-aware that he was someplace dangerous. I didn't even escape it at night, because when I finally did fall asleep? I dreamed about him being in danger. Four weeks, and I'm ready to tear my hair out." He touched the top of his head. "Not that there's a lot left right now to tear, but you know what I mean."

As Jack watched, she nodded.

"And I was in Kabul, which is a relatively safe part of the country," Jules said, and they all looked up to see him standing in the doorway, a piece of paper in his hands. He held it up. "Got her. According to an e-mail she sent at 1500 this afternoon, her partner in crime is someone named Lizzie. She's over at her house."

"Liz Milton," Dolphina said, whipping out her cell phone and dialing. "That girl lied, right to my face . . ."

"Wait," Arlene stopped her. "Maggie told me about Lizzie in one of her e-mails. Doesn't she live nearby?" She looked from Dolphina to Will.

Will answered. "Her parents have a condo across the street."

"I don't want to call and have Maggie leave and go somewhere else." Arlene turned to Dolphina, and swallowed the last of the lingering jealousy she had to be feeling for the younger woman. "Please, she admires you so much. Will you go over there, and . . . and talk to her?"

Dolphina nodded. "Of course."

"It might not be a bad idea," Will suggested, "for you to go over, too. Meet Lizzie's parents . . ."

"I want to get Maggie safely home first," Arlene said. "Believe me, I'll be meeting Lizzie's parents in the very near future."

"Maybe Jules should go with Dolphina," Robin suggested. "In case Maggie's uncooperative. He could play the FBI card."

Jules was shaking his head. "I'm not here in an official capacity," he said as Jack opened his cell phone, checking to see if Maggie had texted him back. His last text should have elicited *some* kind of response from her.

"Yeah, but Lizzie and Mags don't know that," Robin countered.

"I've kinda already played that card," Jack spoke up, and everyone turned to look at him. "I've been texting Maggie," he explained, "telling her that she better get home, stat, or else—" but he didn't get any further, because the front door opened, and Maggie herself burst into the apartment, followed by a dark-haired girl who no doubt was Lizzie.

"It's all my fault," Maggie announced. "Don't arrest Will."

"No one's going to. . ." *arrest me*, Will started to say, but Jack kicked him in the ankle. "Ow!"

Jules Cassidy was on the ball, good man. "It's lucky you came back when you did," he told the girl in what had to be his official FBI agent voice, crisp and cool. "Or I would have had to bring Will in."

"For what?" Lizzie apparently wasn't as gullible as Maggie, attitude dripping off of her. "No one's done anything wrong."

"For neglect of a minor," Jack supplied the made-up excuse he'd texted to Maggie several minutes earlier, before Jules could answer.

Lizzie crossed her arms. "Then maybe you should arrest Maggie's mom. Talk about *neglect*."

Ouch. Arlene flinched as if the girl had struck her across the face.

Maggie looked stricken, too. "No," she told her friend, "you don't understand."

"She's never home," Lizzie argued. "You know, this is the first time I've *met* your mom? I mean, God, Mag, your mother's supposed to take care of *you*, and all I

ever see is you taking care of her, sending her packages, worrying about her . . ."

"You don't *understand*," Maggie said again.

"You're my best friend, and you live your life in total terror," Lizzie said just as hotly. She turned to Arlene. "No one should have to live that way. You joined the reserves, not the Army. This wasn't supposed to be your career, and you shouldn't have to go back. And you *don't* have to. All you have to do is—"

"Lizzie," Maggie said. "Stop."

"Have a baby," Lizzie finished.

"It was stupid," Maggie told her friend, "thinking I could set my mom up with Jack, thinking she would just . . . fall in love with him." She turned to her mother, with tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"You don't need to be in love to make a baby," Lizzie said, disgust in her voice. "My little brother's proof of that. People have kids for stupid reasons all the time. Why not have one for a *good* reason?"

"Liz, just go home." Maggie was defeated. "You're making things worse."

"If you die," Lizzie told Arlene, "*when* you die, you won't have to be here to see what it does to Maggie. Or maybe you'll come home without your legs, and Maggie will have to take care of you for the rest of her life—"

"Lizzie, go home!" Maggie shouted.

And everyone leapt into action. Dolphina grabbed the outspoken Lizzie with one hand and Will with the other. "Will and I are going to walk you across the street."

Jules and Robin were right behind them, going out the door. "Call if you need anything," Robin told Arlene, who wasn't paying anyone any attention. She was looking at her daughter, tears in her eyes.

Jack alone hesitated as the door closed behind them all.

"I'm so sorry, Mommy." Maggie started to cry. "Liz doesn't understand. Her parents are rich. They don't—"

"It's okay, baby." Arlene wrapped her arms around her daughter.

"And I'm sorry about e-mailing Jack," Maggie said through her tears. "He was just so nice when I met him at the wedding. When he talked about you, and he told me he's been madly in love with you since you were like, sixteen, and all I could think was . . ."

Maggie kept talking, her words punctuated by her sobs, but Jack stopped paying attention to what she was saying, because Arlene lifted her head and looked at him, surprise in her eyes. Surprise and disbelief.

Great.

Yeah, it was definitely time to go.

But now Maggie was speaking directly to him, pulling free from Arlene to face him. "I'm sorry," she told him, tears running down her face. "I just wanted . . ."

"It's okay, honey," he told her. "I know. I got a little caught up in the fantasy, too. But you can't just snap your fingers and make someone change everything they believe in. Your mom, she's one of the heroes and . . . I had a shot at making her fall in love with me a few years ago, and I screwed it up. I wish I hadn't, because I'm pretty sure that I could've talked her into marrying me and . . . Having a baby right now might've been the right choice for all of us." He shook his head. "But she and I, we're both different people now and . . . And you can't just make someone fall in love with you, especially after letting them down in the past. Life doesn't work that way."

Maggie nodded, subdued. "I know."

Arlene spoke. "You've really been in love with me for seventeen years?" She was standing with her arms crossed, looking at him as if he were roadkill.

"Something like that," he said, through a mouth that was suddenly dry. "I know you don't believe me, but—"

"It never occurred to you to *tell* me that? To say the words? *Hey, Arlene. How have you been? I'm kinda in love with you. . . ?*"

Yeah, like he was going to walk in here, cut open his chest and toss his heart onto the floor? "I asked you to marry me."

"Out of pity," she countered.

"What? No," Jack said. "I asked for the reason most men propose marriage to the woman that they . . ." He had to clear his throat, and even then the word came out on a croak. "Love."

"You asked her to marry you, but you didn't tell her you love her?" Maggie was deeply unimpressed. "What are you, an idiot?"

"Apparently," Jack said.

Maggie turned to her mother. "He loves you. Madly. He told me. I asked him how he knew it was really love, and he told me he knows because he's felt it forever

and it won't go away. He said he dreams about you, and that's the only time he's ever really happy and—"

"Maggie." Jack cut her off. "That doesn't change anything. Except it maybe makes me feel like even more of a loser—"

"Because you love my mom?" Maggie asked. "Why . . ."

"Because I'm nearly forty years old," he told her, a tad impatiently, "and I should know when it's time to give up and go home." He met Arlene's eyes again. "But every time I look at you," he whispered, "I find myself thinking *How can I leave when I'm already home?*" He took a deep breath, and said it. "I love you, Leenie. I always have, and I always will."

* * * *

Arlene Schroeder had gotten pregnant when she was nineteen, and had married her college boyfriend, Ted, even though she knew it would never—could never—work out.

But he was Maggie's father, and she'd tried, for years, to make it work.

Tried and failed.

But she'd learned a lot from the experience. First and foremost, she'd learned that one person, working alone, couldn't possibly make a relationship succeed. It needed, she suspected, to be a joint effort, a combined endeavor.

And she'd learned that there needed to be a whole hell of a lot more than sexual attraction to make a romance last. Respect, honesty, and friendship were key ingredients to a deep, abiding love.

But here she was, standing in the apartment her brother shared with her daughter, gazing into the eyes of a man who claimed he loved her, a man she'd loved for damn near forever, too. Loved, but didn't really respect or trust.

But as she stood there, with Maggie watching, wide-eyed, Jack got on his knees.

"Marry me," he begged her. "Not because I want to get you pregnant—although that's definitely on my wanna-do list. But marry me because I love you, because I've always loved you. Marry me because I just can't shake the sense that you've always loved me, too. If you really, truly, feel that you've got to go back to Iraq, well, okay. I don't agree with you. I don't think we

should've gone there in the first place, and I think the sooner everyone comes home, the better. But if you think otherwise, for whatever reason? I respect you, and I respect your choices. I'm going to be scared shitless until you come home, and you goddamn better e-mail me every freaking day, but don't not marry me, Leen, just because you're doing something hard. If I'm wrong, and you don't love me, not even a little? That's why you shouldn't marry me, but on the other hand, I've been here on my knees more than once tonight. Obviously pride's not a big thing for me, so feel free to marry me out of pity. I'd be good with that."

As Arlene gazed into Jack Lloyd's whiskey-colored eyes, she could feel Maggie slipping back, out of the room, into the kitchen.

"Don't go far," she called to her daughter. "You and I have a *lot* more to talk about before this day is behind us."

"I know," Maggie called back, resignation in her voice. "I thought maybe it would be a good idea if we all had dinner. I'm starting the rice and setting the table."

The hope radiating off of Jack was so palpable Arlene could practically smell it. Or maybe that was Maggie's hope she was getting a whiff of.

"Get up," Arlene told him.

He shook his head. "I'm fine down here."

"Hey, Jack," Maggie called from the kitchen. "Do you like ranch or italian on your salad?"

"Jack can't stay," Arlene called. "He's got an article he needs to finish writing tonight because we're going to drive up to the north shore to have lunch tomorrow."

Jack's smile was like sunshine. "So no to a lifetime, but yes to lunch." He nodded. "Okay. I'm going to call it a victory. A small one, yes, but that's good enough for me—for now."

Arlene held out her hand to pull him to his feet, but once he was up, he didn't let her go. He tugged her close enough to reach out with his other hand and push her hair back from her face, his fingers warm as he tucked her curls behind her ear.

"Thank you," he said. "I'll see you tomorrow. How about I pick you up at nine?"

Arlene had to laugh. "For lunch?"

"Gotta get there early to get a table on the deck,"

Jack told her. "I'll bring coffee for the ride. Large, but half decaf, skim milk, one sugar, right?"

She blinked at him. "I can't believe you remember that."

Jack shrugged. "In love with you for seventeen years." He laughed. "That's getting easier to say, which is a little scary, I've got to admit."

And there they stood. Arlene gazed up into his eyes, as his familiar smile quirked at the edges of his generous mouth. It was the uncertainty she saw there that made her heart beat harder. As much as he tried to pretend otherwise, he wasn't as cocksure as he often seemed.

"I guess I've kinda gone all in," he told her.

"Dark roast," Arlene said, still holding his gaze, "black, three, count 'em three, sweet and lows. That stuff is going to kill you, Jack."

He laughed, but then narrowed his eyes at her. "So what are you saying?" he asked. "That you've been in love with *me* for seventeen years, too?"

She shook her head, no. "Twenty," she said and he laughed his surprise. She could tell from the sudden heat in his eyes that he was seconds away from grabbing her and kissing her, so she put her hand on his chest to keep him at a safe arm's length. "But I'm pretty sure I was only in love with the *idea* of you," she admitted. "You know, my big brother's super-hot best friend. I guess I'm willing to take a little time to see how the real you compares."

And with that she took her hand away.

But Jack was wary, clearly afraid to push his luck, so Arlene stood on her toes and brushed the softness of his lips with hers.

"Yesssss."

Jack smiled down at Arlene, the laughter lines around his eyes crinkling. "Was that Maggie or me? Because it was exactly what I was thinking."

She pushed him toward the door. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Nine o'clock," he verified as he opened the door.

Arlene had to laugh. "Sure. Why not?"

He went through the doorway, but stopped in the hall to look back at her. "Huh," he said. "This is kinda weird. I'm happy, yet I appear to be awake."

It was, without a doubt, one of the sweetest, most romantic things anyone had ever said to her. "See you

tomorrow," Arlene said past the lump in her throat.

"Don't be too hard on Maggie," he told her.

And with that, he was gone.

* * * *

Robin carried Jules's overnight bag into their house.

"We should make a point to spend more time with Maggie," he told Jules as he followed him into the kitchen. "You know, next month, after Arlene goes back. I'll invite her to the set. It's good to keep busy, be distracted. Not that it really helps—although it does help pass the time."

Jules put the pizza they'd picked up on their way home onto the kitchen counter. "It's still really hard for you, isn't it?" he asked. "When I'm gone."

Robin shrugged. "It is what it is. Although I definitely prefer it when you spend four weeks in California. As opposed to a war zone. That *really* sucks." He crossed to Jules's side of the center island. "Let's eat. Later."

His smile was pure sex, but Jules had more to say. "I'm away a lot."

"Yes, you are, babe. Just make sure you keep coming home," Robin said, taking him by the tie and tugging him toward the back staircase that led to their bedroom.

But Jules couldn't promise this man that he'd married that he always *would* come home. At least not in a body-bag.

"I hate the idea that I'm doing to you what Arlene is doing to Maggie," he admitted, even as he followed Robin up the stairs. "She's got no real choice. But I do."

"No," Robin said, turning to face him, right there on the stairs. "You don't. You wouldn't be happy doing anything else. I would never ask you to—"

"I know." Jules kissed him. "But maybe you shouldn't have to ask."

Robin smiled into Jules's eyes. "You must really love me," he said, and the tenderness on his face took Jules's breath away. "Because we have this exact conversation every time you get back from overseas."

"You know I love you," Jules said just as quietly. "And I hate the idea that something I do makes you miserable."

"So make it up to me." The heat in Robin's eyes made Jules smile.

"You sure we don't have anywhere else to go tonight?" he asked. "Anyone else to help rescue? Any other crisis to handle?"

As if on cue, Jules's cell phone rang.

He took it out of his pocket to silence it and then, without looking at the caller ID, holding Robin's gaze the entire time, he tossed it into a basket of laundry that was sitting near the bottom of the stairs.

And then there they stood, halfway up the stairs, just looking at each other.

Robin blinked first. "You better get that," he said. "What if it's Arlene. Or, you know, the president?"

Jules nodded. "Yeah." With a sigh, he went down the stairs, and dug his phone out from the clean towels. *Missed Call*, it said. But it was neither Arlene nor the U.S. President. "It was Yashi," he told Robin.

Joe Hirabayashi was one of Jules's subordinates and a good friend. If he truly needed to get in touch with Jules, he would call back. But hopefully not for a while.

Still on the stairs, Robin smiled and held out his hand.

Jules took it—and raced him to the top.

* * * *

Arlene sat on her old sofa in Will's living room, with Maggie's head on her lap.

Her daughter had cried herself dry—they both had—and she now slept, as Arlene ran her fingers through her hair.

They'd discussed quite a few difficult topics—sex being at the top of the list. But as Arlene had hoped, Maggie's threat to get pregnant was just that. A threat. Even with Lizzie's less than spectacular example, Maggie wasn't even close to being ready to become sexually intimate with any of the boys she knew.

Although Arlene did find out that she had a crush on Lizzie's older brother, Mike, who had told Liz that he thought Maggie was pretty. He was a junior in high school, and Arlene absolutely was going to send Will and Jack over to speak to the boy. And okay, yes, not so much speak to him as scare the hell out of him. She made a mental note to talk to Dolphina about him as well, to ask her to keep an eye on things and . . .

God, she didn't want to go back. She wanted to be an active part of her daughter's life.

She and Maggie had talked—for a long, long time—about that, too. About duty and honor and keeping promises.

And then they'd talked about Jack.

"How come you never told me about him?" Maggie asked.

Arlene shook her head. "There was nothing to tell. He was Will's best friend. I was Will's kid sister. And then I met your father. . . ." She shrugged.

"Jack told me he cried," Maggie told her. "When he found out you were marrying Daddy."

"Really?" She winced even as the word came out of her mouth. She sounded like one of Maggie's middle-school friends.

"He told me all these stories about you," Maggie reported. "I talked to him for like two hours at Jules and Robin's wedding. I knew he was totally in love with you even before he said it because he called you *music*. It was right when I first met him. He goes, *You've got to be Arlene Schroeder's daughter*, and I go, *yeah*, and he goes, *Your mother, she's music*. That was what Will said when he first told me about Dolphina."

"So naturally you e-mail him to see if he'd be interested in being my new baby-daddy."

Maggie avoided eye contact. "I guess. . . I thought it was worth a try. I think it would be cool to have a brother or a sister. I could baby-sit, help take care of him. Or her." She glanced at Arlene out of the corner of her eyes. "I think Jack would make a great father."

"He's got two sons," Arlene told her. "Luke and Joseph. I think Luke's ten and Joey's seven."

"Sweet," Maggie said with enthusiasm. "We could be like the Brady Bunch. With the new baby, there'd be six of us."

Arlene just looked at her.

"I'm just saying," Maggie said—which was one of Will's expressions. Jack's too, come to think of it.

"What am I going to do with you?" Arlene asked as she ruffled her daughter's unruly curls.

"Tomorrow, nothing," Maggie said with a grin, "because you're having lunch with Ja-ack."

It was obvious that Maggie was ecstatic about that, and Arlene found herself thinking of Jack's parting words. *This is kinda weird. I'm happy, yet I appear to be*

awake.

It was *definitely* kinda weird, because the thought of meeting Jack tomorrow made Arlene feel happy, too.

Happy and hopeful, even though, in a month, she *was* going back.

Her head still on Arlene's lap, Maggie stirred, waking just enough to look up at Arlene and murmur, "I love you, Mommy."

Arlene's heart clenched as she smiled down at her daughter. "I love you, too, monkey-girl."

Meet Vinh Murphy

Former Marine Vinh Murphy is described by fellow Troubleshooters operative Jim Nash as part African-American, part Vietnamese, with just enough Irish thrown in to make things completely confusing to anyone walking into a room and looking for a guy named Murphy. Nash goes on to call Murphy a human monolith. Murphy, he declared, could have been the love child of Tiger Woods and Andre the Giant, and wasn't the kind of guy you could meet and then forget.

In *Flashpoint*, Murphy goes to the earthquake-stricken city of Kazabek, Kazbekistan, as part of a Troubleshooters team posing as relief workers. They are, in fact, looking for the missing laptop of a well-known terrorist who was killed in the quake. Lawrence Decker is team leader, and along with Murphy, they're joined by Jim Nash, Tess Bailey, and former CIA agent, Dave Malkoff—all of whom also appear in *Into the Fire*.

This excerpt takes place after the team's first exhausting day in K-stan.

FROM *FLASHPOINT*:

Tess was already sleeping in the back as Jimmy climbed up and into the driver's seat of Khalid's wagon.

She was asleep sitting up, leaning back against the hard wooden sideboards, Dave Malkoff's head in the softness of her lap, her hand in Dave's hair.

Dave had his eyes closed, too. His food poisoning was significantly more severe than he'd let anyone believe, and Jimmy couldn't help feeling respect for the man. Dave had worked tirelessly all day, without a single complaint, as they'd dug more than six hundred surviving boys out of that basement bomb shelter. He'd just stepped aside, dropped to his hands and knees, and quietly communed with the dust and dirt when necessary.

In the past, when Jimmy had done the food poisoning tango himself, he'd been able to do little more than lie in bed and moan. So, okay, yeah. He was impressed. And a little jealous of that hand in the hair thing. Jealous and impressed. By Dave Malkoff. It was surely a sign of the coming apocalypse.

Vinh Murphy climbed up beside him, and the ancient cart creaked and groaned under the big man's weight. "Yo, Nash, you really know how to drive this thing?"

"Yes, I do."

Murphy looked at him and laughed. His eyes actually twinkled—a giant Asian-African-American leprechaun. "Yeah, right."

Jimmy looked back. Murphy had two basic modes. Silent and watchful, which played to most of the world as just this side of comatose, and amused. It was hard not to laugh, too, when Murphy was laughing, probably because he wasn't ever mean-spirited. Murphy didn't laugh *at* anyone—he laughed at the world around them.

"You know, Khalid had no trouble believing me," Jimmy told him.

"Khalid is, like, twelve years old. Besides, he wanted to go to the hospital with his brother," Murphy pointed out. "You could've told him you were the Queen of England, man, and he would've kissed your ring and asked you for a knighthood."

Khalid had wept with joy when Amman had been carried from the basement with nothing more serious than a sprained wrist and a bad case of dehydration. He'd needed to go to the hospital to get checked out, but the little boy wouldn't stop clinging to his brother's neck.

Jimmy had suggested Khalid trust him to drive his horsecart to Rivka's house, where they were planning to stay. Khalid could go to the hospital with his brother and pick up both horse and cart the next morning.

The boy had extracted a number of promises from Jimmy. He promised to feed and care for the horse and to lock up the cart in Rivka's yard. He also promised that he'd handled a horse and cart before.

"Okay, James," Decker called softly to him now

from the back of the wagon. “We’re good to go.”

“Yeah, James,” Murphy said. “Pedal to the metal, man. I told Angelina I’d try to call her tonight, and cell towers are still down in this part of Kazabek. I’m hoping something’s been restored in the wealthier part of the city.”

“Don’t count on it.” Jimmy smacked the reins loosely against the back of Khalid’s horse, Marge. As in Marge Simpson. Hooray for satellite TV.

Marge glanced back at him in mild annoyance, but otherwise stood there.

Come on. He’d seen it done this way in the movies. Jimmy tried again. “Giddyap.”

The horse’s ears flickered. He—Marge was a gelding, go figure—didn’t even bother with the WTF look this time.

Murphy knew when it was not a good idea to laugh.

* * * *

Murphy and the team return in *Hot Target*, when Troubleshooters Incorporated is hired by a Hollywood studio to protect Jane Chadwick, a writer/producer who has received death threats for making a movie about a gay WWII hero. The team, again led by Lawrence Decker, provides round-the-clock security for Jane, and the operatives move into her run-down mansion in the Hollywood hills.

After an accident on set provides a close call, Jane has a close encounter of a different kind with Cosmo, a new, temporary member of the TS Inc team.

Murphy is there the next morning . . .

FROM *HOT TARGET*:

Murphy was in the kitchen when Cosmo came in for breakfast.

“Whoa,” Cos said. What was he still doing here?

“I’m double shifting,” Murph told him before he could ask. He looked up from the piles of paper—computer printouts and reports, from the looks of them—that he had stacked in front of him on the table. “Sleep well?”

Um. “Yeah,” Cosmo said, opening the cabinet in search of a coffee mug.

“PJ and Beth had a thing—not a fight, a thing. That’s a direct quote,” Murphy explained. “So I stuck around.”

“You should have called me,” Cosmo said.

“Hmmm,” Murph said. “Yeah, I guess. It just seemed silly to use the phone when you were sleeping right down the hall. Except, you *weren’t* there. Very mysterious. At first I thought you were out in the yard, but then I realized that I would have heard the alarm go off and then back on as you went through the door.”

Damn. He knew he should have gone back to his own room a whole hell of a lot sooner than he had. Cosmo poured himself a cup of coffee, keeping his back to the former Marine.

“It’s really not my business,” Murphy said. “Except now it sort of is my business, because I’m wondering how much of this is my fault. I believe what I said was ‘go and give Jane a howdy,’ but maybe I’m not up on the latest Caucasian slang, so—”

Cosmo turned to face him. “It’s not your fault.”

Murphy gazed at him. “Again, it’s not my business, but if I were in your shoes—”

“I’ve already called Commander Paoletti, left a message that I need to talk to him some time today,” Cosmo told him. He had to figure out the right thing to do—morally, ethically, professionally. Continuing on as things were wasn’t an option. Certainly not without bringing Tommy Paoletti up to speed. To some extent, anyway.

Cos had called his mother this morning, too, asked her to stay in San Francisco a little longer.

“Then before I tactfully change the subject and never speak of this matter again,” Murphy said, “I want to say, *Dude!* You are *so* the man. Not only is she a walking wet dream, she’s unbelievably *nice*. I just have to know, though—”

“Is it possible to tactfully change the subject after you’re dead?” Cosmo mused as he took a sip of his coffee.

* * * *

In *Hot Target* Murphy and his new bride, Angelina, are the victims of a sniper attack. Murph is badly wounded and Angelina is killed. Although the killer is brought to justice at the end of that book,

it's clear that Murphy's life has been irrevocably changed.

Into the Fire takes place several years later as, after years of anesthetizing himself, Murphy finally takes the first steps to return to the world of the living.

He goes to visit his old friend, Hannah Whitfield, at her mountain cabin in Dalton, California. . .

FROM INTO THE FIRE:

It was a Wednesday in early July—the day that Murphy reappeared in Hannah's yard.

It was half past noon, and as she straightened up from weeding the green beans in her garden, she jumped, startled to find him standing there, just a few feet away from her.

"Sorry," he said as she gaped. "I didn't mean to sneak up on you."

She almost didn't recognize him in the sunlight. She shaded her eyes against the glare from the too-blue sky and . . .

It was definitely Murph, a bright red gym bag at his feet. He must've walked up the hill, and quite possibly all the way out here from Dalton. His truck was nowhere in sight.

He'd lost quite a bit of weight in the months since she'd last seen him, but that only meant he was extra-large instead of extra-extra. His leanness was apparent mostly in his face. His cheekbones stood out, accentuated by cheeks that were no longer boyishly soft.

She'd always thought he was a good-looking man, with his cafe-au-lait skin and dark brown eyes—eyes that revealed his part-Vietnamese heritage with their exotically graceful shape. His mouth and nose came directly from his African-American father, fitting his face perfectly, especially those full lips that—once upon a time—had been quick to curl up in a smile.

Murph had been out of the Marines for years, but he still wore his hair regulation short. Wavy and black, Hannah knew firsthand that it was soft to the touch.

Yeah, she'd always thought he was handsome, but now other people would agree.

Further scrutiny revealed that his clothes—jeans

and a black T-shirt—were clean. He was wearing sunglasses but he took them off so she could see his eyes. They were clear. He was sober.

For now, anyway.

He was also waiting for her to say something. Anything. So Hannah pulled off her work gloves and, wiping the sweat from her forehead with her arm, she stepped over the chicken-wire fence she'd built to keep the rabbits at bay. "You must be Dalton's new Avon lady."

Murphy laughed. It was a terrible joke, but he actually laughed, even though it was over too soon. "Hannah," he started.

She held her hand out to him. Cut him off. "It's good to see you, Vinh."

He took her hand, engulfing it in both of his, and as she looked up at him, she saw his remorse, his regrets, his apology, his embarrassment. He opened his mouth, but she looked away. "Don't," she said. "Let's just . . . let the past be the past. Shit happens, you know? Especially when Johnny W.'s involved. He's a sonuvabitch."

Murphy squeezed her hand, waiting until she looked back up at him.

"I wasn't sure I'd be welcome," he said.

Her heart clenched. "You're always welcome here," she told him. "Always."

He was scrutinizing her as carefully as she'd looked at him, taking in her recent haircut, no doubt noting the toned muscles in her shoulders and arms, the way her cargo pants hung loose around her trim waist. Yeah, she'd spent the past few months getting back in shape, too, storing her cane in the bathroom closet. She still limped when she got tired, and her ankle hurt like a bitch when she tried to run, but . . .

"So where've you been?" she asked him, pulling her hand free, walking backward so she could watch him as they headed toward the cabin.

"Juneau," he said. At least that's what she thought he'd said. But . . .

"Excuse me?"

"I went up to Juneau, Alaska," he told her. "This time of year . . . I thought you'd be up there, helping Patrick find whales to show to the tourists."

She stopped short. "No, Pat's getting married. Didn't I tell you?" She had, but apparently it had been

Meet Vinh Murphy

one of those nights Murphy had wiped from his memory. “He’s selling his boat and . . . He’s in Arizona with his fiancée, Debbie. So I’m here in California all summer again.” Like last year. “Hence the garden.” She still didn’t quite believe what he’d just told her. “You really went to Juneau. To look for *me*?”

“Yeah.” Murphy nodded.

“That’s one freaking expensive apology, bwwee,” Hannah told him. “I mean, shit, Murph, flowers would’ve worked. You know, with a note—*sorry about accidentally having sex with you and then crying about it like a little girl.*”

He laughed again. Twice in one visit—a miracle.

**Tall, Dark & Believable:
Creating the “Perfect” Romance Hero
From a writing workshop presented by
SUZANNE BROCKMANN**

Let's start this writing workshop with a little role playing.

I want you to step into the character of a contemporary romance heroine.

You're young in spirit if not in actual age, you're smart, you're talented, you're beautiful—even if you don't particularly think so—and you're just a *little* bit bored with the safety of your somewhat predictable life.

Two different men approach—and both want to take you to lunch.

Coming at you from the right is a tall, handsome man, looking resplendent in his Canadian Mounties uniform. Yes, it's Dudley DoRight, and he's fallen in love with you at first sight.

He stands a respectful distance away, and in his clear, pure tenor (he sings, too!), he requests your company for the midday meal.

But bachelor number two has probably also caught your eye, although he's not wearing a uniform.

He's over on your left, leaning against the wall. He probably hasn't slept in days, but that doesn't stop him from letting you know that, ever since he's spotted you sitting here, he's discovered that he's ready and willing to spend another long, hot night *not* sleeping.

Yes, again you're right. It's none other than Han Solo, and he wants to have lunch, too.

Whose invitation are you going to accept?

Take your time deciding, because Dud's really a great guy. He brings that heroic “I'll save you” attitude with him to the table. You know you'll be safe with him. (Plus he'll probably sing for you.)

Han, however, needs a shave. His hair is shaggy, and he's slept in his clothes again because he's on the run. There's that glint in his eyes that makes you

wonder which he'll try to steal first—your virtue or your wallet.

Who are you having lunch with today?

Me, I'm going to take my chances with Han Solo.

I recently made a list of my all-time favorite heroes:

- Butch Cassidy
- The Sundance Kid
- Han Solo
- Spike from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*
- Angel from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*
- Mal Reynolds from *Firefly*
(Joss Whedon is my god.)
- Hawk from Parker's *Spenser* books
- Shane

Yeah, Jack Schaefer's gunslinger *Shane* has a permanent place in my heart. No doubt about it, this character has influenced every one of the men in my books. (Read Schaefer's novel, don't bother with the movie.)

Looking at that list, I find myself thinking, “Aha!” Apparently I have a thing for criminal types. Either that, or there's a correlation between outlaws and exceptional heroes . . . ?

But my list keeps going:

- George Bailey from *It's a Wonderful Life*
- CK Dexter-Haven from *The Philadelphia Story*
- Indiana Jones
- Mister Spock

None of these men are on the FBI's most wanted list.

Although, yes, while I confess to being drawn to heroes with a criminal element—call it a rebellious

Tall Dark & Believable: Creating the “Perfect” Romance Hero

side—there are enough law-abiding heroes on these lists to rule out the connection between outlaws and great heroes.

So what is it about these guys?

When I give this workshop in a non-written form, I tend to get feedback from the attendees, and right about now, someone usually throws out that well-known writing term: **internal conflict**.

Ding, ding, dingety-ding! The men on my list definitely have their share of internal conflict.

More—much, much more—about that in a sec.

Because as long as I’m making lists (I’m a list maker by nature), here’s a list of other Dudley DoRight-type heroes:

- Keith Partridge
- Mike Brady
- Any character played by Frankie Avalon and
- (yawn!) Prince Charming

And okay, I have to admit that I made this list a long time ago, before I saw the movie *Ever After*. Remember that flick? It was Drew Barrymore’s version of the Cinderella story—as opposed to your Disney-loving grandmother’s version. This movie is now one of my favorite romantic comedy comfort-views, along with *French Kiss*, *Clueless*, *American Dreamer*, and *Notting Hill*.

But let’s focus on *Ever After*.

In the familiar, classic Cinderella story P.C. (Prince Charming) is told by King Dad, “Okay, kid, it’s time to continue the royal line. Go do your duty and get married and make some princes of your own.” And bland, whitebread, Dudley DoRight-type hero that he is, P.C. usually doesn’t do too much complaining.

But in *Ever After*, the character of the prince is *pissed* by his responsibilities. And (I’ve got to point out) our intro to this character is a perfect example of a **reluctant hero**.

As the movie starts, our P.C. is escaping from the castle and the confines of his role as crown prince. He’s outrunning his father’s guards, and he’s going to make it to freedom, too—until he runs into some travelers who have been robbed. One of the victims is a distraught, elderly painter whose masterpiece has been stolen.

P.C. knows that if he goes after the crooks, he’ll get

the painting back—but in doing so, the guards will catch up with him. He’s angry and frustrated—mostly at himself because he can’t *not* be the hero. He is completely unable to be selfish and just ride away. And so he goes after the thieves—cursing the entire time—regains the painting, and loses his freedom.

Our old lunch buddy, Han Solo, falls into the “reluctant hero” category, too. These guys can’t keep themselves from ultimately doing the right thing, even when they desperately don’t want to! They wish they could be callous and uncaring, but when push comes to shove, they do care—too much—and their inner hero takes control.

Okay, so we’ve got reluctant heroes on one hand, and the Dudley DoRight heroes on the other. The Dudleys are guys that we don’t doubt for one second. We know that they will—always and absolutely—do the right thing.

In fact, it won’t be a problem for them to do the right thing.

Because they have no real **internal conflict**.

Let’s examine Keith Partridge’s internal conflict, shall we? What was *up* with him anyway? He didn’t have a whole lot going on. “Come on, get happy.”

I’m sorry, this is an eighteen- or nineteen-year-old man whose *mom* was in his rock band. If I’d been writing Keith Partridge, he’d have had one hell of an internal conflict over that alone!

But the way that they’ve been drawn, both Keith and the other Dudley DoRight heroes on my list are too perfect. They’re too darn good.

Take George Bailey, another one of my personal favorite heroes. Played by Jimmy Stewart, he’s the main character of that fabulous classic holiday movie, *It’s a Wonderful Life*. This is the story of an everyday, ordinary guy who, throughout his life, always does the right thing. He’s a good father, a wonderful husband, and the kind, compassionate owner of a small town Savings and Loan.

But when his crazy uncle loses a huge sum of money on Christmas Eve, George finds himself facing personal and financial ruin and actually considering suicide.

Here’s a hero who should be a Dudley DoRight. He’s a nice guy, a good man. He does the right thing over and over and over, until it’s expected of him. But

unlike a Dudley, he suffers through it. We see the great depth of his frustration and his anger, his jealousy and pain as he puts his own wants and needs and dreams behind doing the right thing again and again. He is a deep, multifaceted, multilayered character and we watch as each time he's forced to swallow, and even smile through his disappointment. We watch as that disappointment and frustration and anger bubbles and boils inside of him, so that when he does lose it, he loses it big time. His despair—and shocking thoughts of ending his own life—are completely believable.

Vanilla Dudley heroes vs. complex, complicated, darker-tinged heroes

One of my favorite examples, when comparing Dudley heroes to dark heroes is Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars* versus. . . Luke Skywalker in the *other* two movies of that classic trilogy, *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*. (You thought I was going to say Han Solo again, didn't you? Stop thinking about him! We're talking about Luke now.)

In the first *Star Wars* movie, Luke wears the space equivalent of a white cowboy hat. He's on the side of Right with a capital R.

His world is black and white, and he is bland and predictable. (And a little whiney.) The only gray to be seen comes in the very attractive form of Han Solo. (I was seventeen when I first saw this movie, and from the moment I saw Han, my reaction was Luke Who?) (Okay, my bad. I brought him up again.)

But. In the next two movies, we watch Luke begin his struggle with the dark side of the Force.

As he does so, as he examines and acknowledges this horrible darkness that is part of him, he becomes a more complex and much more intriguing character. He also gets to dress in all black, which really works for a dark hero.

Use the Force.

I believe that it is this acknowledgement of our on-going battle with the dark side that *every* human being possesses, that gives a person great depth and a powerful soul.

It's easy for Star-Wars-Luke to squeeze his eyes shut and say "I believe only in the good side of the Force," or "I will never give in to evil because I am

incapable of doing anything other than good."

Instead this character had to acknowledge that his own father—a Jedi warrior of legendary power—had been seduced by the darkness. Luke had to face that *and* face the fact that this darkness was inside of him, too, ready to devour him, already eating away at him like a cancer.

When I sit down to create heroes for my books, I make sure that they, like Luke, have their own version of the dark side of the Force with which to struggle.

Because my number one rule for creating the perfect romance hero is: *Don't make him perfect.*

The perfect romance hero is, in fact, extremely flawed. He's also incredibly complex.

Okay, time out. We're going to talk more about internal conflict and my personal methods for creating believable heroes, but first I want to discuss plotting and pacing, because, really, when it comes to writing about writing, plot and characters are intertwined.

I've done a number of workshops on how to write page-turners, and I've found that the only absolutely essential ingredient for creating a story that readers can't put down is **compelling and intriguing characters**.

Plus, it's the characters that make the plot unique.

Think about it. Same plot plus different characters equals a totally different story.

A few years ago, I taught a four-week course in romance writing at an adult education center in the Boston area, and I gave my class a take-home exercise. I provided each of them with the exact same series romance hook—a marriage of convenience situation. The heroine has to get married within a certain amount of time or she'll lose a vital inheritance. The assignment was for each student to create a hero and a heroine, to come up with a major moment or plot point, and to figure out how that conflict is resolved at the book's end.

Out of a class of fifteen people, I got fifteen different stories. I told the class that if they wanted to keep going, to flesh out their story and even write the book, that they should feel free to do so. Because as soon as they created their own hero and heroine, that standard series romance storyline became different

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from everyone else's. With the creation of unique characters, the story became their own.

Excellent, believable characters are number one on my list of the most important elements of a romance novel.

Here's how I break it down:

1. Characters.
2. Writing voice and style.
3. Internal conflict (including the romance).
4. External conflict (plot).

Keep in mind that this doesn't mean that just because you're writing a romance, you can slack off when it comes to creating a compelling external conflict. But it does mean that if you've got a great idea for a plot, you should take the time to create some truly wonderful characters to go along with it!

Let's talk about the importance of characters in a backward kind of way, by going back to the main plot of a story.

I believe that, taken at their simplest level, there are two kinds of plots. There are stories that take place on a personal level, and those that take place on a global level.

EXAMPLE: *The River Wild* vs. *War Games*

I like to use movies as examples—but forgive me, because both of these titles, above, are somewhat dated. (If you haven't seen them, because you're, like, too young? Shut. Up. But put 'em on your “to rent” list, kids. They're both terrific movies.)

Here's a synopsis of the plot of *The River Wild*: A former white-water raft expert (played by Meryl Streep, who's older than I am) takes her son and her, estranged husband on a rafting trip out west. They are held hostage by a pair of thieves (one of whom is played by a *rilly* scary Kevin Bacon) who will stop at nothing—including murder—to get their stolen money to safety. The bad guys intend to use the heroine's skill to navigate a dangerous part of the river that has been proven deadly and is currently off limits to recreational rafters. The bad guys are ruthless and the audience sits on the edge of their seats wondering how and even *if* the heroine and her family will survive.

Here's a brief description of *War Games*: A teenage hacker (Matthew Broderick) breaks into the National Defense computer and starts the countdown for World War Three. The entire world faces nuclear annihilation as the young hero and his girlfriend (not Sarah Jessica Parker, although that would've been cool) race against time to save the day.

Nuclear annihilation vs. the lives of one small family. Global vs. personal.

What's different: The scope of the threat.

What's similar: We are on the edge of our seats for both of these stories, global and personal, **because we care about the characters.**

Just because the threat is only to one family in *The River Wild*, we don't say “Oh well, it's only three lives. No big.” We care very much about the characters and want them to survive.

And in a similar way, we don't lose sight of the intimate drama in a story like *War Games*, because the writers bring the global threat down to a personal level and, again, we care deeply about the characters. Without that personal level, the audience or the reader has no real intimate connection with the potentially world-ending events.

It can be argued that some global threat movies don't make it personal enough, relying too much on special effects. But if the audience doesn't care about the characters, they say “Go ahead, get eaten by dinosaurs or swallowed up by the volcano or invaded by aliens. So what? I'll be in the next theater over, watching *Juno*.”

Whether your story is small or large, you've got to make 'em care about your characters.

Characters make it personal.

This is done in nonfiction as well, even in journalism.

Think about a news story on a toxic dump—a report of neighborhood children dying of cancer, filled with statistics and numbers. The tragedy is real, but it's too distant.

But give the readers an up-close look at little Jimmy O'Neil, bald from chemo, playing in his hospital room. Give us a look at the lines of pain and strain on his parents' faces, and suddenly it's way personal.

Think about homeless people. We can walk past them on the street if we don't look at them too closely. But stop to talk, see that this is an individual human being with a name and a heart and a soul, and it's a little bit harder to walk on by, isn't it?

We've got to do this with our stories. And we can. We can make our plots *personal* to the readers by giving them excellent, compelling, unique characters that they cannot walk past.

Great characters are characters that you-the-writer force the reader to care about.

So how do you do this? How do you make the reader care?

You have to convince your readers that these are real, living, breathing people. You must make your characters real, and remember, real people are peppered with flaws.

I believe that a good writer needs to understand human nature—why people do the things they do. And I feel that it's close to impossible to create believable fictional characters with believable motivation and internal conflict until you have at least a basic understanding of what makes people tick.

I've read a lot of self-help books—pop psychology—to help me better comprehend *people*.

Two of these books, *Awaken the Giant Within* and *Unlimited Power*, both by Anthony Robbins, are on my permanent reference list. (See References at the end of this workshop.)

I use what I've learned from one of Robbins's theories each time I create a new character.

His theory, paraphrased in a nutshell, goes like this: **People do the things they do because they have their own set of beliefs and values.**

In other words, each person (and this includes our fictional characters) is uniquely different from the next because of their differences in what they believe and what they value.

Beliefs and values. They are exactly what they sound like.

In *Awaken the Giant Within*, Robbins describes a belief as “a feeling of certainty about something.”

In *Unlimited Power*, Robbins gets more specific, writing, “. . . in the most basic sense, a belief is any guiding principle, dictum, faith or passion that can provide meaning and direction in life. . . . Beliefs are

the prearranged, organized filters to our perceptions of the world.”

Beliefs are things that we as individuals have learned over the course of our lives. And (this is the kicker—and very important to remember) beliefs are not necessarily true.

Example: Some people, even in this day and age, believe that their skin color or their religion or their gender make them better than other people.

Is this true?

No, of course not. But it's true to the people who believe this, in that it controls the way in which they live their lives.

Every single person on this planet has a slew of beliefs, many of which they might not even be aware.

Beliefs can be instilled in us during childhood, most of the time without our knowing. For example, phobias are a kind of belief that can sometimes be traced back to a traumatic childhood incident.

Example: Tornadoes are one of my own personal fears. Yet, I've lived in New York and New England nearly all my life. I've never so much as seen a tornado, live and up close. But I bet you can guess why tornadoes have made such a big impact on me.

That's right. The *Wizard of Oz* scared me out of my tiny little mind each Halloween, when my family watched it on TV.

Even though rationally and logically I know otherwise, I believe that a tornado can lift my entire house up off its foundation and take me to Oz.

And that tells you something very important about beliefs. They are not logical, rational, or well thought out.

Beliefs tend to be emotional. They tend to be extremes.

Another of my personal beliefs is: **Nothing is impossible.**

And yet I *know* I can't do a broad jump across the Grand Canyon.

But, see, it doesn't do me any good to believe “Almost nothing is impossible.” Or “Most things are possible, except for the really hard, impossible stuff.” No, I'm going to get much further in life believing “Nothing is impossible.”

Everyone has their own set of personal beliefs.

They’re there inside of you, even if you haven’t thought about them. It can be very helpful to examine your beliefs—helpful in understanding yourself. Some of your beliefs may be weighing you down. Some may need to be jettisoned, others may need changing.

Just like the beliefs of your characters.

Let me give you some more examples of my own personal beliefs:

I believe that hard work and perseverance will result in success. I’ve written forty-five books in not-quite fifteen years and most of them have won awards and popular acclaim—the eight most recent being *New York Times* bestsellers. So, I’d say that belief is working for me.

I believe that eating correctly and exercising regularly is vital to my well-being and healthy state of mind. This one’s a little harder to prove, but trust me. This belief is working for me, too.

I believe in equal rights for all people, in freedom and justice for all.

I believe in absolute separation of church and state.

I believe that war is unhealthy for children and other living things, and that it’s always darkest just before the dawn. (Two posters I had on my bedroom wall when I was a kid that still ring true to me.)

I believe that cats are extremely smart and they know instantly that I’m terribly allergic to them. If there are four people in a room, the cat will come to me. I’ve yet to outsmart one.

I believe that nonviolence is the best way to go, but if you threaten one of my children, I *will* rip your heart out with my bare hands.

My personal list of beliefs goes on and on. They encompass everything from global concepts like freedom and equality to little details like my paranoid phobia when it comes to certain housepets.

Early in my career, when I was just starting out as a romance writer, I believed, absolutely, that I would eventually be published, that sooner or later, I would succeed.

Do you share this belief—those of you reading this, who have yet to make your first sale? This is an empowering belief. Embrace it completely! Go, baby, go!

Do you believe it’s going to be easy to achieve success as a writer? (Maybe if you believe this, it will be. But maybe if you believe this and it’s *not* easy, you might have to radically change your belief in order to keep from quitting.)

Do you believe it’s going to be tough, filled with rejections and hurdles to overcome? Do you believe you have what it takes to keep going, no matter what obstacles are thrown in your path?

That’s a cool belief to have, isn’t it? That’s a variation of my belief—that perseverance and hard work will result in success.

We (and when I say we, I’m including all of our heroes in that collective) are always revising, adapting, or adding to our list of beliefs as we live our lives, as we learn and grow.

In further studying Tony Robbins’s concept of each individual’s personal system of beliefs, I learned that there’s a long list of things about which people tend to have strong beliefs.

This list includes:

- money/finances
- home and security
- parents/children, family relationships
- love
- patriotism
- career choices
- health
- religion/spirituality

Knowing my heroes’ beliefs about all of these things keeps them acting true to their character.

Cheap Laugh Syndrome

Did you ever read a book or see a movie and find yourself scoffing “This character would *never* do that.”

If you fully understand your character’s beliefs and values, you won’t make him act outside of his nature.

There’s something I call “Cheap Laugh Syndrome.” I see it all the time in movies and occasionally in books, too. It’s when a writer makes his or her characters do something ridiculous and kinda stupid—and completely out of character—just to get a laugh.

It's the comedy equivalent of the heroine in a horror movie going down to the basement when the lights go out in the house. Dude, she's a smart, well-educated woman who *knows* there's a killer after her. Does she run screaming over to the neighbors for help? No. She takes off her clothes and, wearing only her underwear, down those stairs she goes.

Sheesh.

Characters should lead the story. They should control it. You can throw them into a tough situation, but you have to let them react and respond to that situation in a way that is faithful to their character.

Action and reaction

Action is always followed by character reaction.

Think about it this way: Action is plot. Reaction is what your characters always do when they bump into your plot, whether it's the main plot or a smaller subplot, or not even a subplot, but something I call an "action burst."

More on that in a sec.

First let me explain what I mean by action and reaction.

Example: What if a wild animal enters a roomful of people, including Tom, Dick, Steve, and Harry.

Tom is a police detective. He's also a father and he's with his two-year-old son. His reaction: To put himself between the animal and the crowd, including his son, even though he's currently unarmed.

Dick was mauled by a dog when he was a child. His reaction: Terror. To run away as quickly as possible—to hell with anyone else in the room.

Steve is a zookeeper. He's got strong beliefs about the value of life, he's also got experience handling wild animals. His reaction: To calm the animal, to try to clear the room of the other people as slowly and calmly as possible, to call for equipment (cages, trunk guns) to get the animal back into the wild without hurting him.

Harry's a math professor at the local university. His reaction: To realize he's perhaps not the best person to deal with this situation, to step back out of the way and see if someone else is more qualified to handle this problem.

There are dozens more potential reactions to this very same action.

Now note what I've done in this example. I've told you something about the kind of people Tom, Dick, Steve, and Harry are, simply by telling you snippets of their backstory. (More about backstory in a bit!) As you can see, their experiences play heavily into their reactions.

Let's bring in a new character named Frank. Like Steve, he's also a zookeeper. But two years ago, an animal escaped from its cage and killed one of his staff members. His reaction may be very different from Steve's, because he's seen what an angry lion can do to a human being with very little effort. His love for animals—and his beliefs about how dangerous they truly are—was seriously affected by that incident. His reaction may be to do whatever he needs to do to destroy the animal as quickly as possible before anyone is hurt.

Action Bursts

I use action bursts to help develop my characters—to let the readers understand who they are—in the most compelling way possible.

Say I've reached a point in my story where the hero and heroine need to have a conversation—where the hero must reveal some information that's vital to the plot.

Say he's a cop and the heroine's being looked at for the murder of her estranged sister, but her alibi held up and she's in the clear.

Where should these two characters have this important conversation?

Standing in the hallway outside the door of the heroine's apartment? At the local coffee shop? On the street outside the police station?

Possibly. But those will all be stagnant scenes—two characters standing around talking.

If this scene takes place early in the book, or during a lull in the book's action, I might put them in a crowded subway car, and have that subway get stuck in a tunnel. It's awkward and claustrophobic—and then things go from bad to worse when a woman sitting nearby goes into labor.

This would be an action burst.

The pregnant woman isn't connected to the main external conflict of the book. But the action of her unexpected labor will create very definite *reactions*

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from both the hero and the heroine.

What do they do? What do they say? Do they try to help? *How* do they help?

Remember that individual people have different definitions for the word *help*.

One character might kick out the window of the subway car and run down the track to find out how far it is to the nearest station.

Another might push his (or her) way through the crowded subway cars, looking for a doctor or nurse.

Another might get right in there and deliver that baby him or herself.

Another might get on his or her cell phone and call 911.

The hero's action depends on who he is. What defines him? What experiences has he had in his life? What are his beliefs and values?

Back to beliefs. . .

Strong beliefs frequently turn into clichéd statements or adages. This happens for a good reason—because these beliefs are important to *lots* of people. When I'm creating characters, I often start with adages or sayings because they tend to be universal.

I combine them with other more specific, personal statements when I'm creating my character's full set of beliefs.

Example: In his books and audiotapes, Tony Robbins provides an excellent list of adages addressing beliefs about finances or money. (I'm sure you've heard all of these, many times before):

- Money doesn't grow on trees.
- Money is the root of all evil.
- A penny saved is a penny earned.
- You can't take it with you.
- Eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we may die.

My friend Deede has a strong belief about money. She says “I invest in people.” She has dozens of friends, but not a lot of money in the bank. She's an elementary school teacher—it's a vocation for her—and obviously (sadly!) she doesn't earn the same kind of salary as a corporate CEO. For years, she was also a little, um, sloppy, shall we say, in managing her finances. Too generous, you could call her, always

willing to share, and not so good about saving for the future.

But when her father got sick, all of her many friends got together and chipped in a few bucks, and bought her an airline ticket home to Arkansas. So, it turns out her belief is a correct one!

Think about the movie *Shakespeare in Love*. Remember the Geoffrey Rush character who owned the theater? When asked about the production of *Romeo and Ethel the Pirate's Daughter*, he kept saying, “Strangely enough, it'll all turn out well.” How? he's asked. “I don't know,” he says, completely honestly. “It's a mystery.”

When watching this movie, you get the sense that this character truly believes his own words, and in the end, he's right.

Beliefs can often conflict

Remember, people are complicated, and it's not unusual to find that a person's beliefs will conflict.

Those conflicting beliefs are constantly at war within us. (Hello, internal conflict!)

Look back at that list of adages about money. Yes, “a penny saved is a penny earned,” except what's the point in saving that penny when “you can't take it with you?”

Obviously, most people either believe one adage or the other, but some do believe both, which creates inner conflict.

Let's build the basic elements of a hero using belief-adages as the foundation.

How about this for a character defining belief: Don't sweat the small stuff.

Imagine the kind of hero who would have this as one of his strongest beliefs. You can already get a rather vivid picture of him, just from that one single statement, can't you? (He probably didn't shave this morning.)

Add more beliefs to this character's list. What if he also believed in the “Eat, Drink and Be Merry” adage and had a live-for-today attitude?

Then throw in a few conflicting beliefs. What if he grew up in a severely dysfunctional family and, looking in through other people's windows (and I'm talking symbolically here, people!) he carries with him a

wistful belief that “there’s no place like home.” Even though he never had one, he longs for that connection. But what if he also believes, from his experiences as a teenager, when his father kicked him out of the house, that “you can never go home again”?

Deep down inside (internal conflict!) this is one unhappy guy. On the surface, he’s Joe Party, living for the moment, able to shrug off the insignificant daily problems of life. But inside, he’s longing for a home that he believes he’ll never be able to find.

Beliefs and internal conflict

Every human being is filled with internal conflict. We’re continuously at war with ourselves, constantly shuffling around our conflicting beliefs.

Let me give you a simplified example of one of my own personal internal conflicts.

I never finished college. Yet I grew up with parents who were both public educators who believed, and who taught me at an early age to believe, that a person could never achieve her full potential without a college education.

A few years back, even when I celebrated a career high, I would sometimes hear this little voice whispering poison into my ear: “Yeah, but you’re a college drop-out. Loser.”

Whenever that happened, a much louder, stronger part of me shouted, “Hey! I’m doing just fine without the diploma! Check out the forty-five books I’ve written that line my shelf! Can you say *New York Times* bestseller?”

Conflict/resolution. Perhaps if I were a different person, I would’ve let that little voice truly bother me, let it continue to eat away at my self-confidence.

See, a small part of me believed that I might be a loser without a college degree, but I also believed and continue to believe—with a lot more conviction—that my accomplishments make me anything but.

This is internal conflict: all these small—or sometimes gigantic—wars going on within us. These wars are going on within our characters, too.

Sometimes resolution is as simple as identifying the poisonous little voices and then shouting them down.

But keep in mind that this example I’ve given you is just one little internal conflict of mine. Think about how many conflicts we have, all battling within us at once.

Example: *The Admiral’s Bride*

Jake Robinson, the hero of my book *The Admiral’s Bride*, is one of my all-time personal favorite characters, and yet he’s not really that dark a hero. In fact, he’s probably the closest thing I’ve written to a vanilla-bland hero. So why is he so popular among my readers, too? What makes him a compelling hero?

He’s funny and smart—out of all my heroes, he’s the most together. He likes himself. He really does. He spent twenty years with the same woman—Daisy—who died of cancer. Jake loved her deeply and there were no fatal flaws in their relationship. He would still be with Daisy if she hadn’t fallen ill and died.

Jake’s a natural-born leader, charismatic and open-minded. He’s strong and patriotic, and you don’t doubt for one second that he’ll do the right thing for his men and his country.

He began his military career in Vietnam, where he saw some terrible things that haunt him still. He deals with it, but it’s back there, always a part of him—this glimmer of darkness. But it doesn’t overwhelm him. It’s not enough to make him a truly dark hero.

So why isn’t Jake a boring Dudley DoRight?

It’s because of his internal conflict.

Jake has some extremely complex and seemingly insurmountable internal conflicts in *The Admiral’s Bride*.

He **believes** he’s too old for the heroine, Zoe Lange—he’s fifty-three and she’s twenty-nine. That’s a twenty-four-year age difference for you non-math people out there. Zoe’s father was in Vietnam at the same time Jake was—in fact, her father is one of the many men Jake helped rescue.

Jake’s also still in love with his wife, Daisy. Yet when he meets Zoe, he’s hyper-aware of the fact that he’s attracted to her. She’s the first woman he could imagine sleeping with that he’s met since Daisy died.

He misses sex, and that makes him feel guilty.

Jake also **believes** he’s *not* too old to be out in the “real world,” which is what the SEALs call their missions or operations. But he’s got to deal with the way the rest of the SEALs in his team see him—and most of them are in their mid-twenties. They doubt his ability to keep up—and the reader has the opportunity to doubt him, too.

Jake’s journey in this book is his acknowledgement that he’s still alive. He’s healthy and vital. He’s got a lot of years left to live, and he’s got to make a choice—is he *young* at fifty-three, or, is he *old*? Who is he going to be? The young fifty-three-year-old who can still keep up with his SEALs, or the fifty-three-year-old who’s too old for Zoe?

Jake’s got some other **beliefs** about age as well—he **believes** that the world looks with disapproval upon men who become romantically involved with women who are half their age.

He also feels guilt. He feels unfaithful to Daisy not just because he’s attracted to Zoe, but because he *likes* Zoe—his guilt and feelings of unfaithfulness and betrayal aren’t just about sex.

He **believes** Zoe’s got some kind of hero-worship thing going for him, that her feelings aren’t based in reality. This adds conflict for him, too.

He knows he’s just a man, and he’s tempted. He wants this woman, despite all the guilt. And when he starts to fall in love with her, he fights his feelings.

So those are some of the seemingly-insurmountable conflicts that are battling within Jake Robinson. He’s continuously in conflict, and it’s made worse by the book’s plot. He and Zoe are posing as newlyweds as they infiltrate a compound of terrorists.

In a way, what I’ve done is use Jake’s very Dudley DoRight goodness to create his internal conflict.

If he hadn’t loved Daisy so completely, if he didn’t feel strongly about his and Zoe’s age differences, if he didn’t feel honor-bound to do the right thing, *The Admiral’s Bride* would be a very different book.

As it is, I don’t diminish Jake’s feelings for Daisy as his feelings for Zoe grow. He loved and will always love Daisy—that’s never going to change. But now he loves Zoe, too. Zoe doesn’t replace Daisy, in the same way that Daisy wouldn’t be able to replace Zoe in Jake’s heart.

But until Jake comes to this understanding, and also makes the choice to be the *young* fifty-three-year-old, his internal conflict is very painful. And some of it’s ongoing, even as the book ends. He’s made the choice to be the old guy with the young wife, and he’s going to have to deal with that for the rest of his life.

Let’s put Jake’s internal conflict into my “dark side

of the Force” example.

Jake thinks his attraction to Zoe is the dark side that he’s got to fight, when in fact, his personal dark side is within him whether or not Zoe is part of his life. Is Jake going to let himself live or is he going to keep himself in half-life limbo forever? Zoe’s presence provides additional conflict and speeds the decision-making process along.

Let’s move on to VALUES

Values are less specific than beliefs but they are just as powerful in controlling our actions.

In *Awaken the Giant Within*, Tony Robbins says, “To value something means to place importance upon it; anything that you hold dear can be called a “value.”

According to Robbins, there two kinds of values: “moving-toward” or positive values and “moving-away-from” or negative values.

Positive values are those things that we want. According to Robbins, they include:

- love/relationships/family
- success
- achievement/accomplishment
- freedom
- security—both financial security and physical safety
- power
- adventure
- spirituality/gratefulness
- intimacy
- comfort
- health/vitality
- passion
- growth
- creativity
- happiness/fun
- contribution
- intelligence/education
- honesty

Negative values are things we avoid. According to Robbins, they include:

- rejection
- frustration
- fear
- failure

- jealousy
- anger
- loneliness
- humiliation
- guilt
- overwhelm

Here's how it works: We all want the positive values and we try to avoid the negative values, but every individual wants these things (or wants to avoid them) in a different order with a different level of priority.

I've included a written exercise at the end of this section, but right now, just *think* about your own personal values. Later, if you like, you can do the exercise and prioritize these values for the hero in your work in progress.

And this is probably a good place for my workshop disclaimer. In this article, I'm discussing *my* methods for writing, for creating heroes. There are billions of different ways to write—all of them good and right. My methods are no better or worse than anyone else's—as writers we must use what works FOR US.

I'm an outliner, a planner. If you're a seat-of-the-pants-er, you'll probably blanch at some of my suggestions. Ignore them and read this article purely out of interest in seeing how another writer writes.

Or adapt them to fit your method. For example, you might want to examine your hero's beliefs and values *after* you finish your first draft—and use what you learn to polish and revise.

So okay, look back at the list of positive values.

Which of these values do you want the most? Are you able to put this list into priority order?

It's not going to be really clear cut for some of you. Yes, I want love, but I want security, too. In his *Personal Power* audio workshops, Robbins recommends that we use questions to discover our priority of positive values, such as: Is love worth living

in the streets as long as you're with the object of your affections? If the answer's no, then security's a pretty high value for you, too.

Is love worth living in chains as a slave? If the answer's no, then freedom or power might be things you value to a high degree. Is love worth giving up that trip climbing Mt. Everest? Yes? Okay, adventure's lower on your list.

Prioritizing your values involves a great deal of thought, of self-analysis and self-awareness.

Example: Here's an example from my list of positive values: Security (as in financial security) is near the top of my list. But also up there, even higher, is freedom. If freedom wasn't a value I prioritized, I never would have become a writer, because, let's face it, writing is a very risky career choice. If I didn't value freedom (to be my own boss, to work at something I love) I would have taken some financially secure job that required me to sit behind a desk from nine to five each day. I'd have had health insurance benefits and a weekly pay check.

Instead, I chose freedom over security. But those two conflicting values were constantly at war within me, particularly during those starving-artist years, early in my writing career. I had freedom—and one hell of an ulcer from worrying about how and when my bills would be paid. (Ulcer equals symbolic internal conflict!)

Like beliefs, our values are always shifting, always adjusting, as we live our lives and change and grow.

Take a minute right now and look at that list of negative values. These are things that we try very hard to avoid. Look what's right on the top of the list: *rejection*.

As writers, we must learn to face rejection regularly. It's part of the publishing business. Every writer in the world has a rejection letter file. (Unless they tear the letters up in a rage.) My file is about four inches thick. And keep in mind that the words "This story doesn't work for me" don't disappear once you get published. It will be an ongoing theme throughout your career. Once published, you face rejection from critics and bloggers and people who post their scathing opinions on Amazon.com.

It's part of this business.

Best thing we can do is thicken our skin to

rejection. Develop a “so what” attitude.

My personal list of negative values—those things I will try to avoid at all cost—doesn’t even include rejection. I’ve taken it off the list. Rejection no longer bothers me, because I’ve learned to associate it with success. I *believe* that I can’t be successful without facing rejection from a portion of the population. So go ahead. Reject me. I’ll be over here, hanging with the multitude of readers who think my books are swell.

The negative value that tops my personal list is *overwhelm*. Some writers work best when pressured by deadlines, but I don’t. I start spinning in circles when I have too much to do and too little time to do it—and nothing gets done as I get more and more frantic.

Because I’ve learned this about myself (due to thinking hard about these negative values), I’ve also learned that as soon as I start feeling overwhelmed, I must proactively take steps to bring order to the chaos.

A good example happened to me last April. I was in Juneau, Alaska, on vacation, visiting my son, who was appearing in a professional theater production of *Tommy*. (How cool was that?) I was working on writing my *Force of Nature Extras* booklet, which had a May 1 due date, which was already feeling uncomfortably tight, since I would have one short week to truly finish this project after returning from my trip.

Day two in Juneau, I signed online to discover that page proofs for one book, revisions for another, and the audio-book abridgement for the first book were also all due on May 1.

Eeeek!

Want to see the pictures from my trip to Alaska? Here I am sitting at my laptop, writing in our room at that neat little B&B. Here I am, still sitting at my laptop, working, while my family visited the glacier and went whale watching. . .

But wait—that didn’t happen! I’m actually in the pictures we took!

Instead of going into my usual frantic spin, I worked out a schedule with my publishers that allowed me to get the work done in a timely manner, with due dates scattered over the course of the first few weeks in May.

Of course, as soon as I no longer felt the pressures of overwhelm, I managed to get things done well ahead of each of the deadlines, and handed everything in far closer to that original May 1 date.

The moral of this story, kids, is that if I hadn’t known how badly I deal with overwhelm, I might’ve attempted to meet that deadline, and ended up missing it with *all* of the projects, and getting a lot of people annoyed with me—including my family!

Look at that list of negative values and try to arrange them according to *your* personal priority of avoidance.

And then think about your hero. What tops his list of negative values? What is the one thing he avoids at all cost?

Here’s something else to consider: Some people view negative values positively, and positive values negatively. I could create a hero who loves to scare the crap out of himself. Fear isn’t something he avoids, but rather something he seeks out. (Perhaps he loves jumping out of airplanes or wrestling gators?) He might also value freedom so highly that security (commitment?) is, for him, a negative value—something he tries to avoid.

See how that works?

Exercise:

Part One: Using the list of values from this workshop:

1. Create a list of your own personal, positive values. What do you value most? What do you value least?
2. Make a list of your personal negative values. What do you wish to avoid most? Least?
3. Now do the same thing for the hero in your work-in-progress.

Part Two:

1. What are some of your own personal, strongest beliefs? (Can be anything!)
2. Our beliefs change. Think of a strong belief you held years ago that you no longer believe today. Try to remember what happened to make you change that belief. (Was it a single, lightning-strike-type incident, or was it a more gradual change, made over a number of months or years?)

3. What are some of your hero's strongest beliefs? How are those beliefs going to be challenged and changed throughout the course of your story?

* * * *

Let's return again to internal conflict.

I have a belief about writing. I believe that **the best kind of internal conflict you can create for your hero is based on a conflict among his own values and beliefs.**

We touched on this before with Jake from *The Admiral's Bride*, but let me give you another example.

This one's from *Frisco's Kid*, the third book in my Tall, Dark, & Dangerous series about Navy SEAL Team Ten.

Navy SEALs make great romance heroes. SEAL stands for SEa, Air, and Land, and these commando-type forces can operate equally well in any of those environments. They're spec warriors—part of the U.S. Military's special operations. They tend to operate in small seven- or eight-man teams.

SEAL training, also called BUD/S training, is extremely difficult. Just to qualify to get into the program you must have outrageously good grades and be in top physical shape. One of the early phases of BUD/S training includes something called Hell Week—five days of intense physical and mental challenges. SEAL candidates only get a few nonconsecutive hours of sleep for the entire five-day session. Many candidates don't have the stamina, endurance, or will-power to get through BUD/S training, and as a result only a small percentage of the original class actually graduate and become SEALs.

So the SEALs' reputation for being the best of the best is actually an accurate one. The men who survive BUD/S training and earn their SEAL "Budweiser" pin have a great deal to be proud of.

SEAL is forced to retire from active duty after his knee is permanently injured. He can walk with a cane but the nature of his injury is such that he'll never be able to rejoin his SEAL Team.

However, the hero of this book, Frisco, doesn't **believe** this. He **believes** that if he works hard enough and endures enough pain, he'll bring his knee and himself up to speed and become a SEAL again.

HIS BELIEF: If he tries hard enough, if he endures long enough, he will succeed.

Now, as a Navy SEAL, this belief has worked for Frisco in the past. But the real truth—the truth he must come to terms with—is that if he works too hard and pushes his injury harder, he'll end up back in a wheelchair—maybe even permanently.

So there's a solid conflict for him. He's being told he's got to accept his limitations, when in the past he's learned that if he pushes, he'll succeed.

Add into *that* mess the fact that our hero Frisco **believes** that he was no one and nothing before he joined the SEALs. He **believes** that if he cannot be an active duty SEAL, his life is virtually over.

Attached to that is his **belief** that his injury makes him less than whole, less than a man.

So when the heroine, Mia, comes along, Frisco feels awful. He feels that she couldn't possibly love him if she knew he'd never be able to walk without a cane again. His feelings for her force him to stop looking at his injury with this false "can do" attitude and face the medical facts. He's *not* going to get better. And now he feels as if he's tricked the heroine into somehow believing that he *will* make a full recovery, so his internal conflict becomes even more intense.

The values that matter most to this man are adventure and success.

The values Frisco tries to avoid at all cost include failure.

Throw in a little backstory: His father was an alcoholic and a real failure in Frisco's eyes. And now with his injured leg, unable to pursue and succeed at his adventurous career, Frisco sees himself as a failure, too.

So there's Frisco—a tightly wound bundle of conflict.

What I as his writer have got to do is make him rearrange his values and beliefs. He's got to embrace

Here's the premise of *Frisco's Kid*: A career Navy

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new beliefs if he wants to live happily ever after with his very real and unchangeable physical limitations.

Okay. So how did I create a living, breathing complex character like Frisco? Again, there are many ways to do it—I’m going to tell you what I do.

I start with a character sketch.

I’ve found that when I’m developing an idea, that the plot and characters tend to come almost simultaneously, from the same initial story question or something that I call a “story seed.”

All of my books and characters come from questions.

What if. . . ?

What would happen when. . . ?

Example: *Everyday, Average Jones*

For *Everyday, Average Jones*, my plot question/story seed was this: **What happens to the hero and heroine of an action/adventure story after the smoke clears and the danger is over?**

We’ve all seen movies that end with the heroine in the hero’s arms. (The movie that triggered this particular question for me was *Speed*.) Credits roll, and the movie’s over. But I’ve always wanted to know what happens next.

I wondered: How will these two people who have nothing in common deal with everyday, normal life?

It was from this question I developed the story idea for *Everyday, Average Jones*.

I took that question and made it more specific: **What happens to the rough, tough Navy SEAL hero and the mild mannered girl-next-door heroine that he rescues, after the smoke clears and the danger is over?**

In the opening chapters of this book, the heroine is rescued from a hostage situation. She’s dragged through the hero’s danger-filled world and brought to safety. Once safe, the two give in to their attraction, and spend about a week in bed—until the heroine ends the affair and attempts to return to her old life and reality.

During the entire rest of the book, the hero spends his time trying to prove that he can fit into the heroine’s life in her quiet New England town. Of course, he turns both the town and her life upside down.

If you look back at my second question, the two

characters’ basic personality types are right there.

Rough, tough, Navy SEAL. The hero of this story is not going to be a careful, conservative man. Nor is he a bookish accountant.

Several things we know this hero values are: (and remember this is just a quick sketch):

- adventure
- freedom
- patriotism
- responsibility—he’s a SEAL, so we know he’s responsible. He’s worked hard to get where he is.

This hero (a Navy SEAL) believes in taking risks, in living life to its fullest. He’s also probably something of a free-spirit.

I also knew that, in order to make the plot idea work, the heroine:

- could not be a risk taker
- was a girl-next-door type

The heroine of this book must value security—countering and conflicting with the hero’s need for adventure.

Characters make the difference in the plot

(Remember how we talked about this earlier?)

What if instead of making the heroine someone who valued security, I’d made her adventurous—a risk taker, a modern Mata Hari?

If she valued adventure, this would be an entirely different story. Instead of *Everyday, Average Jones*, it might be called *Try To Keep Up with Me, Jones*.

Again, same basic plot plus different characters equals totally different story. And that wasn’t the story I wanted to tell. I wanted my hero and heroine to have contrasting values.

I wanted these characters to be two people who were so outwardly different that they probably wouldn’t have given in to the spark of attraction under normal circumstances.

Example: *The Unsung Hero*

Here’s an example from the first book in my Troubleshooters series about Navy SEAL Team Sixteen.

The “story seed” question from which this book

grew was: **What if my Navy SEAL hero spots an international terrorist in small town New England while he's home on leave?**

That's a good start, but watch how I build it to create even greater conflicts: What if the hero's on leave because he's just had a near-fatal, career-threatening head injury?

What if the terrorist he thinks he's seen is a man who's believed to be dead, a man my hero spent many months of his life chasing, several years back?

What if he's suddenly uncertain if he's actually seen this terrorist, or if he's suffering from some weird paranoia or hallucinations brought on by his recent severe head injury?

Let's add some internal conflict: What if this SEAL hero has never doubted himself before?

And here: the question that really builds both the internal *and* external conflict, and provides a great deal of this book's suspense: **What if the hero has more and more reason to believe the threat is real and because of this head injury, no one in authority believes him?**

Throw in additional internal conflict caused by his potential romantic relationship with the woman who used to live next door, and we've got ourselves a suspenseful romance novel.

Make your hero suffer.

If you know your hero's beliefs and values, if you've identified his internal conflicts, you can follow **my second rule** of writing great, compelling romantic heroes which is: **Make the hero really suffer.**

If you know your hero well enough, you can create *external* conflict that will absolutely tie him in knots and cause him serious pain. And that's what it's all about, isn't it?

When I first became aware of the Navy SEALs—a friend called me to tell me about an article on BUD/S training Hell Week that was in *Newsweek* magazine—I knew instantly that they would make incredible romantic heroes.

At the time, I'd written three books for SIM, and I was actively searching for some kind of hook that I could turn into a multibook series. I didn't want to write a family series—brothers or cousins or sisters—

because that's finite. I was originally thinking in terms of location, like Rachel Lee's Conard County series, or the Sunrise Key series I wrote for Loveswept, wherein the place ties all the books together and creates a potentially infinite series.

But when I read that article on the Navy SEALs, I knew I'd found my miniseries hook. I had an automatic eight-member brotherhood, with plenty of other SEALs available for future books.

But because most miniseries tend to be in trilogies, after researching the SEALs, I sat down to plot three stories with SEAL heroes.

Here's the question I asked myself: **What are some of the most difficult and painful situations into which I could put a Navy SEAL?**

Here are some basic facts I'd learned about SEALs:

- They tend to take action to solve a problem.
- They're alpha males with strong personalities.
- They're highly intelligent.
- They work in extremely tight teams, utilizing each member's strengths, and dealing with their weaknesses.
- They're extremely loyal to each other (SEALs are never left behind).
- Becoming a SEAL involves training that is both physically and mentally grueling. The drop-out rate for SEAL candidates is very high—very few men make it through the program.
- The men who do make it through and become SEALs are extremely proud of who they are and what they've done and can do.

Okay, so knowing all that, I came up with what I thought were the three external conflicts that would torture my SEAL heroes the most.

PRINCE JOE: My alpha male/leader hero is forced to act as bait as he impersonates a European prince who's been targeted by terrorists. He's the guy who's usually kicking in the door, yet this time, he's got to stand around and be a target. I figured that would frustrate the hell out of a SEAL.

FOREVER BLUE: In this book I took my hero and plucked him out of his SEAL team. I sent him home to South Carolina for his step-brother's wedding, where he's framed for murder. He calls his CO for help, but the entire team's out of the country

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on a training op. This man who’s used to working in a team is forced to deal with this situation completely on his own. Or so he thinks. (Enter the heroine. . .)

FRISCO’S KID: As I mentioned earlier, this was the book where I really tortured my hero. I took a guy who’s so proud of all he’s achieved, and I gave him such a severe knee injury that he could no longer be an active duty SEAL. In this book, I took away the hero’s pride and his very identity. I forced him to rediscover himself, and to redefine his belief of what it means to be a success.

The plot ideas from these three stories all came with a given, something I knew up front: My heroes were going to be Navy SEALs.

Now, I’ve since written well over a dozen books featuring heroes who are Navy SEALs, and this doesn’t mean that all of those heroes are exactly the same. Not even close. But it does mean that all of those heroes started at the same jumping off place.

To be a Navy SEAL, you need to value adventure pretty highly. And as we discussed earlier, fear is often pretty far down on the list of negative values that you try to avoid.

But each of the SEALs I’ve written about—and the secondary SEAL characters who will someday have their own books, too—have full sets of unique beliefs that make them unique individuals.

Exercise: Create a new story (and character) seed

Let’s apply this method of prioritizing beliefs and values to create new characters and a new story seed.

Let’s take the same basic story seed as *Everyday, Average Jones*. Only this time, our hero isn’t a SEAL. Let’s make our heroine the “tough guy.” She’s an undercover cop or maybe an FBI agent. Let’s put our two characters into a situation where our heroine needs to rescue our hero.

And here’s the new question: What happens to the passionate romance between an FBI agent and the man she rescues, after the danger is over and the smoke has cleared?

What type of hero would be most tortured by this scenario?

Is he a “bad boy” or a “cowboy” (not literally! A figurative cowboy!) Is he someone who might hate to be rescued?

Maybe he’s someone who’s in hiding—in the witness protection program. Maybe he can’t reveal that he’s capable of taking care of himself, and it drives him crazy to sit still and let the heroine defend him. (Shades of PRINCE JOE) Maybe he’s pretending to be a college professor or a computer geek, while in truth he’s a former agent or cop.

Maybe our characters only *think* the danger’s over but it’s really not. Maybe there’s still someone out there, gunning for the hero.

Let’s add a little romantic conflict—if our heroine finds out who the hero really is, he’ll have to go back into the witness protection program and he’ll never see her again.

What are some beliefs that a hero like this might have? (Feel free to think in terms of adages and clichés. You can start there, and then personalize it.)

Is he jaded? Cynical? Angry? Matter of fact?

Has he lost himself by taking on so many different identities?

What else has he lost?

What would his strongest positive values be? (Conflict alert! Someone who highly values honesty is going to suffer if he’s forced to lie.)

What are his strongest negative values?

How about the heroine? What are her beliefs and values?

* * * *

Okay, so I’ve got my story seed—including basic information about my hero. I then write extensive character notes, including pages of backstory, to fully understand his beliefs and values.

Backstory

My definition of backstory is everything that has happened in a character’s life from the day he’s born to the moment he appears in my book.

As I’m preparing to write each book, I write pages of notes about my hero’s childhood. Where did he grow up? What kind of relationship did he have with his first grade teacher, with his father and mother, with his brothers and sisters, with his grandparents? How old was he when he had his first crush? What was his first job? Did he spend his childhood getting

either overt or indirect messages that he wasn't good enough?

Remember, childhood is where we acquire most of our more bizarre beliefs.

But I also write about my hero's history in terms of his career, his education, his past romances, and his sexual experiences.

Again, everything he's done in his life adds to his set of beliefs and values. These things happened to him, so now he believes XYZ.

My hero's backstory gives me a strong sense of his priorities, his goals, his drives, those things he avoids.

Frankly, I believe it's not possible for me to write *too* much of a hero's backstory. But I always have to remind myself that I'm not writing down these little details with the intention of including every one of them in the book.

In fact, chances are I'll only include a very small part of this massive backstory that I've just written. (And almost none of it will be in the first few chapters! It's a common mistake among beginning writers to start a book with complicated explanations and huge amounts of backstory. I recommend that you start with action and keep the reader asking questions. Don't reveal too many secrets up front!)

It also helps to remember that some of the information I uncover about my hero will be things that he doesn't realize or understand.

Why do we do the things we do?

Most people don't really know. I like to let my hero make self-discoveries as he journeys through his book.

Motivation

After I've written my hero's backstory, I focus on discovering his motivation. What does this character want, and what is he willing to sacrifice to get it?

This will probably change throughout the book. Your hero's motivation may well not be the same at the end of the book as it was at the beginning—that's okay.

Remember that his beliefs and values—those things he's learned in his past—drive him.

They twist him up inside and—working along with the heroine and the external conflict—they cause him to act and react throughout the course of the book.

Be true to those values and beliefs, and as his motivation changes—as it will and should—it will ring true.

If I've done it right, by knowing my hero's backstory, beliefs and values, and motivation, I'll also be acutely aware of his **vulnerability**.

Vulnerability

Remember what I said about making your hero suffer?

If there's any one magic ingredient to creating a believable hero, it's vulnerability. And it's heroism in the face of vulnerability that makes an impact.

Let me explain. If you create a mountain-climbing hero and have him scale a cliff to save a stranded child, your readers will probably yawn.

But if you create a hero who's afraid of heights and force *him* to climb the cliff to save the child. . . His action is significantly more heroic.

It's the same action, but the non-mountain climbing hero is doing far more than scaling a cliff. He's facing his demons.

So what I like to do, to really make my hero suffer, is to find his vulnerability and grind his face in it.

Example: Let's go back to *Frisco's Kid*. In this book, one of Frisco's vulnerabilities was his sense of being less than a man.

He's humiliated by his physical limitations from his career-ending knee injury.

So what do I do as a writer?

I have the bad guy beat up Frisco—in front of the heroine and Frisco's little niece.

In this book, I force the hero, over and over and over again, to come face to face with his vulnerability, and I force him to endure. And that's Frisco's challenge. He doesn't have to climb any cliffs. He has to learn to accept his limitations. He has to learn to adapt to asking for help. And his heroism in the face of that challenge is probably more powerful than that of any other hero I've ever written.

Just as when I write about plot and external conflict I find myself coming back to characters, when I write about characters, I keep coming back to plot.

Use the plot as a device to show your hero in his best (or worst) light. And use the plot in a timely way. Give your readers a solid reason to fall in love with

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your hero within the first few chapters of the book. Make him instantly sympathetic, even if he’s intensely unhappy and on the verge of alcoholism, like Frisco.

That can be a real challenge. How do you do it? How do you make sure the reader is going to like your dark, gritty, flawed hero right from the start?

In the case of *Frisco’s Kid*, I thought it might be a good idea if I could show the reader that the hero had once been an upbeat, funny, friendly guy—and that he still was, deep down inside.

So I wrote a prologue that takes place five years earlier, in which Frisco helps deliver his sister’s baby. It’s that baby, Tasha, now five years old, who provides much of the external conflict of this story when she needs a place to stay and Frisco’s suddenly playing daddy.

But my editor didn’t like the prologue and it got axed.

I worried about introducing this hero and giving the readers a full hit of his bitterness and frustration. Here’s this angry, angry man whose world is falling down around him. Oh, yeah, gang—and he drinks too much.

The situation is grim: Frisco’s sister is forced to go into rehab after facing DUI charges. If Frisco doesn’t volunteer to take care of Tasha, the child will have to go into some kind of state program.

So here’s Frisco, barely able to take care of himself, being thrown into the deep end of the pool of fulltime child care.

And here’s what I did to set up Frisco as a sympathetic character despite his warts:

In chapter one, I intro Frisco, set up the facts of his injury. I focus on his physical and emotional pain. The bitterness and anger is there, but what I show the reader most is *pain*. And I contrast Frisco’s pain with his CO Joe Catalanotto’s good news about his wife’s pregnancy. I also use this to introduce the theme of kids into the book, foreshadowing Frisco’s niece’s soon-to-be announced visit.

Chapter two is from heroine Mia’s point of view as she first meets Frisco. She’s his next-door-neighbor—liberal, left-wing, an ever optimistic school teacher. Cheerful and annoyingly friendly. Frisco’s incredibly rude to her—he’s been drinking—but through Mia’s

compassionate eyes, the reader learns that beneath his rudeness, he’s in pain. (Still, she’s no dummy, and she decides she better keep her distance from this guy.)

It’s not until Chapter three, again through the heroine’s eyes, that the reader gets a look at the man Frisco really is.

I use the plot to show Frisco simultaneously at both his best and his worst. Tasha arrives for her extended visit very early in the morning, and Frisco looks and feels like hell—he’s hungover and needs a shower and a shave.

By this point, we’re well aware of his pain (I kinda hammered that home!) and we know he’s struggling to deal with his own life, yet as Mia looks on, Frisco makes a genuine attempt to reassure his frightened little niece that everything’s going to be okay. Her mom has left, but she’ll be safe with him.

And it’s his gentle interaction with the child that shows the reader, yes, this man may be a beast at times, but his heart is in the right place.

I’m not talking about a major transformation here—just a chink in his armor that the reader is allowed to peek through.

Transformation

We’ve discussed the way conflicting beliefs and values create internal conflict for our heroes. But how do we get them to the point where they’re ready to accept the happily ever after ending we need for a romance?

Once I’ve gotten to know my hero and all his beliefs and values, his backstory, his motivation and vulnerabilities, I use the external conflict to make him **learn and grow and change**.

I believe that the hero’s got to resolve at least *some* of his conflicting beliefs to achieve the kind of happy ending necessary for a romance novel.

Example: Again, using *Frisco’s Kid*, the hero had to learn that the heroine loved him unconditionally. She would continue to love him whether he rejoined the SEALs or whether he spent the rest of his life walking with a cane, or even confined to a wheelchair.

Frisco also had to learn to accept his physical limitations.

He had to learn that his limitations don't make him a failure. (Remember, his definition of success was to be an active duty SEAL. Anything less than that in his eyes made him a failure.)

The truth is, Frisco could still succeed—he just had to redefine *success*.

So I created a plot that gave him plenty of opportunity to learn. And I created two other characters—the heroine and the hero's niece—who provided Frisco with some of the motivation to want to change his restrictive beliefs.

In Summary:

- Develop a full set of beliefs and values for your hero.
- Have these beliefs and values conflict so your hero really suffers.
- Identify your hero's vulnerability and make him suffer even more.
- Use your story to give the hero reason to grow and change some of his beliefs, resolving some of his inner conflict—enough to enable him to work at living happily ever after with the heroine, enough to enable him to go on fighting his dark side (as all real people fight, if not happily ever after then darn close to it) for the rest of his life.

If you do this, you'll create a complex, conflicted, wonderfully flawed, truly believable hero.

And, to me, that's a **perfect** hero.

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Chat With Suz!

Any questions?

I'll be holding a live question and answer session on my message board, on Thursday, August 14, 2008.

Post your questions about this *Tall, Dark, & Believable* writing workshop 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!

INTO THE FIRE

SUZANNE BROCKMANN

ON SALE JULY 22, 2008, IN HARDCOVER

Suspense doesn't burn any brighter and desire doesn't run any deeper than when Suzanne Brockmann takes the helm, opens the throttle, and takes readers along for a breathless ride as she breaks the thrill barrier—again and again. With *Into the Fire*, Brockmann lights the fuse on her most explosive story yet.

Vinh Murphy—former Marine and onetime operative for the elite security firm Troubleshooters Incorporated—has been MIA ever since his wife, Angelina, was caught in a crossfire and killed during what should have been a routine bodyguard assignment. Overcome with grief, Murphy blames the neo-Nazi group known as the Freedom Network for her death. Now, years later, Freedom Network leader Tim Ebersole has been murdered—and the FBI suspects Murphy may have pulled the trigger. To prevent further bloodshed, Murphy's friends at Troubleshooters scramble to find him and convince him to surrender peacefully.

Murphy himself can't be sure what he did or didn't do during the years he spent mourning and lost in an alcohol-induced fog. He does know he occasionally sought solace from Hannah Whitfield, a former police officer and the very friend who'd introduced him to his beloved late wife.

But Hannah, still grappling with the deafness that resulted from an injury sustained while on duty, was fighting her own battles. For years Hannah had feelings for Murphy, and one painful night their suffering brought them together in a way neither expected—and both regretted.

But finally, Murphy is ready to rejoin the living. As always, he finds himself knocking on Hannah's door, and as always, his longtime friend welcomes him back into her home. Yet even as Murphy slowly rebuilds his splintered life, he continues to fight his growing feelings for Hannah. Then he learns of Ebersole's murder and comes to believe that the Freedom Network has targeted him—and Hannah—to avenge their leader's death.

Now Murphy must face the terrifying prospect of losing to violence another woman he loves.

As the Troubleshooters desperately search for him, Murphy races toward a deadly confrontation with the Freedom Network and the ultimate choice: surrender his life in the hopes that Hannah will be spared, or risk everything to salvage whatever future they may have together.

READ ON FOR AN EXCERPT

Into the Fire

Murphy was sitting there, in front of Hannah's laptop computer in the main room of the cabin, waiting for her to explain why Dave Malkoff from Troubleshooters Incorporated had sent her nearly a dozen e-mails over the past few days.

"I went there," she told him as she pulled another chair from the dining table over to the desk. "To the Troubleshooters office. I thought you were going to . . . do something crazy, so . . ." She scanned the subject headers as she sat down next to him. *Hoping this is still your email address* was the first one sent—last Friday morning. She reached for the mouse and clicked it open.

*Hannah,
Have you heard from Murphy lately?
—Dave Malkoff (from Troubleshooters Inc.)*

Murph tapped her arm, and she looked over at him. He'd shaved this morning, as he'd done every morning for the past two weeks, and his lean cheeks were smooth. He smelled good, too. Unlike Hannah, he always showered and changed out of his workout gear well before lunchtime. She sometimes stayed grunged up until dinner, because what the hell.

But now she was aware both of the bead of sweat that was lazing its way down past her ear, and the fact that her tank top was soaked. She couldn't smell herself, but that didn't mean that she didn't reek. It just meant that she'd gotten used to her own stench.

Personal toxic fumes aside, it was a little disarming to be sitting quite this close to Murphy, particularly after that conversation they'd just had on the porch.

Dude, I'd wanted to get with you for years.

"You went all the way to San Diego?" Murphy asked her.

"Yeah." She opened the next e-mail. *Re: Hoping this is still your email address*. It was dated Saturday morning. Murphy tapped her arm again, but she shook her head. She was reading.

*Hannah,
I didn't manage to convey just how important it is that I get in touch with
Vinh Murphy, as soon as possible. It's quite important.
Hoping you can help me,
Dave (from TS Inc)*

“Dave Malkoff wants to talk to you,” Hannah said, even though he was sitting right there and reading the e-mail, too.

But Murphy was directly in front of the keyboard, and he opened a memo window and typed, “How did you get down to San Diego?”

He had such large fingers, it seemed almost unbelievable that he could manipulate the small-sized keyboard, but the words appeared on the screen almost as fast as she could read them.

“I drove,” Hannah answered. E-mails three, four, and five were variations on the same theme. Dave was looking for Murphy. Did she know where he was?

“Are you allowed to drive?” he typed.

“Probably not,” she said. “My license expired—I haven’t tried to renew it.”

“If your L expired, the answer would be a NO, not PROLY NOT,” he typed.

“Too bad I’m no longer a police officer,” she told him, “so I can’t arrest myself.”

“Ha ha,” he wrote.

Yeah, she was a real comedienne.

Sunday’s email from Dave was a little different.

Hannah,

In case you haven’t heard—Tim Ebersole of the Freedom Network is dead.

“Holy God,” Hannah said.

Dave had included a link to a *New York Times* article, and Murphy bogarted the mouse in order to click on it as quickly as possible.

The news article appeared on the screen, and they both leaned forward, shoulder to shoulder, to read it. Ebersole had been found in a remote part of the Freedom Network’s compound, in the mountains east of Sacramento. Shot in the head. The murder weapon was believed to be a sniper rifle. The killer was believed to have military training. An investigation was under way.

“Now we know why Crazy Dave’s been looking for me,” Murphy typed.

“I’ll let him know that you’ve been here with me,” Hannah said through her relief, reaching to regain control of the mouse, clicking back to Dave’s e-mail so that she could hit reply.

But Murphy covered her hand with his own. She looked at him, in surprise, but he was shaking his head. “I don’t want you to . . .”

“What?” It looked as if he’d just said “life for me.”

He typed the words. "I don't want you to lie for me."

Lie? Hannah still didn't get it. "You've been here for two weeks—"

Murphy typed: "TE was killed four months ago."

Oh, *shit*. She must've been reading too fast. She went back to the article and . . . Yeah, there it was.

Holy God.

And there they sat. In silence. As Hannah's heart thumped unsteadily in her chest. All of the relief that she'd felt—that Ebersole had gotten his just desserts without Murphy having to spend the rest of his life in prison—had morphed into fear.

Holy God . . .

Then Murphy reached over and sent the article to the printer. Apparently, he wanted a hard copy. His fingers flew over the keyboard again. "It's okay if you ask me."

She looked at him, looked into his eyes, searching for answers. If they were there, she couldn't see them.

"It's okay," he told her, also signing it. He typed again, "I know what you're thinking. I'm thinking it, too."

"I'm not sure what to ask you," Hannah admitted. "Did you do it, Murph? Or maybe I should ask, How did you manage to get away?"

Murphy laughed, but his smile quickly morphed into a grimace. And he wouldn't meet her eyes.

"I don't know," he typed, as a muscle jumped in his jaw.

"Don't know what?" Hannah asked, her heart in her throat.

"Don't know if I did it," he typed, "and if I did, I don't know how I got away."

Izzy Zanella's Back!

Reader favorite Izzy Zanella plays a major role in *Into the Fire*. He's back—
and getting into trouble, the Navy SEAL way . . .

FROM *INTO THE FIRE*:

The most beautiful woman in the world walked into the bar.

It sounded like the setup to a not-particularly-funny joke. But the bar was the Ladybug Lounge—the SEAL Team Sixteen hangout near Coronado Navy Base—and the woman . . .

She was incredible.

It seemed almost sacrilegious that all movement didn't stop, that the clamor of the place didn't cease, that the room didn't fall into an appropriately reverent hush. Instead, a group of jarheads didn't even look up from their game of pool, the jukebox continued blaring the YouTube-famous treadmill song from *OK Go*, the crowd at the corner booth burst into raucous laughter, and the bartender blended a new batch of piña coladas with an earsplitting appliance whine.

Instead, Izzy Zanella alone stopped breathing to watch as the most beautiful woman in the world let the door close behind her. His heart damn near stopped, too, as she approached the bar where he was perched on a stool, nursing a beer.

It was true that she wasn't dressed to be noticed in a pair of cutoff shorts and a gray *Colbert Nation* T-shirt, flip-flops on her perfect feet. Her dark hair was pulled back into a casual pony-tail, but despite that, with her heart-shaped face and flawlessly smooth skin, her Natalie Portman eyes and that mouth that he knew he'd see tonight in his dreams, she was magic personified. It seemed incredible since Izzy couldn't remember his last girlfriend's chin—she must've had one—but even this woman's chin was freaking perfection.

Which was saying something, because for him to be looking anywhere besides her five-mile-long, suntanned, beach-bunny legs was unbelievable.

Damn. While he'd never passed up a chance to appreciate a nice pair of legs, he was pretty much in the legs-were-legs-were-legs camp.

Not anymore. He'd always thought of himself as a

breast man, but now that he'd died and gone to leg heaven, he'd have to rethink that, although she had plenty of C-cup action going on, too.

Izzy could see the string-straps of a bikini—yellow and black—tied around her graceful neck. And for the first time in God knows how long, he found himself praying. *Please, Yahweh, let her be lost on her way to the beach. And let him offer to show her the way so that he could see the rest of that barely there bathing suit . . .*

As she came closer, he saw that her eyes were indeed a rich, dark, mysterious brown. Their gazes locked and . . . She shifted slightly to the right, away from him, putting an empty barstool between them.

Oh. Yeah.

He'd changed out of his BDUs, but he hadn't showered—opting instead to beat his teammates over here to the Bug, to get a cold beer inside of himself as quickly as possible—his desperately needed reward after the forty-eight hours of sheer hell that had been described by the senior chief as *an easy training op*. Izzy still wore his olive drab, sweat-stained T-shirt—along with blue-and-white flower-patterned surfer jams that had been among the few clean pieces of laundry in his apartment day before yesterday.

Meaning, they'd *been* clean—day before yesterday. Before that dickweed Danny Gillman had torn out of the craphole of a parking lot over at the simulated swamp—because God and the senior chief knew that every “easy training op” needed a freaking simulated swamp—and sprayed Izzy and his unzipped sea-bag with *the* stankiest-smelling briny-ass mud known to mankind.

Yeah, thanks to Gillman, the most heart-breakingly beautiful woman in the world didn't want to sit too close to Izzy at the bar.

But she *did* glance at him again, with trepidation on her perfect face.

Wise move, staying upwind like that. Things he should have said—perhaps with a reassuring yet appreciative, warm yet manly smile. But when his heart had

stopped—somewhere back when she'd opened the Bug's door—his vocal cords must have gotten gummed up, because all that came out was a great, big, tumbleweed- and cricket-chirping-filled silence.

Izzy accessorized it perfectly with some slack-jawed, open-mouthed, glassy-eyed staring.

Of course it could have been worse. He could have stared at her whilst scratching his balls and belching.

She turned away, leaning forward slightly, elbows against the bar to catch the barkeep's eye, which made the bottom of her T-shirt separate from the low-riding waist of her shorts. Skin was revealed. Smooth, perfect, sexy-as-hell skin that proved without a doubt that her bathing suit wasn't a one-piece. Somehow Izzy kept himself in his seat, fighting the urge to fall to his knees and weep with joy.

"Excuse me," she said, in a voice that was surprisingly husky and deep, yet still inspiringly musical.

"We card here," Kevin the bartender told her, his flat rudeness making Izzy bristle.

"No," she said. "I mean, I know. I'm not . . . I don't . . ." She was flustered, but she took a deep breath and started again. "I'm looking for . . . for . . . a friend of mine? He's a SEAL, with Team Sixteen . . .?"

A friend . . .

But then ol' Kev gave her a knowing look, clearly thinking the same thing Izzy was—that she was some ditched ex, looking for one last face-to-face with a guy who'd already left her in the dust—crazy-assed mofo that he had to have been to dump *her*. "You'll have to wait for your *friend* outside. I don't want any trouble in here."

She squared her shoulders, clearly preparing for battle, but Kevin dismissed her by turning away, and then, *alleluia*, Izzy found his voice. "What's his name?" he asked. "Your friend."

She eyed him warily, and he gave her what he hoped was an "I don't bite—too hard" smile. "I'm Izzy. I'm with Team Sixteen, too. So I probably know him. Your friend."

"Danny," she said as hope dawned in her eyes, as she looked Izzy over more closely, no doubt realizing that he wasn't just some fashion-challenged homeless man, taking a break from dumpster-diving. "Gillman?"

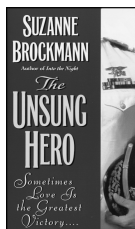
"Gilligan?" Izzy said in surprise.

And all of the trepidation in her eyes was completely replaced by shining relief. Having her look at him like that almost knocked him over. "You know him?" she asked, way too excited considering this was Gilligan they were talking about.

Did Izzy know Dan Gillman? "Yeah," Iz said. "Me and the fishboy, we're . . . tight." If tight meant locked in mortal combat at every possible opportunity . . .

Turn the page for a complete list of
SUZANNE BROCKMANN's
Troubleshooter Series!

The Troubleshooter Series from *Suzanne Brockmann*



1. The Unsung Hero

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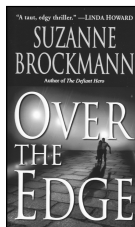
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Nils & Meg, and the rescue of Meg's kidnapped daughter.

"A smart, thrilling keeper . . . this is one to recommend heartily to friends."

—*Publishers Weekly*



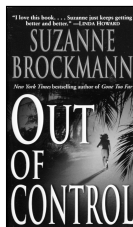
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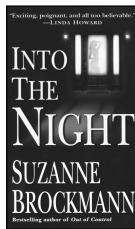
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Kenny & Savannah, and their scramble through the Indonesian jungle.

"I love this book . . . Suzanne just keeps getting better and better."

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5. Into the Night

New York Times bestseller

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"A worthy addition to the author's SEAL saga."

—*Publishers Weekly*



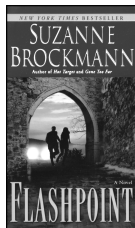
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8. Hot Target

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Cosmo & Jane, and the protection of a Hollywood producer receiving death threats.

"[A] fast-paced thriller . . . edgy, exceptional . . . Brava!"

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“The reigning queen of military suspense.” —USA Today



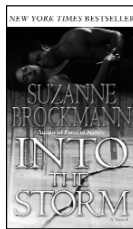
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Max & Gina, and the rescue of Gina and Molly by Max, Jones, and Jules.

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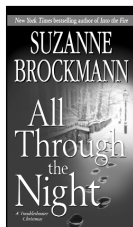
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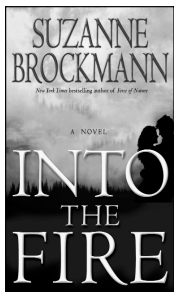
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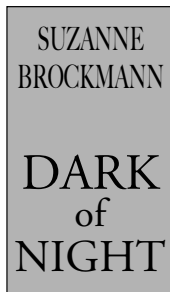
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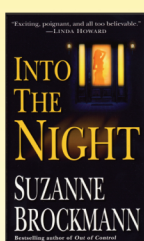
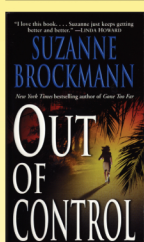
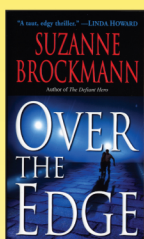
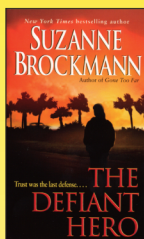
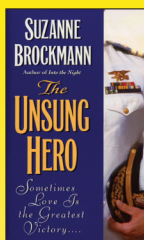
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Since her explosion onto the publishing scene more than ten years ago, **SUZANNE BROCKMANN** has written more than forty books, and is now widely recognized as one of the leading voices in romantic suspense. Her work has earned her repeated appearances on the *USA Today* and *New York Times* bestseller lists, as well as numerous awards, including Romance Writers of America's #1 Favorite Book of the Year (three years running), two RITA Awards, and many *Romantic Times* Reviewer's Choice Awards. Suzanne Brockmann lives west of Boston with her husband, author Ed Gaffney.

Visit her Web site at www.suzannebrockmann.com



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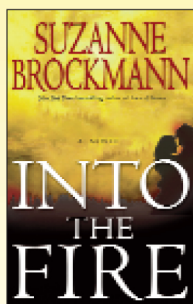
If you are new to Brockmann's Troubleshooters series, her latest novel, *Into the Fire*, provides the perfect opportunity to discover why suspense doesn't burn any brighter and desire doesn't run any deeper than when Suzanne Brockmann takes the helm.

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