

MILLS & BOON



Vintage INTRIGUE

In the Line of Fire

BEVERLY BIRD

Beverly Bird

In The Line Of Fire

«HarperCollins»

Bird B.

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After six years in jail for a crime he didn't commit, ex-mobster Danny Gates was ready for a new life, and hoped to find it helping troubled kids at the local rec center. But when sassy, sexy Molly French showed up, Danny knew playtime was over. Officer Molly French was a handcuff-toting, law-abiding lady cop—the most beautiful one he'd ever seen. Still, ex-cons and cops went together like oil and water, didn't they? However, when Molly uncovered evidence of a police conspiracy behind the Lone Star Country Club bombing, Danny was the only one Molly could trust. Could Danny help Molly discover the bomber's identity, before their attraction became an affair of the heart?

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Danny Gates

Former henchman with the Mercado gang, Danny served his time in jail and wants a brand-new life, helping troubled teens avoid a life of crime. But when a beautiful lady cop steals his heart, Danny's in danger of breaking his parole—and breaking his heart!

Molly French

Assigned to the LSCC bomb task force, ambitious police officer Molly French knew she could crack the case in no time. But that was before she fell head over heels for a bad boy with a smile to die for and a stint in jail! Can Molly separate business and pleasure before it's too late?

Bobby J.

Danny befriends the sullen juvenile delinquent and convinces him to go straight. But Bobby's mysterious employers won't let him leave "the business" and send him to the hospital. Who is Bobby working for? What secrets could he possibly reveal?

Police Chief Benjamin Stone

A month after the Lone Star Country Club bombing, the Mission Creek Police are no closer to finding the culprits. Is someone sabotaging the investigation? Will Chief Stone ever discover the bomber's identity?

Dear Reader,

They say that March comes in like a lion, and we've got six fabulous books to help you start this month off with a bang. Ruth Langan's popular series, *THE LASSITER LAW*, continues with *Banning's Woman*. This time it's the Banning sister, a freshman congresswoman, whose life is in danger. And to the rescue...handsome police officer Christopher Banning, who's vowed to get Mary Bren out of a stalker's clutches—and into his arms.

ROMANCING THE CROWN continues with Marie Ferrarella's *The Disenchanted Duke*, in which a handsome private investigator—with a strangely royal bearing—engages in a spirited battle with a beautiful bounty hunter to locate the missing crown prince. And in Linda Winstead Jones's *Capturing Cleo*, a wary detective investigating a murder decides to close in on the prime suspect—the dead man's sultry and seductive ex-wife—by pursuing her romantically. Only problem is, where does the investigation end and romance begin? Beverly Bird continues our *LONE STAR COUNTRY CLUB* series with *In the Line of Fire*, in which a policewoman investigating the country club explosion must team up with an ex-mobster who makes her pulse race in more ways than one. You won't want to miss RaeAnne Thayne's second book in her *OUTLAW HARTES* miniseries, *Taming Jesse James*, in which reformed bad-boy-turned-sheriff Jesse James Harte puts his life—not to mention his heart—on the line for lovely schoolteacher Sarah MacKenzie. And finally, in *Keeping Caroline* by Vickie Taylor, a tragedy pushes a man back toward the wife he'd left behind—and the child he never knew he had.

Enjoy all of them! And don't forget to come back next month when the excitement continues in *Silhouette Intimate Moments*.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Leslie J. Wainger', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Leslie J. Wainger
Executive Senior Editor

In the Line of Fire

Beverly Bird



www.millsandboon.co.uk

BEVERLY BIRD

has lived in several places in the United States, but she is currently back where her roots began on an island in New Jersey. Her time is devoted to her family and her writing. She is the author of numerous romance novels, both contemporary and historical. Beverly loves to hear from readers. You can write to her at P.O. Box 350, Brigantine, NJ 08203.

For Don, still titling and still inspiring...

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Chapter 1

It was raining hard in Mission Creek, South Texas.

It wasn't the general, impotent misting that he'd come to accept as a squall during his formative years here, Danny Gates thought, as he stood on the concrete sidewalk of Main Street for the first time in six years. That sort of rain would have been a kind of "welcome home, boy." This rain was hard and punishing. It slid down the back of his neck, a cold finger trailing memories, most of them of the freedom he'd enjoyed years ago.

He started to pull up the collar of his jacket, then he remembered, too, that he no longer owned one. He'd been dragged off to jail without warning on a blistering hot July afternoon. He'd been denied the bail that would have allowed him a window of time to get his affairs in order. As a result, almost everything he'd owned back then was gone now.

Danny took a step off the curb. A glaring yellow taxi pushed toward him through heavy traffic, and he started to wave it down. He aborted the gesture just in time to shove his hand into his jeans pocket and pull out a few crinkled bills. He had six dollars and some change left of the money that the state of Texas had given him as a parting gift. Not enough for cab fare to his mother's home out on the poor end of Gulf Road—it wouldn't have been enough six years ago.

Danny swore aloud. His brown eyes darkened dangerously in the direction of the driver as the car approached. His expression obviously warned the cabbie not to pick that man up after all, because the yellow car sped on.

He'd have to work on that, Danny thought, rubbing a hand over his jaw as though to erase the expression.

He started to walk, turning off Main Street, leaving Lone Star County's probation offices behind. He didn't even dare stick his thumb out as he would have done as a kid. Hitchhiking was considered a minor crime in most places, and Danny suspected that Mission Creek was probably one of them. Any ridiculous infraction now could get his parole revoked.

He was an ex-mobster and an ex-con. He accepted responsibility for the first if not the second. He trudged on, toward whatever fate had in store for him in this second chance at life.

On Monday morning Molly French overslept.

Part of that could be blamed on the really good pinot noir she'd uncorked last night after her shift had ended—a sort of quiet celebration here on her bed with an old movie and a bag of tortilla chips. Unfortunately, her shift had ended at midnight, and that celebration had taken her into the wee hours of the morning. The rain that had started at dawn hadn't wakened her; it had just lulled her into a deeper, dreamless sleep. Thanks to her little party-for-one, she'd forgotten to set her alarm before she'd dozed off.

"Damn it." She pushed the comforter back and sat up in bed, scraping chocolate-brown corkscrews of hair out of her eyes. The curls tumbled back again as soon as she let them go. Because there was no help for it, she levered her legs over the side of the bed and went in search of a headband.

She found one on the floor where she'd tossed it last night when the stupid heroine in the movie had stood there screaming at the sight of a Martian. Molly distinctly remembered shouting, "Shoot him, shoot him!" and ripping the headband off to throw it at the television in disgust when the bimbo had only stood there with her laser weapon pointed at the floor. "She did not deserve what she got," Molly muttered, shoving the headband on again. The bimbo had gotten the hero—long, tall and sexy with a fierce glare that could have slain the Martian on its own. It had probably been her large breasts that had won him over, she thought. When a woman had large breasts, it was Molly's experience that she really didn't have to actually do much of anything.

She turned on her heel and ended up facing the cheval mirror in one corner of her bedroom. Her curls were fastened back now, but beyond the braided leather headband, they shot straight up

from her head as though protesting the confinement. Her favorite oversize sweatshirt—emblazoned with the words TEXAS A & M—stopped high on her thighs. Her legs were good, trim and strong, but her breasts were definitely not large.

“My cross to bear,” she murmured. She picked up the chip bag and the wineglass from her bedside table and carried them into the kitchen, glancing at the clock on the wall.

It was just past eleven. She liked to get to the rec center no later than two o’clock, but she was going to be late today. She’d found out last night that she’d been appointed to the task force that had been organized to investigate the bombing at the Lone Star Country Club last month. That was what she’d been celebrating.

Appointed might be a somewhat inaccurate description of what had actually gone down, Molly admitted, heading into the bathroom. She had badgered the chief of police shamelessly. She’d written him four or five memos and sneaked them into his In box. Okay, maybe the first three had actually resembled memos. Maybe the last couple had been outright pleas. Either way, Chief Stone had finally relented.

She’d had to promise him that she would work the task force on her own time, that it wouldn’t interfere with her regular patrol duties. It was the only way she’d been able to overcome his reluctance to appoint her. But Molly had never had a problem with working hard, and this time she had a plan. She’d been with the Mission Creek Police Department for nearly two years now and it was time to start moving up the ranks. She had the experience. She’d had almost ten years in with the Laredo Police Department before she’d made the jump to Mission Creek. She’d known she would lose her seniority and would have to start back at the bottom of the totem pole here, but two years of wallowing in the trenches was enough.

She wanted her detective’s shield, and she wanted it now. So she figured she’d just crack the case that the rest of the task force had been chasing their tails on for the past month. Then she’d accept the accolades with a small, polite smile. Then Chief Stone would realize what an incredible asset she was to his department, and he would rush at her with hands outstretched, that sweet little shield nestled in his palms.

“Nowhere to go now but up, baby.” Molly took her headband off again and yanked her sweatshirt over her head. She turned on the shower. She considered that she really ought to do something about this habit of talking to herself, but it just wasn’t high on her list of priorities. She stepped over the lip of the tub...and yelped.

Molly lunged for the steaming shower nozzle and turned it aside so she could readjust the water temperature. The task force was the opportunity she’d waited for, but what good would it do her if she scalded the skin off her bones before she even started?

Fifteen minutes later she was aiming the blow dryer at her curls and ruthlessly attacking them with an industrial-size hairbrush. The result was a rich, full sweep of gloriously straight hair that just skimmed her collar bone. This, she knew, would last until she left the rec center. She’d get four hours out of the do, tops...if she didn’t sweat. The bright side was that a scrunchie and her uniform cap would take the edge off the worst of the corkscrews from four o’clock until midnight, her regular patrol shift.

She hesitated at her closet. What did an off-duty cop wear to pop up in a task-force war room and share her brilliance? Jeans, she decided. Nice jeans. And a classic, V-neck white sweater. She’d look casual but ready for anything.

With that decision made, she was out the door in ten minutes. She lived in a ground-floor apartment on the north edge of town. She kept three separate locks on her door. Not that she owned a great deal worth stealing—she’d sold most of what she’d owned when she’d made the move from Laredo. But she’d been harassing Mission Creek’s more unsavory element for the better part of two years now in the line of duty. She’d slapped a few handcuffs on people who would not forget it in a hurry, and it wouldn’t take much effort to discover where she lived alone.

Molly turned her key in the last lock and stepped away from her door. Her booted feet got tangled up in the newspaper there and she nearly twisted an ankle. "Whatever the art is to walking in heels, I've yet to discover it." She bent to swipe up the paper and held it over her head in an effort to divert some of the rain coming down.

"Good afternoon, Molly."

"What?" Her gaze shot to the street where the custodian for the apartment complex was busily clearing the gutter. "Hi, Warren. It's not afternoon yet. It's only eleven..." She pushed up the sleeve of the navy-blue blazer she'd tossed on. Her watch read 12:05.

"Well, isn't that just fine?" What would the task force think when she strolled in at a quarter past twelve? Not a thing, she decided, not once she wowed them all with her brilliance.

Still carrying the newspaper, she jogged along the walkway to the parking lot tucked off to one side of the complex. She was behind the wheel of her ten-year-old Camaro when she succumbed to an urge to pull the paper out of its protective plastic. She opened the reasonably dry pages against her steering wheel, then she saw the date at the top.

Year after year, memory after memory, it always happened to her the same way.

Her heart stopped for half a beat, then it raced. Something airy and light filled her limbs, then her head. And hot tears came unbidden to her eyes, though she refused to let them fall. It was February fifteenth. "Well, happy birthday." Molly swallowed hard.

It was the day she had been born thirty years ago, the same day Mickey had died seventeen years later. Molly's hands fumbled as she crushed the newspaper into a large, wadded ball. She tossed it into the passenger seat and shot the key into the ignition, revving the Camaro's engine. She drove out of the lot, turning south onto Mission Creek Road.

This was not a day to dwell on the past, not this year. This February 15th she was going to find out what her future might hold.

It held three fellow officers who did not seem exceptionally overjoyed by her presence, Molly discovered ten minutes later.

By the time she stepped into the task-force war room, the rain had her hair zinging all over the place again. She blew a couple of damp locks out of her eyes and looked around. Chief Stone had converted the old lunch room for the task force's efforts. The three Formica-topped tables had been jammed back against the far wall in a line. Some chairs were situated in front of them; others were littered about the empty room as though a band of rowdy children had suddenly abandoned a game of musical chairs.

The table farthest to the left supported a computer that was whining with a high-pitched hum that told Molly it might be about to exit this world. Beside it were photos from the bombing scene. Joe Gannon and Paulie McCauley stood there, flipping through them. The table in the middle held the crime book and a lot of pages and reports yet to be filed. She thought she could make herself useful there. It would be an excellent way to bring herself up to speed on what the task force had achieved this past month without her.

But first she went to the table on the right. It held the coffee machine, an empty box of donuts and a solitary slice of pizza abandoned in its super-size box. Molly lifted the lid to inspect the pizza. The cheese had hardened into yellowish-white nodules and the edges were curling.

Detective Frank Hasselman was standing there talking into a cell phone. His pale eyes lifted to her face at Molly's expression. "Not to your liking, Officer?"

Molly gave a weak grin. "Not particularly."

"Then find another restaurant."

Her spine stiffened. Deliberately she lifted the slice from the box. "This'll do."

His brows climbed his forehead. "You're not seriously going to eat that."

"Watch me." She bit in. Once, when she had been ten, Mickey had talked her into swallowing an earthworm. She reasoned that nothing could be worse than that.

She was wrong. Molly fought valiantly to swallow. At least the pizza didn't curl in on itself on her tongue the way the worm had. "Yummy."

"You're crazy." Hasselman put the telephone back to his mouth and turned away from her to continue talking.

"I'm tougher than I look," she muttered. And she knew that she was going to have to be to get ahead here. After two years she was still the new kid on the block—which, in all honesty, perplexed her somewhat. It hadn't taken her this long to break in back in Laredo when she'd been fresh out of the academy.

She poured herself a cup of coffee to wash down the truly bad pizza and went to the table in the middle. She pulled out the chair there and dragged a pile of filing toward her as she sat.

"What are you doing?" Hasselman said, disconnecting his call.

"The grunt work. Somebody has to."

"She knows her place, got to give her that," said McCauley.

"Ease off her," Joe Gannon warned from the other table. At forty-three, he was pretty much the elder statesman of the task force. She'd looked into all fourteen officers and detectives who comprised the team. Gannon was two years from retirement.

Molly fought the urge to sigh in relief. He might be an ally...sort of.

Gannon placed a photo into a pile and came to the middle table to join her as McCauley and Hasselman left the room. "Do you know what you're doing?" he asked, frowning.

"Oh ye of little faith." She glanced up at him as she began sorting pages. "I worked a task force in Laredo. Double homicide."

"Don't tell that to the others."

Molly frowned. "They've got a thing about me coming in from Laredo? Is that what it is?"

"It's part of it."

"What's the other part?" She slid the last of the pizza surreptitiously into the trash can beneath the table and thought she saw him grin fleetingly.

"Beats me."

"That's not helpful."

"Best I can do." Gannon shrugged. "Plus they don't trust anybody who wanted to be on this detail so bad she'd do it without pay."

"Word spreads fast."

"Start filing. Earn Brownie points. That's my best advice." He moved away from the table again.

Forty minutes later, Molly knew scarcely more than she had when she'd started. It was appalling how little information this team had gathered in the month since the bombing, and how disorganized it was. Fourteen cops, four weeks and the crime book was only about two inches thick. She rubbed her forehead, feeling a headache coming on.

The bomb had gone off behind the Men's Grill, in its kitchen, at the Lone Star Country Club. The task force had gathered statements from everyone dining there at the time with the exception of Daniel and Meg Anderson who'd had the misfortune of being seated closest to the point of detonation. They were dead. Their little boy, Jake, was not. He'd been on his way to the bathroom that afternoon when he'd made a wrong turn near the kitchen. He'd seen a couple of men moving large green canvas bags outside into a car. Molly noticed from some handwritten notes—not even typed—that there were those on the task force who thought the bags had contained the explosive device.

No matter how she tried, she couldn't envision a bomb being transported in numerous green canvas bags. And besides, according to little Jake, the bags had been heading out of the country club, not in. It took no thought at all to rule out the theory, so why were the notes included without a disclaimer and why had it been awarded five useless interviews with the kitchen personnel?

Molly wanted to talk to Jake Anderson. He was currently living with Adam Collins, one of the firefighters on the scene that day. He and his fiancée, Tracy Walker, a burn specialist at the hospital

where Jake had been treated, had already set the wheels into motion to adopt the little boy. What shape were these bags that he'd seen? That was important, but apparently no one had bothered to ask him. Had they been smooth, compact...or bumpy and bulging with knobby angles? Jake had said that something about them made him think of Santa Claus.

Molly made a note to herself to contact Adam Collins and see how the boy was doing. It might be too stressful for him to talk to her just yet. Whoever was behind the bombing had obviously thought Jake knew too much because he'd been kidnapped along with Tracy Walker no more than a week ago. They were both safely home now, but on top of losing his parents...Molly shook her head and decided she'd wait a few weeks on Jake.

But the boy brought to mind the matter of Ed Bancroft. Molly sat back in her chair and dug the heels of her hands into her eyes. He and another guy, Kyle Malloy, were the ones who had kidnapped Tracy and Jake, but neither of those men were going to be talking about it. Malloy had been killed when he was apprehended, while Bancroft had been slapped into a holding cell here at the police station. As soon as she had heard about it, Molly had rushed over to see if Bancroft would talk to her, even though she wasn't part of the task force. But she'd found him swinging in his cell from an overhead fixture, courtesy of his belt.

Bancroft and Malloy were—had been—cops.

Then there was a nagging little something that had been bothering her ever since she'd gone to the scene that day of the bombing. Nine-tenths of the Mission Creek Police Department had responded to that call, most—like herself—whether they had been on duty during that shift or not. Granted, Mission Creek was a smaller, more intimate community than Laredo and they didn't see this kind of trouble very often. But still...that was a lot of cops.

Molly didn't like what she was thinking. She felt nauseous, but maybe that was just the pizza. She pawed through the papers and reports on the table that she had yet to file and found notes pertinent to Bancroft. The general consensus was that he and Malloy had been sucked in by Carmine Mercado and his boys into moonlighting for the Texas mob. It felt right to Molly. Green canvas bags, she thought again. Weapons, drugs, something being moved through the country club's kitchen. And whose domain were those things in South Texas? The mob's, of course. If Malloy and Bancroft had kidnapped Jake Anderson in order to keep him from talking about what he'd seen, they'd done it on orders from whoever was responsible for the blast. That indicated that the organized crime network had owned them.

It always upset her when a cop turned. She thought about all the officers at the scene again. Were Bancroft and Malloy the only ones? Or had some of the others had a staked interest in that explosion?

There were other theories. Heaven knew the Wainwrights and Carsons had been going at each other's throats for the better part of a century now, but Molly couldn't see two of Mission Creek's elite families blowing up the spectacular and lavish club they had jointly established generations ago. There were rumors around town about the involvement of a South American terrorist group, but as far as Molly was concerned, that just smacked of pulp fiction. What would terrorists want with Mission Creek, Texas? Mission Creek already had its own bad boys in the form of Carmine Mercado and his mobsters.

Molly finally pushed her chair back and stood. She'd only gotten halfway through organizing the book, but a glance at her watch told her that it was time to move on to the rec center. She turned away from the table to find Paulie McCauley standing in the door watching her, his arms crossed over his fairly significant chest.

"Solve the case yet?" he sneered.

"No." Molly shook her head and walked toward him, squeezing past him when he wouldn't move aside to give her space. "But you can bet your bottom dollar that I'm going to."

"Danny, Danny, Danny."

He looked up from his seat on the chintz-covered sofa in his mother's living room, the one that had smelled faintly of over-cooked cabbage twenty-five years ago and still did. If he inhaled hard, he could detect it beneath the strident lemon tang of the cleaning solution his mother tended to use with a heavy hand. It made his heart move in a way it hadn't done for a very long time. This was home.

Some things never changed, Danny thought. Including the money in the shoe box on his lap.

"There's nearly thirteen thousand dollars in here," he said.

"You told me to keep it for you. Here. Have another cookie."

"Mom..." He felt twelve again, but Danny took the cookie.

She went to the threadbare chair across the room from him and sat. Her hair was still as iron-gray and as ruthlessly scraped back from her face as it had been six years ago. Her face was just as seamed. He recognized her blue polyester slacks and the dimpled, dotted Swiss blouse she wore from the years before he had gone away. As near as he could tell, the stubborn woman hadn't bought herself a damned thing in six years.

He loved her so sweetly and savagely it stole his breath for a moment, so he did the only thing he could do. Danny grinned at her as he shook his head in defeat.

"I told you to use what you needed and to keep the rest of the money for me," he clarified.

"Which I did." Mona Gates took a cookie for herself and watched the change come over her boy's face. Thirty-two years old last month, she thought. She'd visited him in jail with a birthday cake, but they'd hacked it all to pieces before they'd let her give it to him. If she had been going to slide a file in there, she would have done it six years ago when he had first gone away, not weeks before his chance for parole. Fools.

On that day, on his thirty-second birthday, her Danny's beautiful brown eyes—as soulful and hopeful as a puppy's, she'd often thought—had stayed fixed on her face, never wavering. She knew he had gone through the motions of celebrating for her sake, not his own. Mona had watched him right back, knowing his gaze missed nothing in that visiting room, not a single movement of the guard standing near the door or a gesture made by the couple sitting at the table beside them. To Mona's knowledge, Danny hadn't smiled in six years.

His mouth had a way of crooking up at one corner—almost like he was abashed, but then there was that devil's own gleam in his eyes. He'd had a way of winking that made anyone who saw the gesture feel as though they'd just been let in on some wonderful, exciting secret. Danny didn't wink anymore, either.

After a moment his smile faded. "You used less than four hundred dollars, Mom. I gave you thirteen thousand three, and you're giving back most of it."

"That was what I needed. I get my Social Security now."

And he could just imagine how much that added up to each month.

"I have everything I want," she insisted.

"Liar."

For a second her eyes twinkled, the way they had long before his father had left them with nothing, before she'd worked too many jobs trying to see them through and before Danny had accepted Ricky Mercado's offer of a job to pull them out of a particularly bad financial hole. That had started him down a long road that had ended with him knowing every one of Carmine Mercado's secrets...and needing so desperately to get away from them that he had spent six years in jail to do it.

"You can get a cab back now, can't you?" Mona asked.

Danny nodded. "I'd say so." His feet still hurt from the walk.

"Buy yourself a car," she advised.

"I'm planning on it." But it wouldn't be the black Lexus he'd owned six years ago. All the same, it was time to move on, Danny thought. He stood and scraped two thousand dollars off the top of the money in the box. She probably wouldn't spend that, either, but he was damned if he was walking out of here with it.

Although he'd been picked up by the police without warning, he'd been able to tell his mother where to find this stash. He'd kept it in a safe deposit box at the bank because anything could happen in the profession he'd chosen, and often did. His mother had been authorized for access to that box. She'd picked up the money for him and had held it all this time.

He laid the two thousand dollars on her scarred coffee table. "Buy yourself a new sofa."

"I don't want a new sofa."

"Then that crocheting machine you used to want so much."

She thought about it. "That's only about a hundred."

"Mom..."

She laughed and stood suddenly to hug him. "Danny, Danny, Danny. It's so good to have you home. I love you."

"I love you, too, Mom."

He finally extracted himself from her arms and folded the remaining eleven thousand back into the shoe box. He looked around for her telephone. She read the direction of his gaze and pulled a cordless from the cushions of the chair she had been sitting in.

"One of those newfangled ones. I bought it with forty dollars of your money when the arthritis started hurting me too bad to get to the phone fast."

Danny laughed. That was something, at least. "Good for you."

He used it to call for the cab he hadn't been able to afford two hours ago. It arrived within fifteen minutes. He was half hoping it would be the same driver who had snubbed him in the rain, but it was a young Hispanic guy with what might well have been the whitest smile Danny had ever seen. He flashed it a lot, too, as though he had only just discovered what a jolly place the world was. Danny didn't particularly agree with that assessment so he stared at the guy in the rearview mirror until he stopped grinning and looked away.

Eleven thousand dollars left.

The cab let him out at a used-car lot on Scissom Street. He negotiated a fourteen-year-old Dodge down to two thousand dollars and didn't like the look the salesman gave him when he paid in cash. He'd paid cash for a lot in his life, but back then he hadn't given a damn what anybody thought. Danny wanted to warn the salesman that if the car didn't run for at least eight blocks, he was going to come back and bury him in it. But that kind of remark would probably get him in trouble so he kept his mouth shut.

He finally took possession of the car and drove...home.

The rec center was a beleaguered tan brick building on the eastern edge of Mission Creek. He pulled up at the curb and stared at it. Rain funneled down from the corners of a flat roof that covered most of the building. The water formed a solid, wet sheet cascading from the green metal awning hanging over the front door. The place took up most of the block, and the door was dead center with two barred windows on either side of it. Stuck to the top of the left side of the building was a square addition, sided in well-aged cedar. That had a window on each of its four walls.

His apartment. And the kids loitering beneath the green awning, getting wet but not seeming to care, were his new job.

Danny had agreed with his parole officer to teach basketball to these underprivileged kids, most of whom had already had a few skirmishes of their own with the law. For this he would receive the impressive compensation of eight bucks an hour. He could also have the apartment in exchange for acting as a handyman/caretaker/night watchman. Danny got out of the Dodge and reminded himself that this was what he had decided he wanted during his long, lonely nights in that cell.

The kids eyed him. He eyed them right back.

There were three boys and a girl. The boys were all wearing identical baggy jeans that clung to their narrow hips in a way that defied gravity. Two of them wore T-shirts and the third wore a green wool sweater that had seen enough launderings that the knit had gone loose and given way to nubs.

The girl scared him a little. Her hair stuck up from her head in spikes. Her roots were jet black and the ends purple. She was a beauty, with smooth dusky skin and intense dark eyes. It couldn't be more than fifty-five degrees today, and the sky was pouring cold rain to boot, but she stood with one hip cocked in a stretchy black sports bra and a very small green leather skirt. A silver ring had been inserted into her belly button. Danny rubbed his own midriff against a reflexive sympathy pain.

One of the boys came forward, his chin jutting, ready to protect his territory. Danny pushed his hands into his jeans pockets, a deliberately nonthreatening gesture. He hadn't been off the streets so long that he didn't remember how it was.

"Who're you?" the kid asked.

"The answer to your prayers. And you would be?"

He didn't answer but one of the other boys stepped forward. "How come you want to know?"

"So I can call you something besides 'Hey, you.'"

Glances were exchanged. The girl sidled up to join the other two. "Well, I'm Cia."

"Hi, Cia. Are you going to play basketball in those boots?"

She looked down at her feet. They were encased in more leather with chunky, killer heels. "Who said anything about basketball?"

He had his work cut out for him, Danny thought.

He kept his eye on the one boy who hadn't yet come forward. He was bone thin with dark hair that had been cut ruthlessly short. One to watch, Danny thought. There was something about him, something that said he was more desperate than the others. There was a certain hollowness to his eyes.

The other kids scattered as Danny passed by them beneath the awning, but the loner held his ground. Only his eyes moved as Danny walked past him. Danny pulled open the rickety screen door to the center, then he paused to read the graffiti on the bricks to one side of it. It was significantly more creative than it had been in his own youth.

"Is that even physically possible?" He nodded in the direction of the words scrawled in red paint.

The first boy snorted. "Not for you, maybe. I can pull it off."

Cia laughed. "In your dreams, Lester."

So he had Cia and Lester, Danny thought. So far so good. "Meet me inside on the court in fifteen minutes."

"What for?" Lester demanded.

"I'm going to teach you guys basketball." If not today, then tomorrow, Danny thought, but sooner or later they'd come into his gym.

He stepped through the door into a vestibule floored with cracked blue linoleum. The walls had once been white, but they were filthy now with graffiti of their own. There was a single door to his left and double, swinging doors straight ahead. The door to the side wore a small metal sign that read office. Danny went forward. He pushed through the double doors and stepped into the gym.

A glance around told him that, surprisingly, it wasn't in total disrepair. He could work with it, and what he couldn't work with, he could fix. He'd never set foot in this place when he was a kid—he'd had the school gym at his disposal until Ricky had taken him under his wing and had shown him more lucrative ways to spend his time.

Thoughts of Ricky had his heart seizing a little. Best to take care of that little problem straight off the bat, he thought. Otherwise he wouldn't live long enough to coach anybody.

Beyond a door at the back of the gym were stairs. The light bulb overhead was burned out so Danny made his way up cautiously, finally stepping into a single room, half of it given over to a sofa bed of deep, depressing green. The other half of the room was taken up by a kitchen straight out of the sixties. Danny didn't have to open the bathroom door to know that the facilities in there would be prehistoric. He spotted an old rotary-type telephone on a coffee table in front of the sofa and he went straight for it.

He dialed in the number from memory, glancing at his watch. It was two o'clock. Ricky would be home. He was the type who did his prowling at night.

The line picked up midway through the second ring. "H'lo."

"Some problems never go away," Danny said calmly. "They just lie dormant for a while."

He was gratified by a pause before Ricky Mercado spoke. "So you're out. I heard they were going to spring you sometime this week."

He'd loved the guy like a brother. But Danny didn't feel like playing games. "You heard about it the instant I stepped through that jailhouse door this morning and you were waiting for this call." He knew the way it worked. He knew too much. Therein lay the problem.

He was still as much of a threat to Carmine as he had been six years ago, Danny thought, when the mob had framed him and had him put away because he'd left their ranks. The fact that he had remained silent for six years, not singing like a bird to gain his own release, would hold minimum sway with the old man even now. Danny knew he was alive only because Ricky had probably interceded for him back then, convincing his uncle to go for the prison term instead of eliminating the problem of Danny Gates entirely.

Ricky finally laughed. The sound was rich and familiar. "Okay, we kept tabs on you. So I guess you're not calling me for a lift somewhere."

"No. I'm already where I need to be."

He heard Ricky accepting this in the ensuing silence. "You're definitely still out then."

"I'm out."

"What do you want to do about it?"

"We need to meet and work out a stalemate."

This time Ricky didn't hesitate. "How about tomorrow?"

"No. Friday. I'm going to need a little time." This, Danny thought, would be the true test of how much of their friendship remained. They both knew what he was going to do with that time. "Can you hold Carmine and the others off until then?"

"I guess I have to."

Danny let himself breathe again. Cautiously.

"I'll meet you at the country club at one o'clock," Ricky said.

Danny thought about that. As long as Ricky had kept his nose reasonably clean these past six years, meeting with him wouldn't be a violation of his parole. It wasn't against the law for an ex-con to meet with a suspected mobster—yet. "You haven't been charged with anything while I was gone?"

"Bro, I'm way too clever."

Same old Ricky, Danny thought. "I thought I was, too."

Ricky ignored that. "Friday. One o'clock. In the Yellow Rose Café."

Danny's eyes narrowed hard and fast, like blinds slapping down to cover a window. It worried him that Ricky hadn't chosen the Men's Grill for old time's sake. "Why the change?" he asked.

"Because the grill isn't there anymore. Somebody blew it clear to China last month."

"No kidding?"

"Sky-high, buddy. It's a pile of rubble." Ricky laughed again.

Danny didn't ask if the Mercados had been behind the explosion. It was just one more thing he didn't need to know. "All right. The Café, then. In the meantime you've got my back, right?"

"You're covered."

For now, Danny thought. After Friday, who knew?

He disconnected and shifted his shoulders back and forth, trying to rock some of the tension out of them. Then he cocked his head to the side. From downstairs came the thump-thump-thumping sound of a basketball hitting the gym floor. He grinned to himself. The kids had already come inside.

He returned to the stairs and trotted down, then he went still, holding the door to the gym open with one hand. Whatever was going on out there more closely resembled a game of keep-away than

basketball. And it didn't resemble keep-away much at all. He suspected this all had something to do with the woman who had pulled the kids inside onto the court while he'd been upstairs.

As he watched, she more or less tackled Cia on the hard flooring and began tickling her. The two of them came up gasping for breath. Somehow Cia managed to keep her modesty in that tiny skirt. Then the woman sprang to her feet again. Laughing, she scraped her hands through her hair, pulling it back from her face. It was a wild mass of curls that had hidden her features, but when it was swept clear, Danny saw delicate cheekbones and a spattering of freckles across her nose.

She was small, compact and she had the voice of a drill sergeant. She spun to one of the boys who'd stuck his tongue out at her behind her back—a new one who hadn't been outside. "Keep it in your mouth, Fisk, until you figure out how to use it."

"Hey, babe, I know how. Want me to show you?"

"Grow up first. Maybe we'll talk in ten years." She caught the ball that Lester shot to her. And fast, without looking, she threw it in the direction of Fisk. The boy was startled, but caught it. "Good job," she said. "See? Your hands actually work for something besides picking pockets."

Then she threw herself into the game, or whatever it was.

Her face changed, Danny thought. Her eyes went hot. Passion, he thought. It was there on her face, a hunger both for the release of the exercise and the need to win, assuming her game even had rules. Her hair bounced, all long, dark ringlets that made a man's hand itch for palms full of it.

A new girl had joined the kids from outside, as well, he realized. She caught the sleeve of the woman's white sweater. In an instant the woman stopped playing and turned, looking concerned. Then she slung an arm over the girl's shoulder and together they moved off the court in his direction, their heads close as they whispered.

"Ah, man," Lester said. "Damn Anita's got more problems than an ex-con."

Somehow Danny doubted that.

The woman made a semirude gesture in the boy's direction and it shut him right up. Passion and kindness, he thought, and no-nonsense guts. He felt one corner of his mouth try to pull into a smile. Danny rubbed his palm over it to get rid of the reflex.

When she looked up and saw him, she stopped midstride. "Who are you?"

Danny lowered his hand and stepped out of the stairwell. "Danny Gates." Her eyes were emerald green, he noticed, and she definitely had freckles.

"Is that your rattletrap out there?" she demanded.

"My what?" She'd lost him.

"Your car. There's a car out there in my parking space."

"There's no assigned parking out there."

"I always leave my car at the door. There's an old yellow Dodge there now, in my spot."

"It's lemon."

It was her turn to frown in confusion. "I beg your pardon?"

"Lemon. That's what the salesman called it."

"He might have been referring to its condition, you know, not its color."

That snagged his pride. He walked past her. "Yeah, if the car in question is lemon, then that would be mine."

"A rose by any other name..." She shrugged and pivoted to follow him with her gaze. "Are you leaving now? Because if you are, I'll move my car back to where it belongs since the rain's tapered off a little. I don't want to have to run a block in a downpour to get to it when I'm done here."

He stopped and looked back at her. It had been a while since he'd had occasion to handle a woman, Danny thought, but he was pretty sure he could remember how the routine went. Something told him that this one was used to having her own way, to giving orders. He'd have to fix that if she intended to spend any time around here playing with his kids.

"Finders keepers," he drawled. "I was there first. Live with it."

“I’m staying here for a while, and you’re not!”

“Who says?”

“I...well, I volunteer here. I’m Molly French.”

“Yeah? I work here. I live here. Guess you’ll have to find someplace else for your vehicle from here on in, won’t you? That spot is mine now.”

He had the pleasure of seeing her jaw drop as he picked up the ball that had fallen at center court. “Okay, here’s how we’re going to do this,” he said to the kids. “Let me show you how you’re supposed to play basketball, not that sissy thing you were doing a minute ago.”

He heard the woman make a choked sound of outrage behind him. Danny grinned to himself, and this time he didn’t wipe the reflex away.

His new life was starting to look interesting.

Chapter 2

Who did he think he was?

Molly stared after the guy as he started snapping out directives to the kids. Her kids. For the most part, they were ogling him, just as she was.

“Sure, this’ll work,” she murmured aloud.

Already Lester had that evil gleam in his eye. She gave five-to-one odds that he’d be tripping Mr. Basketball with one of his big booted feet within the next two or three minutes. He was generally the one who protected the kids’ turf from hostile adults. Jerome just shrugged and went to sit down at the edge of the court—he was the most easy-going of the lot and didn’t get worked up about much. As for Bobby...well, Bobby J. rarely showed much reaction to anything, Molly thought. Beneath his bristle-shaved hair, his brown eyes were as watchful as his expression was neutral. He stood at the edge of the court, so painfully thin it hurt her. Bobby rarely spoke to anyone. When he showed up at the center, he was just...there. It was anybody’s guess why he bothered to come by at all.

The coach-nobody-wanted was in Fisk’s face now, talking to him urgently. Molly took in his clothes—really bad-fitting jeans and a rain-dampened blue chambray shirt that was at least one, if not two, sizes too small. Who was he? she wondered again. And where had he come from?

In another thirty seconds, Molly had had enough.

She stalked over to him, reaching for the basketball. “Give me that.”

He went up on his toes, his arm extended, the ball balanced on his hand. He was tall. It was well out of her reach. With a quick little thrust of his wrist, he sent the ball sailing, then it dropped neatly through the hoop. He was all male grace and flexing muscle. It was quite a sight, Molly admitted, swallowing carefully. Something tickled her pulse.

“Nothing but net.” He turned and grinned at her. “You were saying?”

“I—” Molly began, then her mind went blank.

He kept watching her with the kind of smile that spelled trouble...and the trouble was an invitation. Come play with me and get burned. Some women were crazy for his type, and Molly discovered in that moment that she could definitely be one of them.

Unfortunately, they didn’t go crazy for her.

Molly planted her hands on her hips. A lock of her hair fell into her eyes and she blew it back. “Okay. That was pretty.”

“Thank you.”

“And it was a total waste of effort.”

“Says who?”

“Says me. We’re dealing with a bunch of aimless teenagers here, not the Houston Rockets.”

He feigned a look of utter awe. “You know about the Rockets?”

“Knock it off,” she growled.

“Come on, come on, you’re on a roll here. I’ll help you. They’re a basketball team. They actually play by certain rules. They get paid for it. Five-on-five competition in four quarters. Man-to-man defense, twenty-four-second clock to shoot. Does all that sound familiar?”

“Basketball isn’t the issue here.” She ground the words out and realized her jaw was tight.

“Tell that to Ron Glover.”

Ron Glover was the director of the rec center. Molly frowned. What had he said earlier? I work here. “Ron hired you to play basketball? We don’t have that kind of budget!”

“You’re telling me. The pay stinks.” He sauntered away from her to go after the basketball. None of the kids had made an effort to touch it. They were all gathered under the opposite net now, watching them.

This, she thought, was incredible. “He didn’t tell me he was hiring anyone.”

“Ron reports to you?”

“No, of course not. But he...we just...we pool our efforts around here. And he never mentioned this.”

He shot another basket unperturbed. “Don’t take it so hard. It all just came together on Friday.”

Molly went after him as he moved to catch the ball again. “Why? Why would he do something like this?”

“We had a meeting of the minds.” He started dribbling the ball in circles around her.

“What kind of meeting?”

“The kind that says that if we put together a team that’s even halfway good, if we teach these kids the basics, some of them might land on their high school team. One of them might get noticed by a college scout.” He stopped and pinned her with intense dark eyes. “Granted, that would require some raw and unconventional talent, but one of them could get out of here to someplace better, someplace where they might have a chance.”

Molly opened her mouth one more time and shut it again. She couldn’t argue with that.

She wanted the same thing for her kids. It was what she had been trying to do here herself these past two years, why she volunteered her time to the center—though her methods were different. She wanted each and every one of them to get out of the poverty, the drugs, the petty crime that could lead to treacherously bigger things.

Still, she felt she had a certain stake in being contrary, if only because he looked so good with that ball in his hands...and he knew it. “What do the rest of the kids get in this grand scheme of yours?”

“They get something to do for a few hours a day instead of hanging, on the streets.”

This time when he sent the ball swishing through the net, Molly lunged for it and caught it as it bounced to the floor. She gathered it against her chest. “They’re off the streets—sometimes—even without organized basketball. I keep them off the streets. I help them.”

“And how do you do that, pretty Molly French?”

Pretty? Her heart chugged even as she refused to react. “I get them jobs and I get state assistance for their families. I listen when they talk.”

“Admirable.” He started circling her again, clearly looking for a way to knock the ball from her arms.

She felt like prey. Molly pivoted with him, trying to keep him in front of her. “Basketball’s just...you know, something we horse around with here while we...while we...talk.”

“Not anymore.” His hand snaked out so quickly she barely saw him move. He knocked the ball straight down out of her grasp. The back of his arm nudged her breast. Molly lost her breath and took a quick step back. The basketball bounced on the floor between them, and he scooped it up with one broad hand, then he spun it on his index finger.

“Show-off,” she muttered.

“Yeah.” He grinned. “Maybe we ought to leave you in charge of jobs and state assistance. When it comes to the game, you’re...ah, a bit lacking, Molly. No offense intended.”

She flushed. “I rarely get worked up about something so trivial.”

“So what does work you up?” He grinned a devil’s grin, sizing her up with his eyes.

He was flirting with her. Molly definitely felt something working inside her now. It was a low, steady thrumming. She decided to change the subject. “So what are your qualifications for this, hot shot?”

“All-state my sophomore year.”

That would have been high school, she thought. “And the college scouts just gobbled you right up, didn’t they? That explains why you’re working for Ron now.”

A hardening came to his eyes. It happened as fast as his nifty hands could move. “I quit playing when I was a junior.”

“And now you’re here to impart all you learned in two short years.” That was always her problem, Molly thought. She never knew when to keep her mouth shut. “Aren’t we blessed.”

To her surprise he laughed. It was a deep sound, a little rough around the edges. It tickled her skin. He pocketed the basketball against his side and shook his head. “Thanks. I haven’t done that in a while.”

What? Laugh? That puzzled her, then her thoughts scattered again as he took a step toward her until his face was inches from hers.

“Guess what, Molly French? I think I like you.”

Her heart somersaulted. “My jury’s still out on you.”

He laughed again and rubbed his throat as though the reflex hurt him.

“I’m leaving now,” Molly decided.

“It’s pouring.” He gestured with the ball in the general direction of the barred window.

Molly saw rain battering the dirty glass, making tunnels in the brown-gray dust there.

“I’ve decided I don’t care.”

She hurried to the door and shot into the vestibule where she ran headfirst into Fran Celtenham, another volunteer whose contribution to the center was about as indefinable as Molly’s. Fran was in her sixties. She was a widow, a retired civil servant, who worked hard to organize the kids into doing occasional community-service projects. She also ran a bingo program on Monday nights—not just for the kids but for any Mission Creek family who cared to join in. Attendance was sporadic, but she never stopped trying.

“Ron hired a new guy,” Molly blurted without even greeting the woman.

“Yes, I know. On Friday.” Fran smiled at her benignly as she started to step past.

Molly caught her arm. “No, I mean, he hired him.” She held up her hand and rubbed her fingers together to show that money was changing hands. Then, finally, Fran’s words registered. “What do you mean you knew?”

“Ron told me.”

“He didn’t tell me.”

“You weren’t here on Friday.”

That was true. Molly rarely missed a day, but she’d had to testify in court on one of her arrests. “Everyone knew but me.”

Fran patted her on the shoulder before she continued into the gym. “Don’t take it so hard, sweetie.”

Exactly what Danny Gates had said, Molly thought. She stepped outside into the drenching downpour, disgruntled. In seconds her hair was flattened to her skull. She put her head down and trudged to her car.

She was halfway home before she realized that she’d hardly thought of Mickey or her birthday at all today.

The man standing in front of the long ebony desk practically vibrated with anger. “Are you out of your mind? You approve of this?”

“I think it’s a brilliant move.”

“Letting her on the task force?”

“Think about it. She was sticking her nose where it didn’t belong, anyway. She found Ed Bancroft. Think of the trouble we’d have on our hands if she’d gotten to him before his, ah, demise... if he had talked to her.”

The man was silent, but his eyes narrowed with consideration.

“We need her where we can control her and keep an eye on what she’s up to,” the second man said. “We can’t have her running around sleuthing on her own like that.”

“She’s smart. She has big-city experience. It’s a risk. I just don’t like it.”

The second man shrugged. "It's a risk we've been instructed to take. We'll minimize it by having her work the task force on her own hours. That's your responsibility, to wear her out with her regular patrol duties so that her participation with the task force is limited. And have someone keep an eye on her when she's in that war room. Try to have someone get close to her to keep track of what she's thinking, what she's decided she knows."

"I'm not some damned baby-sitter."

"Yes," the second man said. "You are."

"One week," Jerome said. "He'll be all over her like white on rice. Did you see the way he was eyeing her?"

"I'll take that bet. How much?" Fisk asked.

"Twenty bucks."

"Twenty and my diamond stud says she decks him when he tries." Cia touched a finger to one of the many piercings in her left ear. "Molly's tough."

"She's still a chick," Lester said. "And he's got the moves down. My Starter jacket says she wraps herself all over him when he finally gets around to it."

"I'll take that."

"Right."

"Yeah."

High-fives were exchanged, then the subject of the conversation headed in their direction. The kids began to disperse.

"Whoa," Danny said. But he had to pull his mind and his eyes off the door to address them. Molly French could make one hell of an exit when she had her dander up.

It might have been six years, but he knew a rattled woman when he saw one, Danny thought. He was inordinately pleased with himself for the achievement. Damned if he didn't still have the knack.

He waved a hand in greeting at an older woman who came through the gym doors Molly had just flashed through, then he brought his attention back to the kids. "What were you guys just betting about?"

"Who says we were betting?" Lester challenged.

In response, Danny high-fived the air and touched a finger to the earring he didn't have. He was gratified when they exchanged wary glances. "Been there, guys. So spit it out. What's the bet?"

"Nothing," Anita muttered. She was a pretty black girl who paled in comparison to Cia's looks and she seemed to know it. Danny felt something in his heart go out to her.

"Nice tattoo you've got there," he told her.

Her eyes shone with gratitude. She held up her wrist. An inked chain of ivy and roses encircled it. "You like it?"

"Wouldn't want one, but, yeah, it looks good on you."

"Thanks."

"Where'd you get the kind of money to pay for something like that?"

Her eyes shut down. He'd known they would.

"None of your business, man," Lester said, protecting her.

"Yeah, well, see, that's where we're going to have a problem." Danny put the basketball on the floor and sat on it, resting his arms on his knees, looking up at them now. "I'm not going anywhere, and I'm going to keep asking questions."

"Don't mean we got to answer you," Anita said.

"Nope. You don't. But trust me, I'll wear you down after a while."

"Who are you?" Lester was getting agitated.

"My name's Danny. I'm the guy the rec center hired to teach you kids the game of basketball."

"Molly plays with us," Cia said.

"Correct. Molly plays with you. I'm going to teach you basketball. There's a difference."

“What if we don’t want to learn?” Fisk asked, but Danny could tell he was curious.

“Just give me a couple of weeks, then you can decide.” He’d hook them. He was confident.

“What are you, some kind of do-gooder?” Lester demanded.

Yeah, these days he was, Danny thought. But that wasn’t the way to reach them. “Actually, I just came off six years of doing time.”

Eyes widened again in five identically stunned faces. For the first time, Danny looked around the whole gym and realized that they’d lost the skinny, quiet kid with the razor-short black hair. “Where’d that other boy go?”

“Bobby J.? Man, he’s like smoke. He’s here, he’s not here, you know?” Jerome said.

Danny did know. That kid was troubled, he thought again. He made a mental note to keep an eye out for him, not only here at the center, but on the streets, as well.

“Okay, here’s the deal.” He eyed Lester’s feet. “Tomorrow you all show up in gym shoes. No boots.”

“What if we don’t have none?” Jerome asked.

“Then give me your size, and you’ll have some by this time tomorrow.” Danny had a mental image of his remaining nine thousand dollars dwindling fast.

“What about us girls?” Cia asked.

“You’ll play, too.”

“Why would I want to play basketball?”

“Boys think it’s a contact sport.” He was delighted when she tossed back her purple-and-black hair and laughed.

Danny finally stood and picked up the basketball again. “Okay, one last question. What’s with the lady? Molly French? What’s her story?” As soon as the question left him, more high-fives were exchanged. Ah, so that was what the betting was about, he realized.

“You won’t like her, dude,” Lester said, heading for the door. “Leastwise not if you’re telling the truth ’bout doing time.”

“Why’s that?” But something in his gut shifted.

Cia giggled. “Molly’s a definite do-gooder. She’s a cop.”

Every good thing Danny had felt since leaving the parole office abruptly left him.

Molly made it in and out of her apartment, with her hair dried again and her uniform on, in less than half an hour. Record time, she thought. Which just went to show what a good head of steam could do for a woman.

She was really irritated about Danny Gates.

She landed back at the police station three and a half minutes before roll call. The task force cops gave her baleful looks. A couple of them were here, though neither Gannon, McCauley or Hasselman worked the four-to-midnight with her because they all had a healthy chunk of seniority. They got the plum shift, day work, eight-to-four.

Molly’s manna was another cop’s poison. While many of the others complained about working the swing shift, she was just glad to be home each night by 12:30. She had only just worked her way up to the four-to-midnight three months ago. Prior to that, she’d been on graveyard.

Beau Maguire shot a smirk in her direction as Molly slid into the vacant seat beside him. He was on the task force and putting in a lot of overtime these days. “The extra hours getting to you already, Officer?”

Molly made a pointed show of looking at her watch. Then she raised her hand when her sergeant called her name. “Bingo. Present and accounted for. And, I’m pleased to say, not a second behind schedule.”

“You need to work on that mouth of yours,” Beau said, scowling.

“So I’ve been told.” She smiled at him. “Maybe later.”

When roll call was finished, Molly shot to her feet. She already had her cell phone out of her trousers pocket when she got to the hallway. She tapped in Ron Glover's office number with her thumb. When he wasn't at the center, he worked as an accountant.

"What have you done?" she asked when Ron answered on the first ring.

"Molly?" He sounded, as he always did, vaguely befuddled. His voice was always hushed and hesitant, but he had a heart of gold. Ron had taken over the operation of the rec center nine years ago, and against all odds it was still open for the kids.

"There's a man in my gym," Molly said.

"Ah, him."

Ah, him? "Did one of the Wainwrights or the Carsons make some major contribution to our bank account that I don't know about?"

"Most of them won't even accept my phone calls." Ron sighed. "No, we're still limping along on the same budget. I wish I could pay you..." He trailed off without finishing. Neither Molly, Fran nor Plank Hawkins—who ran a city-funded soup kitchen out of the center's back room on Sundays—were compensated for their time.

So how had he found it in the coffers to pay Mr. Basketball with his smooth male grace and that crooked bad-boy grin? It just didn't make sense, Molly thought. Something was wrong here.

She entered the city garage and held her hand out for her cruiser keys as she passed the attendant there. He dropped them into her palm, and she went to her assigned unit. "Danny Gates just came to the rec center for a job, and you flipped open our limited checkbook and said sure?" Molly said into her cell phone.

"Well...yes. That was—that's just about the way it happened."

In a pig's eye, Molly thought.

"He's also going to fix the place up in exchange for the use of the apartment upstairs."

"That's not an apartment. It's a cardboard box." She knew. She had spent two nights there shortly after moving to Mission Creek until she'd gotten her apartment.

"Be that as it may..." Ron said, then he trailed off again. "The neighborhood's not the best, Molly. It's good to have someone like him there at night."

Someone like him? What did that mean? This was getting stranger and stranger, Molly thought.

She drove out of the garage. When something smelled, she thought, it was usually a fish, even if you were standing in the middle of a desert at the time. But she had connections, didn't she? She was a cop. Ron Glover was hardly her only source of information. "Okay," she said equably. "I'm on shift, Ron. I've got to run."

"Oh, of course. I'll see you later, Molly."

She disconnected and narrowed her eyes on the road ahead of her. Thinking. Simmering. Oh, yes, she thought, there was a fish in this desert somewhere, and she was going to follow her nose until she found it.

She went around the block and turned in the direction of the rec center. Danny Gates's ugly yellow car was still in her parking space. She pulled to the curb half a block away and got out, locking the cruiser and pocketing her keys.

She was just going to meander inside and poke her nose into Ron's office for a moment. She'd been volunteering here for two years; she was in and out of Ron's office all the time. So why did she suddenly feel nervous and guilty about it?

Because, she thought, she didn't want Danny Gates with his devil's grin and sexy, not-quite-definable air of danger to catch her at it this time. And Fran might be around somewhere. Sometimes she came in early to set up for bingo. For some reason Molly realized that she didn't want Fran to know what she was up to, either.

Molly slid into the vestibule and waited for a moment, listening. There were no basketballs thumping in the gym. He was probably upstairs. She stepped into Ron's office and closed the door

quietly behind her. The resulting clicking sound seemed furtive even to her own ears. She moved over to his desk and found what she was looking for right there, on top, in the center of his blotter: Danny Gates's application.

It was typed. That was very weird.

She pulled her cell phone from her trouser pocket again, and this time she hit in the number of the Department of Motor Vehicles. She ran his Social Security number.

"He just registered a car today," the woman at DMV said after a moment. "All the paperwork hasn't caught up yet, but his last known address was the state penitentiary."

Molly felt her legs fold suddenly. She turned around fast and sat in Ron's chair. "The pen?"

"Please tell me, Officer, that you're not standing at the side of the road with this guy pointing a gun at you."

"Oh, no. It's nothing like that."

"Well, good. Anything else I can do for you?"

"Not a thing." Molly disconnected.

She would make one more phone call, she decided. She looked at her watch. It wasn't quite five o'clock yet. Ralph would still be at his desk.

She'd dated Ralph Bunderling once, eighteen months ago. He was a probation officer. He was the kind of man who normally went for lady cops. Not a Danny Gates kind of man. She'd known better, she chided herself. She'd known from the start, when her stomach had somersaulted and she hadn't been able to get her air, she'd known that a man like Danny coming on to a woman like her was just...well, flat-out too good to be true.

He was the bad-boy-hero type and she was no big-breasted bimbo. She was a woman who was a whole lot smarter than to get goofy-eyed over an ex-con.

"Damn it." Molly dropped her forehead briefly against the desk.

Ralph was more her speed. Ralph and his kind adored her. Ralph was quiet, timid—basically spineless. He craved an authority figure in his life. Maybe it was her badge, or maybe it was her stubborn strength or her nonstop mouth, as Beau Maguire had said earlier. Maybe it was even the fact that her physical attributes were all—to her way of thinking—just a tad on the side of average. Either way, the Ralph Bunderlings of the world flocked to her while the Danny Gateses...well, the ones who didn't have records just pretty much ignored her.

She'd let Ralph down gently so he was glad to hear her voice when he picked up his line. "Molly! It's been a long time."

"I know. I'm sorry. I've been very busy. Listen, I need a quick run on a Social. I'm on the city's clock right now." She winced a little at the inferred lie.

"Certainly. Absolutely. Anything. Just read it to me."

Molly did. She could hear Ralph's fingers clicking on the computer keys in the background.

"Got him," Ralph said. "Daniel Gates. He was released today, parole for good behavior after six years. He ran a basketball program at the prison. He's not part of my caseload. The parole department has him."

"What did he do?"

"Armed robbery."

Her stomach wanted to heave. She pressed a hand to it.

"Oh, now, here's something interesting," Ralph continued. "His parole officer got him a job at that rec center you help out at. Hey, he's living there, too."

"No kidding."

"You'll keep him on the straight-and-narrow, Molly. I have faith in you."

"Thanks," she said hollowly. "Anything else?"

"Well, they finally got him on the convenience store holdup but prior to that he had a rap sheet going back to the time he was eleven. Those were just loitering and vagrancy charges when he was a

kid, though. You know how it is, they don't want to go home for the night, they hang out somewhere else. And good cops like you get them."

"Like me. Right."

"By his late teens, he was already wrapped up with the Mercados."

"The Mercados?" How much worse could this get? Her head spun. "Any charges there?"

"No, none. It's just in his backup bio. A rumored association is what we call it. He was clean from his last vagrancy charge at sixteen until six years ago when he held up the store."

"Thanks, Ralph. That's what I needed to know." She fumbled her thumb over her phone buttons, disconnecting, and stood unsteadily from Ron's desk. Then the door opened.

The ill-fitting clothes he'd worn earlier—prison issue, she understood now—were gone. Danny stood there, the doorknob in one hand, those dangerous dark eyes of his steady on hers. He wore navy-blue gym shorts and a T-shirt emblazoned with—of all things!—TEXAS A & M.

These clothes fit. Nicely. He must have gone shopping, she thought inanely.

"Great legs," she said hoarsely, trying to smile.

He ignored that. "You really put in the hours here, don't you... Officer?"

So he knew she was a cop. He must have done some digging on her, too. It made absolutely no sense that that should please her, especially under these new circumstances.

Molly licked her lips. "That's me. Dedicated. Ron called me and asked me to stop by to... ah... check on something."

"Something like me?"

He noticed that she had the good grace to flush. Her gaze slid away. A cop. Damn it, it still burned at him two hours later.

The law had been his enemy for too many years. He might be starting over with a clean slate, but damned if he wanted to snuggle up to a narrow-minded, handcuff-toting police officer who wouldn't know a guy was being set up if the proof jumped up and bit her on the nose. And he had been thinking about snuggling up to her. Life had been starting to look good for a little while there. That was the pity of it.

"Were you with Mission Creek six years ago?" he asked sharply, then he heard his own question and fought off the urge to wince. What difference did it make?

"No," she said stiffly. "I was in Laredo back then."

"Were you a cop there, too?"

She nodded.

"Got it in your blood, have you?"

It drove into her heart like a knife. "No. It didn't start out that way." Mickey had changed everything.

So she hadn't been one of those in that interrogation room with him six years ago, Danny thought. They hadn't heard a word of explanation he gave, just stared at him with contempt in their eyes. Then again, he'd known she hadn't been a part of that. There was something about her... something vibrant and vital and worn stubbornly on her sleeve. He'd have remembered her, Danny knew, if she had been there.

"What are the odds that you'll end your involvement with this place?" he asked evenly.

She brought her chin up. "Because of you?" She gave a little snorting laugh. "Slim and none."

"That's what I thought. But I don't want to cross paths with you."

"Finally we agree on something." And he couldn't leave the center, at least not without seriously ticking off his parole officer, she thought. Whatever else he was, he didn't seem stupid.

"Then here's how we're going to do this," he said. "From now on, you just stay on your side of the gym and I'll stay on mine. I changed my mind. I don't like you after all."

She fought the hurt. "No problem."

"Good."

“Good,” she repeated.

“And stop running my name through the system. You won’t find anything else. There wasn’t a hell of a lot there to start with.”

“I didn’t—” But she had to break off. She couldn’t lie.

“Points for honesty, Officer.” His grin was feral. “Unfortunately, you started in the hole.” He left her and slammed the door hard behind him. Molly sank back down into Ron’s chair. For some reason she felt ashamed. Like she’d been narrow-minded and she’d misjudged him. But that was insane. How badly could you misjudge someone who had held up a convenience store? How badly could you misjudge someone who had been associated with the mob—the same mob her task force was looking into for the bombing?

Molly shot to her feet again, angry now, at herself and at him. She left Ron’s office without even glancing over her shoulder at the gym, but the steady thump of Danny’s basketball followed her.

Within twenty-four hours, Molly had decided two things. Dressing for success with the task force was a total waste of time because no one wanted her there, anyway. And Danny never seemed to leave the rec center. At least, that damn yellow car of his never moved.

She woke early on Tuesday morning, thinking to get a good start on the day. The telephone rang just as she was leaving her apartment. It was Ralph Bunderling asking for another date. She’d probably given him renewed hope with her phone call last night. Molly declined politely.

At least the rain had stopped, she thought, stepping outside. Because she wore flats today, her ankle didn’t turn when she stepped on the newspaper. She took a breath, grabbed it from the walkway and looked up. The sky was that cool winter blue that came in February even to southern Texas, and the sun was big and...

Lemony.

“He just moved right in on my turf,” she complained aloud. “And Ron not only let him, he enabled him.”

She realized that she was talking to herself again.

“Well, spinsters talk to themselves. I read that somewhere. They do it a lot. They talk to themselves, and they talk to their cats.” How old did one have to be to officially become a spinster? The term brought to mind doddering virgins in their eighties, she thought as she headed for her car. But times had changed. In current lingo it would probably define a thirty-year-old unmarried woman who had scarcely had more than three consecutive dates with the same man in her entire life.

She decided to drive past the rec center first. If Danny was gone, she’d stop and chat for a while with whatever kids were there. It didn’t matter that it was a weekday and the high school was in session at ten o’clock in the morning. Lester had already dropped out, and the attendance of the others was spotty in spite of the volunteers’ best efforts. Molly wondered how Danny expected them to play for a high school team when half of them already had one foot out that door.

“That’s his problem, not mine.” She slowed down as she approached the center. His car was still there. “Jerk. Store-robbing, gun-wielding, mobster jerk.” Why’d he have to go and rob that store, anyway? Why couldn’t he just have been a nice guy?

Because spinsters had notoriously bad luck where men were concerned, she answered herself. He’d seemed to be flirting with her and he looked good enough to eat, so something had to be wrong with him.

All she’d ever asked for was a man who could match her, stride for stride, she thought, driving on. Someone who wouldn’t back down from her and let her wear the pants all the time. Someone who could make her skin heat with a glance. Someone whose kiss didn’t leave her wondering what was on television later that night.

Someone with all that who didn’t have a record.

The full task force was in the war room when she arrived. They were having a meeting.

She hadn't been informed. Molly felt a dull flush creep up her neck, but she forced herself to stride confidently to the first vacant chair she could find. They had all been lined up in rows for the occasion.

"Hi, Chief." She sat and wiggled her fingers at Ben Stone. "I said I'd do this on my own time. I didn't say you ought to start without me."

Stone's head moved as though his gaze had turned her way, but that was the only acknowledgment she got. He stood in one corner of the room, near the coffee table, taking up space between that and the American flag. She couldn't see his eyes because of the cowboy hat he wore.

Spence Harrison, the district attorney, stood beside him at the end of the table. Molly's glance flicked that way and she caught a quick smile touch the man's mouth. His brown eyes were clear and direct on her for a moment before they cut to Chief Stone. "I wasn't aware that Officer French had joined our ranks."

Stone shrugged without actually responding. One of the task-force cops made a disparaging sound in his throat. Harrison lifted a brow at him, then he focused back on Molly. "Welcome aboard."

"Thank you."

"To sum up, I'm still liking the Mercados for this, predominantly because nothing points away from them," he said, obviously picking up from where he'd been when she'd entered the room.

Translation, Molly thought, he likes them because we don't have anything else.

"But I'm very concerned with our lack of progress," Harrison continued. "If we don't catch a break soon, I'm thinking we're going to have to go outside our area for expert help. The lack of evidence so far indicates a professional job. It tells me that we're dealing with someone who is used to committing crimes and covering his or her tracks afterward."

"Like the mob," one of the detectives suggested.

"That's one scenario," Harrison agreed enigmatically.

Now what did that mean? It was an interesting comment, Molly thought. It seemed to indicate that he had another scenario in mind. But whatever it was, he obviously wasn't going to share it with the task force.

Everyone was standing to leave. Molly stood, as well, but she stayed behind as the others dispersed. She noticed that more paperwork had been added to the crime book table and that no one had done a thing about organizing it since she'd left yesterday. No wonder they weren't getting anywhere. How could Chief Stone even monitor this investigation if nothing was in place?

She started to move a chair back to that table, then she realized that Spence Harrison hadn't left. She gave him a crooked smile. "Joe Gannon seems to think it's my Laredo connection, but maybe it's because I'm a woman. What you think?"

"You mean why they cut you out?" He was replacing papers to his briefcase and didn't look up at her.

"Actually, I sort of cut myself in."

Again, he gave that fleeting grin. "It's an old-boy network. I'll make sure you're notified of the next meeting."

"Thanks." Molly wondered how much she could trust him. Her gut instincts told her that neither Harrison nor Joe Gannon minded her being involved here. She decided to find out. She was a pretty good judge of people and their reactions to things she said. "You know, something's been bothering me."

The district attorney finally glanced up. "What's that?"

"It's Ed Bancroft. Why didn't they take away his belt and shoelaces when they put him into that holding cell? Who booked him?"

"Joe Gannon."

She noticed that Harrison didn't have to consult anything in his briefcase for the answer. Molly nodded. She'd already known it, too, but she was going somewhere with this.

“And he relieved him of all his potentially deadly possessions at the time,” Harrison continued. Molly took a deep breath. “Okay. So Bancroft had a friend who brought him the belt. And by association, Malloy probably had some friends, too.”

“It’s a safe guess.”

“I wonder if these friends have any more associates...within the department.”

“You’re a good cop, Molly. You’ve got to know there are also bad ones.”

There, it was out on the table, she thought. It was what she had been fishing for—support for her only theory. Malloy and Bancroft had friends in bad places—and if they did, then it was entirely possible that other cops did as well.

There had just been too many at that bombing scene, she thought again.

“For what it’s worth,” she said finally, “I like the Mercado angle for this, too. Who else could they have been hooked up with?” She refused to think of Danny when she said it.

“The Mercados are our resident bad guys,” Harrison agreed. He snapped the locks on his briefcase.

He left and Molly sat down at the crime book desk, rubbing her forehead. It was nice to know that someone as powerful as Spence Harrison didn’t think she was nuts for her theory. But she still had questions. Who had supplied Bancroft with the belt he’d looped around his neck? Had Bancroft requested it? Or had someone convinced him that he wanted it?

Molly rose from the table suddenly. She left the war room and went to the records department.

Ten minutes later she had a copy of the official visitors log from the cell area for the day Bancroft had been brought in. She ran down the list of the man’s visitors as she stood in the corridor. Some list. She was the only one on it.

No attorney? Why hadn’t Bancroft called for legal counsel? Those sharks could be counted on to show up before the key turned in the lock.

She hadn’t supplied Bancroft with the belt. Therefore, Molly thought, someone else had visited Bancroft without being signed in. Which meant that whoever had been on desk duty that day hadn’t made an issue of the belt-carrying visitor. Whoever had been on the desk had just waved the visitor in. Because it was another cop?

Her stomach shifted. She’d have to check with personnel to find out who had worked the holding cell area during that shift.

She already knew from the autopsy report that Bancroft hadn’t been dead long when she’d found him. She’d gotten him down and had started CPR herself, to no avail. Bancroft had still been warm. His mysterious visitor could have been there within half an hour of her own sign-in.

Molly started to head back to the war room, then she hesitated. Don’t do it, don’t do it, an inner voice warned her. She stepped back into the records room. “I also need the file on a six-year-old convenience store hold-up.”

“Got a number? An exact date?” the clerk asked. She was a pretty, lithe, young blonde named Gale Howard. Most of the guys loved her.

“No, just a name. Daniel Gates.”

“I should be able to find it. Hold on,” Gale said. “Sign another request for me and I’ll go look.”

And stop running my name through the system. Danny’s voice shot back into Molly’s mind like acid, seeming to singe the edges of everything it touched. “Go away,” she said aloud. “Get out of my head. You’re messing with my kids at that center. I have a right to know.”

“Were you talking to yourself?” Gale asked, returning with the file.

“Uh, no. Well, not really.” Molly took the file and stepped away from the desk.

At some point or other, the store-robbing, gun-wielding, mobster jerk would have to leave the center, she decided, returning outside to her car. He couldn’t stay there twenty-four hours a day, could he? She decided to swing by the place again.

His car was still in her space. That was when Molly got her brainstorm. She went back to the police station and found Joe Gannon in the detective's bureau. She told him what she needed. She could do it herself, but she would probably be questioned by the brass over it.

"What's this about?" he asked, scowling.

"I volunteer there."

"Yeah, I've heard that. But that's not a no-parking zone, is it?"

"Not unless we decide to make it one."

"On what grounds?"

Molly thought about it. "That building is a firetrap."

"Close to it, but it must have passed code or the fire department would have shut them down a long time ago."

Ron was going to kill her for this. Still, principle was principle. And she wouldn't be able to park there anymore, either, would she? Plus, it really would make the building safer. "We should probably have a clear path to the front door for...you know, firefighters. Just in case."

"What the hell are you up to?" Gannon was staring at her as though trying to find the answer in her eyes, then he scratched his temple. "Okay. Who cares? I've got bigger fish to fry."

"So do I. I just want to start with the minnows."

"You're going to owe me for this."

"I always pay my debts, Joe."

"A six-pack. Any import."

"Consider it done."

He nodded, then he called in the tow order for the ugly lemon Dodge in front of the rec center. "I'll have a temporary No-Parking sign there by nightfall."

Chapter 3

It didn't seem possible to Danny that seventeen kids in any given city in modern America could not own gym shoes. Granted, the rec center families were mostly impoverished. But Anita's tattoo, Cia's leather and Lester's boots had all cost money, so the kids were finding it somewhere.

He was being played for a chump, Danny decided. And where had these other eleven kids' names come from, anyway? There'd only been six teenagers here yesterday.

"You," he said to Jerome, "had sneaks on yesterday." He sat at Ron Glover's desk facing the boy who stood on the other side of it.

"They got stole last night."

"Stolen."

"What, now you're an English teacher?"

"Whatever I have to be, pal, to get you into college."

That broke Jerome up. "Me? Yeah, right."

"You. Right." Danny looked down at the handwritten list. At least the kids had sent Jerome back with it. That was something. Actually, it was more than he had hoped for. "Okay, here's the deal."

"I don't do deals, man."

He caught the boy's gaze and held it. "My guess is that you do deals every day, just not with the likes of me. Now where was I? Right. I'm going to leave here and buy gym shoes for everybody who was here yesterday. These other eleven kids—whoever they hell they are—are going to have to make an appearance and personally request their own pair—after they've practiced with us at least five times." In the meantime, Danny realized, he was going to have to try his hand at a little fund-raising. They'd need uniforms, too, and various other equipment, not all of which could come out of his limited bank account.

"Man, that's lame," Jerome complained.

Danny stood from the desk.

"Hey, what did you do time for, anyway?" the boy asked suddenly. "You didn't tell us."

Danny paused on his way to the door. He'd known it was coming and had already determined to be honest with these kids. He had a halfhearted hope that some of them might learn from his experience. "Money," he told him. "They said I stole money."

Jerome didn't bat an eye. "Yeah, so you got plenty, right? You can buy us all shoes."

"If I had money to buy you all shoes, would I be driving that scrap of metal out there at the curb?"

"Ain't no scrap of metal there now, dude."

"Sure, there is. Right out front."

"Uh-uh. No more."

Then, somehow, Danny knew.

He shot around the desk, opening Ron's office door hard enough and fast enough to make it crack against the wall like a gunshot. He heard Jerome laughing behind him as he jogged outside.

His car was gone.

Danny drove his fist against a stop sign. The metal clanged. Then he realized that he was still holding the piece of paper with the shoe sizes. Swearing, he shoved it down into his jeans pocket and headed back to the center to call—again—for a cab.

He was going to kill her.

When Molly arrived at the center at two o'clock, the space in front of the center walkway was vacant. There was a no-parking sign there. She grinned to herself and started scouting around the block for another space. She found the Dodge around the first corner, deliberately taking up two spaces, half in each of them. Her grin vanished.

Oh, baby, this was war.

She had to park two blocks away this time. Molly locked her Camaro and headed back to the rec center on foot. She found Danny in the gym.

There were fifteen to twenty kids with him today. She'd never seen so many kids here at once in the whole two years she'd volunteered. What was he doing? Paying them to play basketball with him? She stalked across the court and approached the knot of them.

Danny looked up at her. "Good afternoon, Officer."

"Same to you." Then she added under her breath, "Inmate."

He heard her. "Not anymore." He nodded at the far basket. "Your end of the court is down that way."

"It's wherever I want it to be."

"No, actually, that rule changed yesterday right around five o'clock. Now I'm assigning you one."

He'd caught her in Ron's office at five o'clock, Molly thought. She felt her temper spike even as her stomach squirmed with guilt. "No one promoted you to director of this place."

"Nope. No one did."

"Then I'd say rule making is a little out of your job description." Where were the kids going? she wondered. A quick glance around told her that they were all easing back to the other end of the gym. "Her" end. Were they choosing up sides, determining to stick with her against him? Molly started to smile at that prospect then she noticed that Jerome and Fisk, Cia, Lester and Anita were all wearing new gym shoes. Cia wore hers with rolled-up white socks beneath a stretchy, skin-tight red skirt.

Molly picked out Bobby J. standing at the edge of the gym, watching the others the way he usually did. He wasn't wearing new shoes. They sat on the floor beside him, still in the box.

"In any society, there tends to be a hierarchy," Danny said.

She turned back to him quickly, her eyes narrowing.

"Hierarchy? Good word. You know, I'd heard they were starting to educate you guys in prison." The barb hit its mark. She could tell by his face, and she almost felt ashamed of herself.

He shot a basket then jogged and caught the ball back. He was wearing a sleeveless T-shirt today. A muscle shirt. And he had the muscles to go with it. Really incredible muscles, she thought. His upper arms were corded, solid, and the sight made her wonder what it would feel like to have them around her.

Molly pressed her fingers to her temples. He was an ex-con. She was losing her mind.

"Hierarchy implies a sort of a totem pole effect," he continued, dribbling. "First comes the director. Then there are the paid employees. Oh, wait. Let me rephrase that. Paid employee. There's only one of us here, isn't there?"

Molly glared at him.

"Then we have the bottom dwellers. They would be the volunteers. Are you following me here, pretty Molly? I think so. Those dazzling green eyes of yours are shooting sparks."

Real anger shot through her. "Fran and Plank give generously—" Then she broke off and made a funny little sound in her throat.

Startled, Danny stopped playing with the basketball to look at her. Was she blushing? Why? Because he'd said she had dazzling eyes? She was a cop. She couldn't be so naive and innocent that she couldn't take a little pure male appreciation in stride. The possibility had something tightening suddenly across his chest. The effect started to spread to other regions before he clamped down on it.

Danny turned and shot the ball through the hoop again. "I admire all of you who donate your time here. All this is just an abject lesson on the authority-chain around here. And, no, they didn't teach me words like abject in prison. I was actually a pretty good student. Before."

Molly waited for him to say something else about before, then she realized that he wasn't going to. She might have asked, but then he'd probably think she was interested or something.

“Bite me,” she grated.

“Oh, honey, I wouldn’t give you the pleasure.”

He turned back in time to see her face actually flame this time. That tightening-effect started to hit his body again, then it was doused by pure surprise. Danny dropped the ball, and it hit his foot, rebounding and rolling away.

“You lost something there, jock.” She looked smug now.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“About so big, round?” She held her hands up as though to grasp the basketball.

“Not the same something I was just thinking of.” He let his gaze coast up and down her deliberately.

It happened again, he realized. She had the most transparent face of any woman he’d ever met. But at the moment, Molly French’s heart was stamped all over her face. His innuendoes were really getting to her.

He took a step closer to her. She actually surprised him by holding her ground this time. One of her heels seemed to shift, but she stayed put.

“Get out of my space,” she warned. “Back off.”

“Molly, this is my half of the gym. I can step wherever I please. Volunteer...” He poked her gently on the chest, right beneath her collarbone. This time she jumped back skittishly. Then he tapped his own chest. “Employee. And by the way, volunteer, you owe me eighty bucks.”

“For what?” she asked, startled.

“That’s what it cost me to get my car out of the tow lot.”

“Your car got towed?”

She blinked with feigned innocence. He wanted to close his mouth over hers and take that smirk right off her lips, swallow it deep, keep it for his own. That rattled him. The suddenness of the urge had him stepping back of his own accord. “Get off my court.”

“You’re going to teach basketball now?”

“You got it.”

“To whom? May I watch?”

“I—” He broke off and looked down at the other end of the gym.

Five of the kids from yesterday remained. They were all sitting beneath the basket, watching them, their new shoes gleaming white in the overhead lights. Bobby J.—and all the rest of them—had vanished.

“Damn it,” Danny swore. “Now see what you’ve done? You chased off my kids!”

Molly turned away with a quick little twitch of her hips. God help him, but he noticed. How could any woman look that good in khakis? He hated khakis. And loafers. She wore loafers that were clicking their hard little heels all over the floor he’d polished late into the night. She was a genuine handcuff-toting, law-abiding priss. With really great hips. He wondered what she’d look like in Cia’s leather.

He watched her sit down among the kids beneath the other basket. A few minutes later she and Anita peeled off from the rest of the group and went outside. Danny took a deep breath and walked toward the rest of them.

“Back to basketball.”

“It’s going to be a little bit of a walk,” Molly apologized as she and Anita turned the corner onto the next block.

“Where’s your car?”

“In Ethiopia.”

“How come?”

Suddenly her mother’s voice filled her head, something about cutting off her nose to spite her face. Molly’s mother had been full of axioms, bless her soul.

Linda Lee French's heart hadn't given out until she was fifty-two. Which was a miracle, Molly had always thought, given her mother's life. She'd raised two children on her own—one of which hadn't been able to stay on the right side of the law to save his life, literally. She cleaned houses day and night, taking in enough extra seamstress work that Molly couldn't remember her ever not having some piece of fabric in her hands. Any men she'd attracted after Molly's father had run out on them had always seemed more interested in having Linda Lee support them than the other way around. And she'd always done it, generously, hopefully, until each of them left her high and dry. Finally, at fifty-two, all her hope had run out.

"The fire department decided they needed direct access to the front door of the center," Molly explained, her heart cringing a little at the lie.

Anita laughed. "You're a cop, not a fireman."

Molly looked at her sharply. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Danny said you did it."

He'd told the kids that? "What else did he say?"

"He said you did it because you're hot for him."

Molly choked as she unlocked her car door. "That's not true."

"Yeah. Whatever. Happens to all of us, right?"

Molly grabbed the drugstore bag out of her passenger seat. It held a pregnancy test and a box of condoms. "But most of us take precautions."

"I knew you were going to get around to a lecture."

She pushed the bag into Anita's hands. "Just listen to me for a minute. Please."

The girl rolled her eyes but she took the bag.

"You are a special, intelligent human being. You don't need to let some guy paw you just to prove that to him."

"Cia—"

"Forget Cia. This is about you." Molly took a deep breath and plunged in. They hated it when she talked to them this way. "When they're pawing you, most guys aren't thinking about how special you are. Most guys are just thinking about themselves. If you sacrifice yourself—your life—to that, you're only betraying yourself." And because she knew Anita would probably do it, anyway, she'd bought the condoms. "There's more to this than just pregnancy, Anita. There's HIV and all kinds of other nasties out there. So try to make sure of who you're with. Make sure of where he's been and try to find out if he's that one guy who knows you're special. I promise you, he's out there. And even then, even when you find him, promise me you'll use what I put in that bag."

Anita opened the top, peeked into it and groaned.

Molly cleared her throat. "I put a pregnancy test in there, too. Can you pull that off at home without anyone knowing, or do you want to spend the night at my place?"

The gratitude in the girl's eyes wrenched Molly's heart. "I can do it at home. My dad's hardly ever there." Molly knew Anita's mother had died years ago of a drug overdose.

"Okay, then let me know. Whatever the result, we'll take it from there. I'll help you, Anita, all I can."

"Thanks." Anita started to turn away. Then she looked back over her shoulder. "I'm really scared, Molly."

Molly couldn't tell her not to be. She just nodded. Then, when Anita was several strides down the street, she stopped her again. "By the way, where'd the new gym shoes come from?"

Anita turned to walk backward, looking down at her feet. "Coach," she said, glancing up again.

Coach? He'd been here twenty-four hours, Molly thought, as something tried to choke her, and already he was Coach? "The rec center doesn't have that kind of money!"

"He paid for them his own self. He robbed a bank, you know."

“He did not! It was a convenience store!” What had he told these impressionable kids, anyway? Molly felt herself moving, taking a step back toward the center, ready to take another strip off his hide. Then she realized that Anita was laughing.

“I knew that,” the girl said. “I just wanted to find out if you did.”

Molly let out her breath and slumped back against her car.

She really, really hated him.

Molly dragged herself home at 12:20 in the morning, bone tired. She tossed her uniform cap on her bed, dragged the scrunchie from her hair and dug her fingers into her curls. When her hair sprang free in her hands, she blew it out of her eyes.

The small of her back hurt from where a teenage behemoth—not one of her rec center kids, thank heaven—had gouged her with his knee as she had wrestled with him on a very hard sidewalk. He’d been higher than a kite. He was in a holding cell now. It broke her heart. But even worse was the fact that suddenly she was getting all the dangerous and waste-of-time calls thrown her way—and she didn’t even have a partner on this shift yet. She had to wonder if it was her comeuppance for having squeezed her way onto the task force.

She undressed and found a T-shirt in her drawer, this one sporting the logo of the Dallas Cowboys. She hadn’t worn her Texas A & M shirt since Danny had turned up in an almost identical one. Danny again. She shook her head. Why couldn’t she get him off her mind? Because he was an enigma, she decided, going into the bathroom to brush her teeth.

Because—damn it—he wasn’t what an ex-con was supposed to be.

She’d known her share. She’d put in her time and she’d met the best and the worst the world had to offer. Danny just didn’t have that same sly glide to his eyes.

Didn’t mean a thing, she told herself, staring at her reflection in the glass. There were exceptions to every rule.

Why was he coming on to her? she wondered with her next breath. Because he definitely was.

Molly took a step back from the glass, eyeing herself critically. Okay, she was cute. Curly brown hair, big green eyes—they were good, but not dazzling—and that dusting of freckles over her nose. But there was nothing especially worth coming on to there, at least not for an ex-mobster who had probably had more than his fair share of exotic, olive-skinned women with come-hither eyes over the years.

Okay, she admitted, so that bothered her. Danny Gates was a hero-type hunk and if his past was any indication, he’d probably been around with the best womankind had to offer. It went with the territory. She couldn’t compete with that. She shouldn’t even want to. And she didn’t. Of course she didn’t. But for some reason, it made her feel so sad.

Molly went back to her bed. Beside her uniform cap, which she picked up and placed on her dresser, was the file she had gotten out of records hours ago. She went to the kitchen for a can of soda pop, then came back and curled up in bed with the file. She told herself again that she owed it to her kids to know exactly what Danny had done—and to convince Ron Glover to let him go if need be. If he posed any danger whatsoever—outside of the bad influence that Ron Glover had obviously already overlooked—she’d drag him off that gym floor bodily.

She read, and twenty minutes later she had enough of a headache to get up again and go looking for some aspirin.

Not much of the police report made sense. The store Danny had robbed had been way the heck north on Mission Creek Road, halfway to Lone Star Highway, actually beyond the city’s jurisdiction. That was the first odd thing. The sheriff had tossed the case to the Mission Creek boys but there was no record of why. Still, she could have lived with that, it was the only oddity.

What bothered her most was the fact that Danny had been picked up on the opposite end of Mission Creek Road—within the city limits—seventeen minutes after the 911 call had come in from the convenience store. Was it even possible to drive from the Mission Ridge area—which was just

west of Mission Creek Road where the store had been held up—to a point south of Gulf Road inside of seventeen minutes? It was, she thought, if you had the pedal to the floor. And according to the police report Danny had been driving a spiffy, presumably horsepower-endowed Lexus at the time. But was it possible to drive that distance in seventeen minutes and add a small side trip even farther to the south and a jog to the west where his condo had been located? Because that was what he would have had to do to deposit the stolen money there. The 911 call had come in at 2:12 in the afternoon. He'd been picked up at 2:29. The stolen money was located almost simultaneously in his bottom dresser drawer by other investigative officers because, lo and behold, the convenience store owner had known Danny's name and had bleated it out like a frightened lamb the minute the first cops had arrived on the scene. They'd dispatched another unit directly to Danny's address, and that unit had discovered the money.

How neat. How convenient. Except...

For that to be possible, Danny would have had to leave the Mission Ridge area, drive all the way to his condo to dump the stash he'd taken, and then for some reason he would have headed north and east again before the cops had picked him up. Oh, and one other interesting thing, she thought. He would have had to make an inexplicable U-turn on Mission Creek Road in the process because by that time, when the cruiser had nabbed him, he'd been heading back home.

At least he'd said he'd been heading home. Maybe he'd lied. Cons did lie.

Why hadn't he called for a lawyer? Maybe that just bothered her because Ed Bancroft hadn't done it, either. An awful lot of guys these days were going down without a fight, Molly thought.

Why hadn't anyone noted the discrepancy in the direction Danny had been traveling? Where had he really been heading home from—especially since he had presumably just left his condo after dropping the cash?

The Mercado compound was right off Mission Creek Road, she thought, between the convenience store and the location where Danny had been picked up. If Danny had been driving home from there, he would have been traveling in the correct direction.

Molly got back into bed and set the file carefully on her bedside table. Well, well, well, she thought as she turned her light off. Another smelly fish in the desert.

"I've figured it out. You were framed."

Danny barely heard her. He was too transfixed by what he found when he came downstairs from his apartment and set foot in the gym on Wednesday afternoon.

First of all, there was an open library book on the floor in the middle of the court. The regular kids were standing back a way and watching Molly skeptically. Some of the newcomers had returned, as well. Four or five of them were lined up on the side of the court next to Bobby.

"What the hell are you doing?" Danny demanded.

"Playing basketball."

"You're not playing basketball. You're bouncing around on your toes and occasionally looking down at that book. What's that book?"

"You were framed. Either you're too stupid to realize it or too stupid to care."

"I cared."

"You didn't do anything about it."

"I want to talk about basketball."

"Well, I don't." She stopped bouncing and faced him, planting her hands on her hips.

Those hips, Danny thought. What he could see of them today left his mouth dry. She wore spandex leggings. There was a great deal of rolled-down sock at her ankles and...she wore new high tops. She also wore a black sports bra, and he liked it a whole lot better than Cia's.

Every sweet curve of her was outlined in nice, tight black.

"You can't learn basketball from a book," he said stubbornly, trying to keep his mind off the way she looked. "That book is about basketball, isn't it? Some sort of in-ten-easy-lessons kind of thing? Basketball for dummies?"

"It's very informative." Molly sniffed. "And I can learn anything from reading. For instance, I learned a great deal from reading your crime file."

"You read my file? I told you to stop digging up dirt on me! Damn it, stop bouncing!" She was jiggling in place. Oh, yeah, she definitely jiggled.

"I just warmed up. I want to stay that way." She thrust her chin toward him. "Warming up is important. The book says so. I want to stay loose."

"You're loose as a goose. And you don't need to be. This is my basketball team."

"Are you guys talking about his record or our game?" Cia called out from behind Molly.

"We're talking about his record," Molly said.

"We're talking about her bouncing," Danny said.

"Oh, man, I want to up my ante," said Fisk.

Danny stalked over to the library book and snatched it up off the floor. "This is a joke."

"Why didn't you defend yourself when they brought you in for questioning?" she countered.

"Why didn't you call a lawyer?"

"It wouldn't have done me a damned bit of good. Get off my court."

"No. Not until you explain." She grabbed the book back from his hand.

"What's it to you?"

"Maybe I just want leverage to use against you."

If it meant he could part ways with that spandex, then Danny thought it might be worth it. He couldn't look at her like this. Couldn't. She was a cop. "Come with me," he said shortly.

"Where?"

"To Ron's office."

"Why?"

"Stop with the questions for once, will you? Follow me. You want to talk? Fine. We'll do it in private." He was damned if he was going to give the kids more of a show.

He was halfway across the court before he sensed rather than saw her fall into step behind him. He stalked angrily through the vestibule and waited by the office door. When she passed through it, he slammed it shut behind her and went to the other side of the desk to keep space between them.

"We have a serious power struggle going on here," he said.

Molly leaned her back against the door. "I was here first."

"You're not going to get rid of me. I don't care how many times you tow my car. Regardless of my parole terms, it was my decision to be here."

Somewhere along the line, she had started to realize that, and it made Molly feel small.

"I'm not going anywhere," he said again, sitting in Ron's chair. He laced his fingers behind his head. The muscles in his upper arms flexed. Molly felt her throat go a little tight. "They're my kids," she said finally.

"Well, now they're mine, too."

Okay, so he had bought half of them gym shoes. "Let's just say I accept that...since I have no choice. What's your point?"

"We had an opposite-ends-of-the-gym agreement. This did not include you bringing library books onto center court."

She tossed the book on Ron's desk. The cover said Learning The Basics of Basketball, pretty much as he had expected.

"Maybe I'm willing to concede that you have a point about getting these kids on school teams," she said. "A weak point, but a point just the same."

That surprised him. He didn't want her to be open-minded. He especially didn't want her to be open-minded for the sake of the kids. It made him like her too much. "Then let me handle it. I know basketball. You don't. There are other areas where you can help."

"Such as?"

Damn it, he thought. Double damn it. She had both her hands wrapped around the doorknob at her back. It made her breasts thrust toward him. "I'm thinking."

"That might be a stretch for someone who allowed the police to frame him."

"Shut it off, Molly. You know nothing about that."

"I'm trying to."

"To what? Shut your mouth down? Yeah, I can see where that might be difficult."

"I'm trying to figure out why anyone would let themselves go to jail without a fight."

"It's none of your business!" he shouted. She had a way of seriously getting to him. He scrubbed a hand over his jaw. "All right, let's calm down here."

"I'm perfectly calm."

"Yeah, well, you are unless I decide to move in on your space. You get pretty shaken up whenever I get too close."

"That's ridiculous."

But he saw it happen again, that flush come to her skin. Today there was a lot more skin. There was all that pretty freckled expanse over the top of her sports bra and a stretch of midriff between the bottom of that and the top of her spandex leggings. She had a truly fantastic body.

He couldn't think like this. She was a cop.

Danny decided that he had gone too long without a woman. That was his problem. He made a mental note to remedy that little problem this very night.

He cleared his throat. "We...uh...need money. We need uniforms. We need the other cities to agree to play against us."

It took Molly a moment to bring her mind back to sports. Her heart was still thumping. She did not want to be affected by him this way—Mr. Mobster, Mr. Ex-Con. But, oh, there was something about him.

"What are you suggesting?" She rubbed goose bumps off her skin absently.

"That if you want to help, come in here tomorrow and get on the phone." Get rid of the spandex, he thought. It would also keep her out of his gym, out of his sight...off his mind.

"I might be willing to do that."

"You'd do anything to help these kids." It came out before he'd thought it through. And he knew he was right.

"Okay." She scraped curls off her forehead. "That takes care of your team. What about the fact that the cops framed you for armed robbery? Who really put that money in your condo?"

Now he understood why she'd given in so easily. She'd been placating him until she could turn the conversation back to where she wanted it to go. "Forget it," he growled. "The cops didn't do it. The mob did."

"And you let them?"

"I'm not willing to talk about this."

"I'll wear you down. I have that way about me."

"Tell me something I didn't already know."

She laughed. Then, for a moment, a deadly moment, they just grinned at each other. A little like...comrades.

Danny recovered first. He needed to fix that. Right now. He could shake her up, make her run, he reminded himself. Danny rose from the desk and closed the distance between them.

Molly tried to back up. With her back against the door, she had nowhere to go.

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