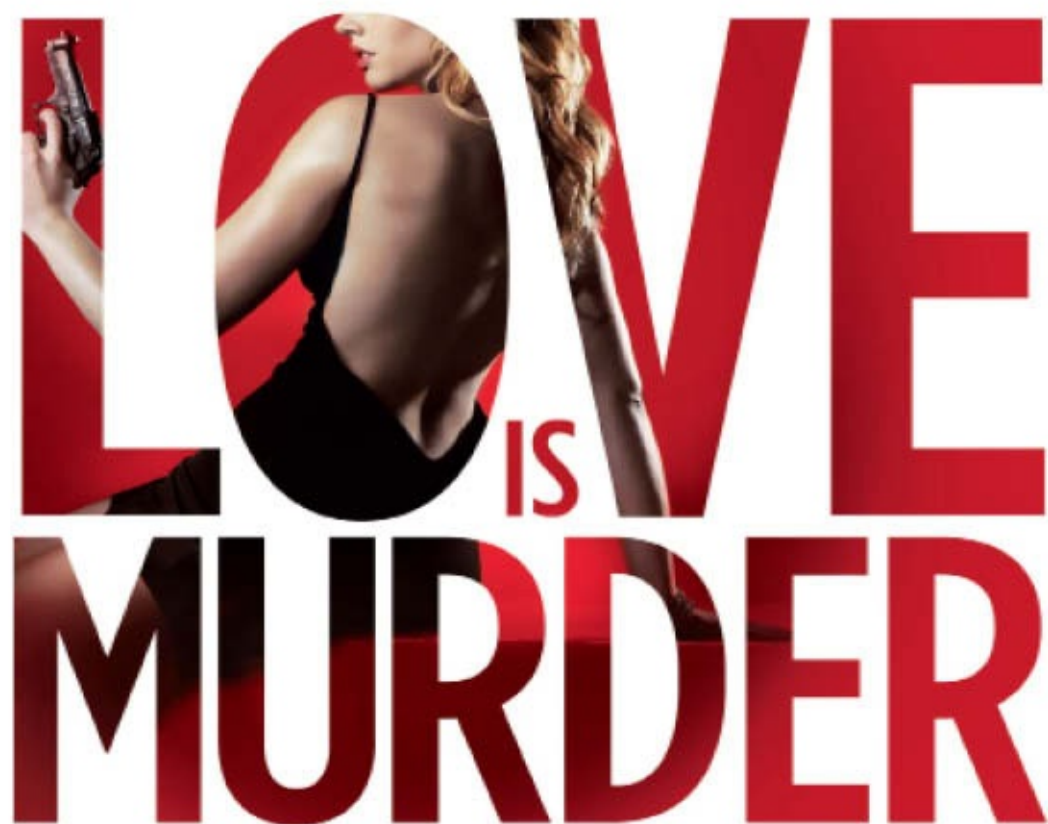

Edited by *New York Times* bestselling author

SANDRA BROWN

The title 'LOVE IS MURDER' is rendered in large, bold, red capital letters. The word 'LOVE' is on the top line, 'IS' is in the middle, and 'MURDER' is on the bottom line. A photograph of a woman in a black dress holding a handgun is integrated into the letters. The woman's face is partially visible in the 'O' of 'LOVE', her back is seen in the 'V', and her arm holding the gun is visible in the 'E'. The background of the image is red.

LOVE IS MURDER

LEE CHILD · SHERRILYN KENYON
HEATHER GRAHAM · ALLISON BRENNAN

HEART-POUNDING STORIES OF ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

Prepare for heart-racing suspense in this original collection by thirty of the hottest bestselling authors and new voices writing romance suspense today.

Go on vacation with Allison Brennan's Lucy Kincaid, where she saves a man from drowning, only to discover he is in far greater danger on land. Meet Roxanne St. Claire's "bullet catcher"—bodyguard Donovan Rush—who may have met his match in the sexually charged "Diamond Drop." Debut author William Simon shows us what happens when the granddaughter of the president of the United States is kidnapped. And Lee Child's pitch-perfect "I Heard a Romantic Story" puts a whole new spin on *Love Is Murder*.

Bodyguards, vigilantes, stalkers, serial killers, women (and men!) in jeopardy, cops, thieves, P.I.s, killers—these all-new stories will keep you thrilled and chilled late into the night.

* * *

Love Is Murder is the third Thriller anthology written exclusively by members of International Thriller Writers, Inc. Barely seven years old, ITW has a roster that reads like a who's who of thriller writing, with 1,635 members representing 28 countries worldwide and over three billion books in print. Headed by current copresidents Douglas Preston and Kathleen Antrim, its board of directors has included such notables as Lee Child, Tess Gerritsen, Steve Berry, James Rollins, M. J. Rose, Carla Neggers, Gayle Lynds, David Morrell and David Hewson. More information is available on the ITW website, www.thrillerwriters.org.

* * *

SANDRA BROWN

Sandra Brown is the author of sixty *New York Times* bestselling novels. Writing professionally since 1981, she has published more than seventy novels and has upward of eighty million copies of her books in print worldwide.

She holds an honorary doctorate of humane letters from Texas Christian University, and in 2008 she was named Thriller Master, the top award given by the International Thriller Writers Association. Other awards and commendations include the 2007 Texas Medal of Arts Award for Literature and a Romance Writers of America's Lifetime Achievement Award.

* * *

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~~On Thursday, April 21, 2011, Linda Jones and I lost our very dear friend Beverly Barton; it hurts so much to realize anew every day that her laughter has been stilled forever, and yet in a way, it hasn't. Her voice and her laughter live on in the words she wrote. Beverly loved the romance genre. She loved writing about love, and threw herself into her work with unbounded enthusiasm. I remember her emails to us when she was invited to join all these talented writers in the *Love Is Murder* anthology how happy she was, how excited about her story "Poisoned." So here's to you, Beverly. We love you~~

We miss you. And, damn, you could write!

—Linda Howard

Contents

[Foreward](#)

[Diamond Drop](#)

[Cold Moonlight](#)

[Poisoned](#)

[Speechless](#)

[Lockdown](#)

[Spider's Tango](#)

[Night Heat](#)

[B.A.D. Mission](#)

[Deadly Fixation](#)

[Hot Note](#)

[Last Shot](#)

[Grave Danger](#)

[Without Mercy](#)

[Even Steven](#)

[Dying to Score](#)

[The Number of Man](#)

[Hard Drive](#)

[After Hours](#)

[Blood In, Blood Out](#)

[Wed to Death](#)

[The Honeymoon](#)

[Execution Dock](#)

[In Atlantis](#)

[Break Even](#)

[Dirty Low Down](#)

[Broken Hallelujah](#)

[Holding Mercy](#)

[Vacation Interrupted](#)

[I Heard a Romantic Story](#)

[Author Biographies](#)

Foreward for *LOVE IS MURDER*

Before I could read, my parents read to me, so I don't recall a time in my life when I wasn't losing myself in fictional worlds. On Mother's and Daddy's knees, I cultivated a passion for make-believe. I grew up with books as a staple and libraries as a second home. Reading was my favorite pastime as a child, and it became an addictive habit I never outgrew.

I can't remember the first romantic suspense novel I read. It might have been *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier, or perhaps one of Mary Stewart's classic blends of mystery and romance, or Victoria Holt's sweeping, gothic tales. I read and reread them. They left me enthralled and wanting more... largely because so few authors were writing what we now call romantic suspense.

But those who did write in that vein, though few in number, wrote it well and had an enormous impact on my professional future. They entertained me, but I also learned from them and continue to try to live up to the standards they set. Helen MacInnes and Evelyn Anthony come to mind. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. One of the best cornerstone novels of the genre was Ken Follett's *Eye of the Needle*. On the surface one could say that neither these authors nor their books have anything in common. Not so. They contain terror tinged with romance. Or is it the other way around? That depends upon the writer, but both elements are in their work.

Romantic suspense is a combination of genres—and the mix is *potent*. Mysteries are puzzles that tease and test our minds. We experience an adrenaline rush from the high-stakes plots of thrillers. Romances remind us of the eternal power of love, honor and self-sacrifice. Stories of romantic suspense offer the best of all these. They give readers an exciting and emotional thrill ride that engages the mind, the heart and all the senses. Merging a rocky romance with a fast-paced thriller makes for a story that crackles with electricity.

The element of love ratchets up the stakes for the characters. It intensifies their motivations, increases the tension and heightens the suspense. When a person one cares about—lover, spouse, child—is in jeopardy, all else ceases to matter. Failure isn't an option. When what one stands to lose is the person most dear, terror is made manifold. But so are determination and courage.

This then is the essence of good storytelling—an individual overcoming incredible odds to save a loved one from peril. This is what makes romantic suspense satisfying on multiple levels.

And, lest I begin to sound too lofty, let's face it—danger can be a turn-on.

Love Is Murder is an anthology of short stories penned by some of our most popular romantic suspense authors. In addition, the anthology features stories by writers better known for their thrillers but who often incorporate into their books the relationship layering that is the trademark of traditional romantic suspense.

Also included are three stories that were selected from more than sixty blind submissions—D. P. Lyle's vigilante story "Even Steven"; Jim Macomber's domestic abuse tale "Execution Dock"; and William Simon's riveting, high-stakes kidnapping "Spider's Tango." I'm overwhelmed by the quality of all twenty-nine stories and hope you enjoy reading them as much as I did.

Inspired by the above-mentioned writers and others, many talented authors today write in this

expansive genre that has diversified to include historical settings, the forensic sciences, police procedurals, the military, the justice system, espionage, the supernatural and plots ripped from the headlines. The variety offered by romantic suspense is vast, and so is the array of storytelling talent contained within this anthology.

It is with a great deal of pleasure that I introduce these stories written in a genre which might not have a *lengthy* heritage, but certainly an impressive one. I'm proud to be included.

~ Sandra Brown

DIAMOND DROP

Roxanne St. Claire

Sexy, naughty, savvy, and fun, this story has quick, smart dialogue and a fantastic twist. ~SB

In spite of the cacophony under the marble dome of Antwerp's Central Station, Donovan Rush heard the distinct tap of high heels about ten feet behind him. The main terminal echoed with a hundred different languages and shook with the shrill whine of high-speed train brakes on the platform levels, but the music of that familiar feminine drumbeat reached his ears and slowed his step.

The footsteps grew closer, preceded by a whiff of peppery perfume, a whisper of a silky sleeve, a subtle clearing of a woman's throat...and she passed him without a glance.

But he stole one, and then stayed two strides behind her just for the fun of it.

Mahogany waves clipped in a careful French twist revealed a slender column of a neck, squared by narrow shoulders casually draped in a bloodred scarf. Hip-hugging black leather pants molded to a heartbreaker of a backside then tapered over long, lean thighs.

And then there were the noisemaking shoes. Five inches if they were a centimeter, platforms, open toes and little silver buckles that he'd like to unfasten with his teeth.

Deadly.

Too bad he'd only be in Antwerp for the brief hour it would take to pass security at the Beurs voor Diamanthatel, meet with the client's sightholder, take delivery of two million dollars worth of rough-cut diamonds and get back on the Thalys for the return trip to Paris.

There was no time for lovelies clad in leather. Especially when his boss had sent a text from New York just moments ago reminding him that the client for this routine diamond drop, Boisvert Jewelers, was run by a CEO who evidently did not tolerate tardiness. Lucy Sharpe had ended her brief text with three simple words: don't be late.

When the owner of the Bullet Catchers—and queen of understatement—issued a warning like that, no one who wanted to keep his job with her elite security firm would dare disobey. Especially not because he was, uh, sightseeing.

The woman in front of him slowed almost imperceptibly, glancing to her left, then quickly pretending she hadn't.

Donovan did the same, noticing a man outside a café entrance, a cell phone to his ear, but his gaze on the leathers, as well. That made him human, since Donovan would guess that most male eyes in the terminal would take the same trip his had.

But the highly trained bodyguard in him noticed the woman's hesitation, the change in her heel-toe tempo and the aura of awareness that shot up around her.

She shifted to the right just as the man ended his call. When he took a single step forward, she turned on one of those spikes and beelined in the opposite direction.

The heels clicked into a trot.

The gold-embellished station clock read twenty-one minutes to ten. Donovan had been doing the Antwerp diamond drops long enough to know he needed twelve minutes to clear security at the

Bourse, and two minutes to cross the cobblestone street that led there. That left seven minutes to follow his instinct...and a woman who'd just upped her speed from purposeful to petrified.

The man hustled toward her, small and spare and quick on his feet, smoky gray eyes locked on the lady, one hand in the pocket of a loose-fitting jacket.

With the reassuring weight of a Glock under his sport jacket, Donovan kept his attention evenly divided between the two people. She took a sharp left toward stairs leading to the upper level train platforms, snaking her way through the crowd with a quick burst of speed.

She paused once to glance over her shoulder, her gaze locking on Donovan's for a split second before she looked away. At the top of the stairs she blended in with a pack of travelers on the train platform, but Donovan kept sight of the ruby scarf.

So did the other man, who attempted the same maneuver up the stairs, but didn't nail it as gracefully as the woman. His failure let Donovan get right behind him and stay there.

Leather lady was on a tear now, running down the platform as the scream of the next high-speed train reverberated through the second level's glass-domed ceiling. She spun around, giving Donovan his first chance to really see her face.

Normally, he'd register the contours of beauty, the appeal of every feature from a whisper of a widow's peak to a shadow of a cleft in her chin. But this wasn't normal. That expression of raw, ripe terror was not normal.

The man had her in his sights, then reached deeper into his pocket, shifting his weight like he was bracing to fire.

Donovan pounced. An arm to the throat, a knee to the thighs, and the guy was down and done.

"Hey!" He tried to thrust an elbow, but Donovan twisted the offending arm and locked it into a position of paralyzing pain. Certain he was immobilized, Donovan peered through the wall of the gathering crowd as the train doors zipped open.

A red scarf fluttered as its owner darted on board. Holding on to the door, she leaned into the light to look straight at him.

"Thank you," she mouthed and then disappeared into the train.

Donovan released his captive and stood slowly.

"What the hell?" the man croaked with a heavy British accent, pushing himself up and whipping around to Donovan.

Donovan stepped back and held up his hands. "Sorry. Had you confused with someone." He turned to leave, but the man grabbed his jacket.

"What's your fucking problem, mate?"

"Excuse me." Donovan brushed the hand off and glanced at the clock above the platform. "I'm late for an appointment."

* * *

"You are free to enter, Mr. Rush." The last of three security guards handed Donovan his clearance papers with an officious nod, his heavily accented English flawless. "Monsieur Pelletier is waiting for you at table fourteen."

Donovan tucked his paperwork in the breast pocket of his sport jacket and entered the double doors to the main room. Sunshine poured through a hundred skylights, built for the express purpose of giving the jewel traders the best possible natural light.

Dozens of tables flanked a center aisle where men sat in small groups, face-to-face, nearly every

one wearing a jeweler's loupe, examining stones.

~~A middle-aged man sat alone at the far end of table fourteen, a black velvet cloth spread with an array of cloudy white diamonds in front of him. He looked up as Donovan approached and stood, no smile on his angular, harsh features.~~

Donovan slipped into the space behind the table, reaching out his hand in greeting, introducing himself. "I'm delighted to welcome Boisvert Jewelers to the Bullet Catchers client roster," he added.

"We understand your company provides the finest security couriers in the business."

"You understand correctly," Donovan assured him, gesturing toward the diamonds. There was no time for small talk if he was going to make the train back to Paris and meet the client's timelines.

"This is what I've selected for you to deliver," he said. "I know the CEO of Boisvert to be a connoisseur of excellence. I've no doubt these diamonds will meet the highest standards."

There were at least forty sizable stones, many that would be cut to make two or three multcarat diamonds. Pelletier had probably spent the past three days poring through hundreds and hundreds of rough-cut rocks delivered from Africa and Australia, his job as a sightholder to be the "eyes" for the parent jeweler back in Paris. A parent company with deep pockets, if they could manage this purchase.

"You've chosen well," Donovan said. Although it wasn't his job to pass judgment on the diamonds Pelletier had purchased; his job was to safely deliver them to the Parisian jeweler whom he worked for. *On time*. "Is the paperwork complete?" If Pelletier had filled it out ahead of time, they were in luck.

The man slid a packet toward Donovan. "Yes. I'll need your signature in all the right places, while I pack this parcel and sign off on what you've taken."

The transaction was so standard, Donovan barely looked up from the pages he had to sign, flipping through each with just a cursory glance, until Pelletier pulled a cell phone from his pocket to take a call.

"Excuse me," he said softly before launching into rapid French. Unable to follow the foreign language spoken that fast, Donovan continued to sign, until a note of alarm in the other man's voice made him look up.

"Is there a problem?" he asked softly.

Pelletier just held up one finger. "*Très bien. Merci.*" He hung up. "That was the CEO of Boisvert Jewelers."

"Really."

"We have an issue that I am obligated to bring to your attention. There has been a credible threat to this diamond delivery. Apparently, the details were leaked."

"By whom?"

He shook his head, unable to hide disgust. "The CEO's assistant. She's been arrested and detained, but we don't know how secure these diamonds will be between Antwerp and Paris."

"I have them," Donovan said, scooping them into a red velvet pouch that would fit in his jacket pocket. "So you can assure Boisvert management that they will be quite secure."

The other man looked relieved, but dubious. "*Très bien, mais...* a word of advice, Monsieur Rush?"

"Don't be late?"

"Trust no one," he replied. "*And don't be late.*"

* * *

He didn't alter his travel plans. Whoever was tracking this diamond drop would assume that an

experienced—and forewarned—courier would choose a different form of transportation back to Paris. But getting to the airport or renting a car would cause unnecessary delays and play right into a thief's expectations.

Instead, Donovan slipped back into the train station, and purchased a new Comfort One ticket on the high-speed Thalys to Paris using different identification. He boarded the first car the moment the giant red wedge-shaped train blew into the station, before most of the other passengers had even reached the platform. Strolling the length of the train, he memorized the face of every passenger already on board since Amsterdam or Rotterdam.

Under the guise of a traveler looking for the most privacy and comfort, he perused nearly four hundred seats in a dozen connected cars, including the bar and café, and every lavatory. And he had no doubt where he would sit.

The last set of glass doors whisked open with an automatic vacuum that responded to the slightest pressure. This small compartment seated only eight, with two rows of seats facing each other, separated by a narrow aisle. Well protected, away from most passengers, and with a single entrance that he could watch every minute of the hour and a half trip to Paris, it made the perfect place to detect a thief.

But, shit, someone had beat him there. He could see the top of dark hair, not quite tall enough to extend above the orange headrest, facing the back seats. No matter. He drew his weapon. He would convince the passenger to leave.

But the person shifted positions to cross a foot into the aisle. A foot wearing a platform peep toe with an unforgettable silver buckle.

Trust no one.

Especially damsels in distress and leather. There were no coincidences in this business; his experience as a Bullet Catcher taught him that. She identified him this morning, got a good look at him and no doubt had the Boisvert informant tell her what train he'd be on.

Of course, he could simply turn and take another before she even saw him.

But that's not what Lucy Sharpe demanded from her men. She wanted to impress the new client? All right, then. He'd deliver the diamonds *and* the thief. *On time.*

He cleared his throat. "May I join you?"

"I was hoping you would." A sultry and feminine American voice answered.

He came around the seat back, his gun drawn, but not yet aimed at her. Let her know he had it and wasn't afraid to use it. "Although I'd prefer not to have to kill anyone who's chasing you on the way to Paris."

"On the contrary." She lifted amber eyes and met his gaze, not even a flicker of surprise. "You've done your good deed for the day."

"So this is no coincidence?" Not that he thought it was for a moment.

Her lips widened in a sexy smile. "I was on the platform and saw you get on board. I decided you were the type of man who would choose the back compartment for...privacy."

"So you're just riding the rails for fun today."

She shrugged. "I did have to take an unexpected trip to Rotterdam, thanks to you giving me that chance to escape, but I easily made it back here on a return train. Going to Paris?"

"I am."

"Then we'll travel together." Her smile was warm. No, *hot*. And inviting. "That guy is gone now, so you can put the gun away."

Not a chance. "I prefer to err on the side of caution." He took the seat across from her—the one he

would have taken anyway, because it allowed for a direct view through the doors and into the next car—and kept the pistol in his hand, resting on the seat next to him.

“I’m Claudia Greenwood,” she said.

“Donovan Rush.” No reason to lie. Obviously, she either knew exactly who he was—in which case he’d either kill her or deliver her to the authorities at the Gare du Nord in Paris—or she really was just a beautiful American on holiday or business in Belgium. Not too hard to guess which. “And who was your pushy friend in the station?”

She exhaled a breath of disgust. “A bad choice from my past.”

Yeah, right. “A woman who looks like you involved with a guy who looks like that? C’mon, I might be big and ugly, but I’m not dumb.”

“You’re quite big—” she let her gaze slide over his shoulders and chest “—but you are *definitely* not ugly. Sadly, I wouldn’t be the last woman who got swayed by an impressive...bank account. What brings you to Belgium, Donovan?”

As if she didn’t know. “Business.”

“Business that requires you to carry a gun?”

“It is Antwerp,” he said, as though that explained it. That *would* explain it to a diamond thief, which, he’d bet the entire pouchful in his pocket, she was. “And you?”

“Business, as well.” Her fingers flicked the end of her scarf. “Fashion accessories. I’m headed to Paris for a trade show.”

“Then we have a whole hour and a half to get to know each other.” And to see just how long it would take for her to make her move.

She settled back into her seat with an alluring smile. “I can’t imagine a better way to spend my time.”

* * *

He had to give the woman a lot of credit. She never dropped character, chatting about clothes and fashion shows, her apartment in New York, her small business. All the while, the train careened through the autumn-washed fields of the Dutch countryside, bridges and farms a blur in Donovan’s peripheral vision. No one entered the compartment but a conductor checking tickets after they’d stopped in Brussels, and neither of them made a move to hit the restroom or get a drink for a full hour.

But thirty minutes outside of Paris, she finally got down to business.

“I really owe you a debt of gratitude for your assistance this morning, Donovan.”

“Not at all. You seemed like you were in trouble.”

“I don’t suppose you’d let me take you to lunch when we arrive in Paris.”

“I’m sorry. I have an appointment.”

She gave a hopeful smile. “Dinner?”

“I’m leaving for Rome this afternoon.”

“Oh, how can I thank you for what you did? I mean, you really saved me. How did you even notice what was happening?”

“I’m observant,” he said, letting his gaze drop from her glossy lips to her silky scarf to her leather-clad legs. “For instance, I noticed your sexy shoes.”

She smiled, raising one foot toward his left hand. “You like them?” She set the heel in his palm playfully, allowing him to cup the buttery leather.

“You wear them well.”

She straightened her leg a little, which made his hand slide up to touch skin. “I can unwear them, too.”

Ah, so she was going to use sex to get the diamonds. As appealing as that strategy was, it almost made him laugh with its unoriginality.

“That won’t be necessary,” he said, circling his fingers around the fine bones of her ankle. “Nice thought, but not necessary.”

She leaned forward, a gap in her creamy silk blouse revealing the curve of her breast. Lifting red-tipped fingers, she toyed with the loose knot of the scarf, giving him an even better view of her cleavage.

An announcement in French almost drowned out the slither of silk over silk as she drew the scarf along the collar, sliding it off.

“We have less than thirty minutes,” she said softly, the light and message in her eyes unmistakable. “I can use them to...thank you.”

She let the scarf hit the floor. Her knees would be next, he surmised. One minute and she’d be kneeling in front of him, unzipping his pants...reaching into his jacket pocket when his eyes closed in pleasure.

Really, the oldest trick in the book.

She reached up to her hair clip in a move that pressed the thin material of her blouse against luscious breasts.

“Do you mind?” she asked in a sultry voice.

“Not at all.”

Auburn hair cascaded over her shoulders, assisted by a slow shake of her head. The halo of soft curls made her delicate features even more attractive, and ratcheted up his already high trouble alert, sending an unwanted bolt of heat into his lower half.

No doubt about it, Claudia Greenwood was a pro.

But she surprised him; instead of dropping to her knees, she leaned back, lifted her other leg and set her shoe on his lap.

“So you really like my shoes?”

He was still holding the left one, his hand running up and down a velvety calf under the leather pants. “Very much. That’s what I noticed about you.”

She gave him a dubious look. “Not my leather pants?”

“I heard your heels behind me.”

“And that sound turns you on?”

“A little,” he admitted. He thumbed the little buckle in response, swallowing against a dry throat and willing his cock not to react to the proximity of her other shoe.

He had a thief by the ankles and he wasn’t about to let his dick get in the way of taking her down.

“So, you’re a shoe guy.” She glided one platform sole over his thigh. His cock stiffened some more but his brain wasn’t bloodless. He calculated exactly how far that greedy foot was from the diamond pouch in his jacket pocket.

Far enough that he could snap her leg in two before she got anywhere near it.

But it wasn’t the diamonds she tucked her toes into. She wiggled her toes and shot a little fire into his balls.

“Spread your legs, Donovan,” she whispered, her fingers closing over the edge of her seat as she added pressure by pushing her feet into his groin a little more. When he obliged—he had to see how far she’d take this—she pulled her other foot out of his grasp and set it on his leg. “Watch what my

shoes can do.”

“I’m not worried about your shoes.” He surreptitiously slipped his index finger on the trigger of his gun while her stilettos bracketed his erection. She released her grip on the seat to finger the button of her blouse and opened it to reveal more creamy cleavage.

“You shouldn’t be worried about anything. Just take your reward for being a Good Samaritan.” She wet her lips and let her eyelids shutter, the leather of her pants skimming over his legs as she worked the shoes up and down the erection tenting his trousers.

“Close your eyes,” she told him. “I’ll do all the work.”

He just smiled and dropped his head back, pretending to follow her orders but ready for her to slam a heel into his balls. She’d be dead before the pain hit his brain.

She stroked harder, faster...and touched her breast with a sensual sigh. He waited, ready...but she seemed intent on pleasuring him.

The first announcement of the arrival at the Gare du Nord filled the compartment, the French barely drowning out the thump of blood in his head. It was time to end the party, sadly. He lifted the gun.

“Party’s over, Claudia. Pack up. You’re going to the French police.”

“What?” She paled, her feisty feet suddenly still. “Why?”

“Because I’m taking you in.”

Confusion darkened her features. “For what?”

For a moment, he almost believed her. Then he laughed. “You’re very good, Claudia, but I’m better. I’ve been in this game too long.” He leaned forward, lifting both her ankles in one hand to set her feet on the floor. “I like you, so I don’t want to shoot you. When we pull into the Gare du Nord, we’re going straight to the French police.”

Her jaw completely unhinged. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about...” Was it possible he was wrong? No. This couldn’t be a coincidence. “Your effort to charm, mesmerize and foot fuck me.”

“Look, I’m sorry.” She started buttoning her blouse with trembling fingers. “I’m not some kind of hooker. I just was...fooling around.” Her voice hitched with a very believable crack. “Please, I didn’t know it was against the law. *Please.*”

Doubt crept into his head. His instinct was rarely wrong. But was it possible this really was no more than a chance encounter?

“I know what you want,” he pressed.

Her golden-brown eyes flashed like flames. “I don’t want anything,” she insisted. “I was being... nice. And, evidently, stupid.”

Was it possible he was completely wrong about her? He had to find out. He had to know. She was so intriguing, so beautiful, and so in the right place at the wrong—

The door swooshed open and a conductor barged in.

“We’ve already had our tickets punched,” Donovan said quickly, shooing him out.

The man’s hand slipped from beneath his uniform, drawing a pistol he instantly aimed at Claudia’s temple.

Over her shocked shriek, he made his demand. “Give me the diamonds or I’ll splatter her brains all over this compartment.”

* * *

Either she was in the wrong place at the wrong time or she was a hell of a good actress because blood

drained from Claudia's face, her eyes popped wide, her next breath trapped in terror. All very... convincing.

"Please..." Her voice was no more than a croak. "Give him what he wants."

The Glock was still secure in his hand. But if Donovan so much as lifted that pistol, this woman would be dead. And while that wouldn't bother him if she were a plant and part of the ruse...it would piss the hell out of him if she were an innocent fashion accessory buyer on a trip to Europe.

"Pick the gun up with two fingers and throw it into the aisle, Mr. Rush, or this woman will die."

She might anyway, and she obviously knew it. Claudia's eyes brimmed with fearful tears, a plea for her life emanated from every cell.

"The gun," the conductor repeated, as calmly as if he were asking for his ticket.

Was her life worth two million in diamonds? Not if she was in on this...but if she wasn't? He couldn't risk it. He slid the Glock down the aisle between the seats.

"Now hand me the bag. And if you have another gun in that pocket, she will be dead before you can produce it."

She whimpered and the man's Walther pressed a bloodless spot in her temple.

Okay, what were his options? To give up the diamonds, and possibly his life. To make a surprise attack that would cost hers. Or...to trust this woman to work with him.

"The diamonds are hidden in her shoes," Donovan said. "I transferred them there."

The conductor's eyes narrowed as he dropped his gaze to her feet. "Where?"

"They're hidden in the platforms." Which would make a perfectly creative and logical place to smuggle diamonds.

"Take them off her," he ordered.

Donovan crouched into the space between the two seats to unbuckle her shoe. As he did he looked up to silently communicate with her. Her gaze shifted to the gun with a slight question in her eyes.

Working as one, they could get this guy. If she really was...*innocent*.

Torn between warring instincts, his fingers caught the silver buckle and slid the leather strap through, the shoe sliding off in his hand.

"Give it to me," the man demanded.

Once more, he shared a look with her, boring into her lioness's eyes, searching for...trust. He saw something there, enough to take a chance.

Donovan reached up to hand over the shoe, deliberately holding it far enough away so the other man had to bend to get it. As he did, Donovan pitched the shoe toward the glass door, the weight making the auto-suction whip the door open. In the split second the man followed the path of the shoe, Donovan dived for his gun.

The man fired, but Donovan heard the bullet ricochet. Claudia dropped to the ground with a cry.

When the man launched at the shoe, Donovan grabbed his leg, pulling him down with one hand so they both landed on Donovan's Glock. He had the gun in his hand, but the other guy pounced, wrestling and rolling as Claudia cried out again, scurrying to her feet. As she leaped over the two men, she scooped up the shoe and threw herself toward the door, making it slide open again. She was gone in an instant.

"She took the fucking diamonds!" the man said, scrambling to get up and run after her.

So she *wasn't* in on it. Now he had to protect her or this guy would kill her for sure. Donovan tried to pull him down by the leg, but the man fell on top of him, crushing him with his weight. He had complete advantage and a gun pointed directly at Donovan.

"Bye-bye, bodyguard." He took a breath, just about to pull the trigger when a deadly five-inch heel

smacked the man's face, shocking him enough to let Donovan shove him off.

Instantly, ~~Donovan flipped him over and got his own Glock in the bastard's belly, looking up long enough to see Claudia in the doorway.~~

"Thank you," she mouthed.

Without bothering to retrieve her shoe, she disappeared into the next car and let him finish the job of taking down the thief.

* * *

Even with the side trip to the French police station, it was 2:59 p.m. when Donovan arrived with the bag of diamonds at the Paris showroom of Boisvert Jewelers, a few doors away from the Plaza Athénée. Lucy had texted her congratulations and informed him the client was most pleased.

Getting there on time would just be icing on the happy guy's cake.

"*Bonjour*," he greeted the receptionist outside the management offices. "I'm Donovan Rush with the Bullet Catchers. I have an appointment with Monsieur Boisvert."

She smiled. "*Oui?*" There was amusement and admiration in her eyes. "We have heard of your heroics on the Thalys, monsieur. *Une moment, s'il vous plaît.*"

He glanced at his watch as the receptionist disappeared behind a set of double doors. If she hurried he'd make it.

Four minutes later, she emerged. "You may go in now, Monsieur Rush." She held the door and he walked past into a large, dimly lit empty office. No one was here? After all the warnings to be on time?

"Excuse me?" he said to the thin air. "I was told I had a meeting in here."

"You're late, Monsieur Rush." Very slowly, the executive chair facing the window turned, revealing...a woman.

He just stared at her, processing everything. The mahogany hair. The crimson scarf. And a heart-stopping smile of pure sex and...authority.

"Claudia Greenwood?"

"Claudette, actually. And you should study your French, Donovan." Her accent was thick...and natural.

Green wood...*bois vert*. Of course. "You're the CEO of Boisvert Jewelers." It wasn't a question; it didn't need to be. "Why?"

"We often test new couriers. The run-in at the train station was a test of your observation skills." She pushed the chair back. "You passed."

"And the foot massage?" He lifted a brow. "A test of my concentration skills?"

"Yes, but..." A soft flush rose to her beautiful cheeks. "I let my attraction to you take that a little too far."

Actually, not far enough, and the attraction, he couldn't deny, was mutual. "And the attempted theft?"

Her expression grew serious. "Unfortunately, that was no test. There was no real threat that we knew of. You were told that so we could monitor how you handled such a situation. But, when it happened? It was real. And you were impressive."

Holding her gaze, he approached her desk as she stood up. "I believe I have something of yours," he said, reaching into his jacket pockets.

"It better be worth two million dollars."

He held out the red velvet pouch. “It is. And this—” he reached into his other pocket and slid out a sexy high-heeled shoe “—is priceless when you consider it saved my life.”

“You saved mine first, so we’re even.”

She reached for the shoe, but he tossed it to the floor and let the diamonds drop with it. “No we’re not,” he said. “I haven’t had a chance to thank *you*.”

He pulled her into his arms and backed her up to the desk to lay her down right on top of it.

“Now?” Her question was a breathy whisper in his ear.

“I wouldn’t dare keep my client *waiting*.”

* * * * *

COLD MOONLIGHT

Carla Neggers

Only a writer as gifted as Carla Neggers could use so few words to convey so much action and emotional depth. ~SB

Ryan “Grit” Taylor felt snow melting in his right boot. He didn’t feel whatever snow might be melting in his left boot because he didn’t have a left foot, or any of his left leg below the knee. In the year since he’d lost it in a firefight in Afghanistan, he’d learned to manage with a prosthesis...even in the Vermont snow, even while looking for Marissa Neal, the eldest daughter of Preston Neal, the vice president of the United States.

It wasn’t a Navy SEAL mission. It was a Charlie Neal mission, Charlie being the youngest Neal, a sixteen-year-old meddling genius and the missing Marissa’s only brother. The Neals had arrived in tiny Black Falls, Vermont, last night for a long weekend in the early-spring snow. Charlie had popped out from behind a tree fifteen minutes ago, when Grit had gone to look for Marissa, thinking she might be making a snowman. Now he wasn’t sure what was going on. Charlie had a tendency to overreact.

He also had a tendency to be right. He was worried about his sister.

The Neals weren’t Grit’s responsibility, but Charlie knew how to give the Secret Service the slip and had done it before. Marissa probably knew how but she was the eldest of five, a history teacher, responsible, mature...pretty. Had she just wandered off? *How?*

What if something was wrong?

“My life didn’t used to be this complicated,” Grit said.

Next to him in the snow, Charlie shook his head. He wasn’t wearing a hat, and his hair seemed even fairer in the early-evening light, with a half foot of fresh spring snow on the ground and clinging to every branch, twig and pine needle in the Green Mountains. “You’re wrong,” Charlie said finally; he was confident that way. “Your life was complicated even when you were fighting in Afghanistan. It only seemed simpler then because you were a member of a special operations team that worked under a chain of command, with a clear mission.”

“Still am, still do.”

Charlie paused on the snow-covered trail. His face was pale, much paler than it should have been given the cold temperature and the pace he’d been maintaining. “Do you have a clear mission now?”

“Keep you safe. Find your sister. Keep her safe. Get you both back to the Secret Service.”

“What if Marissa’s already—”

“Don’t go there, Charlie. It won’t help.”

Without comment, Charlie resumed walking. He and Grit both wore boots, not snowshoes or cross-country skis. There were no other prints in the snow. They rounded a sharp curve shrouded with evergreens. Elijah Cameron was there, as grim as Grit had ever seen him—which was saying something, since Elijah, a Special Forces soldier, had been in the firefight in the Afghan mountain pass the night Grit had lost his lower leg. Black Falls was Elijah’s hometown. He’d always wanted to

come home.

Black Falls wasn't Grit's hometown. Too cold.

"Marissa Neal's in trouble," Elijah said, never one to ease into a conversation. He glanced at Charlie, then shifted his Cameron-blue eyes back to Grit. "I spotted her up on the trail. Then out of the blue some jackass decides to shoot at me sniper-style."

"You were hit," Charlie said, wide-eyed as he took in the blood on Elijah's shoulder.

Elijah shrugged. "I'm good."

Grit knew better than to argue with him. "Where is Marissa now?"

"There's a ski chalet not far from here. She's probably heading there to hide, try to get hold of the Secret Service. She's got about a ten-minute head start on you." Elijah glanced at Charlie. "You, too." He turned back to Grit. "One of them is hurt. Her or the guy who's after her."

"Blood trail?" Grit asked.

Elijah gave a curt nod. "Intermittent."

Grit didn't respond. Charlie's instincts had been on target, not for the first time. Elijah's presence had to have distracted whoever was after Marissa. Elijah had gone for an afternoon walk in the mountains he knew so well, maybe to think about his upcoming marriage to Jo Harper, a Secret Service agent and another native of pretty Black Falls, Vermont. He and Grit had become friends during the past year, but especially over the winter, when they discovered a network of killers had set up shop in Black Falls. The killers were now dead or in prison.

Whoever was after Marissa Neal would be soon, too.

"Let's go," Elijah said, teeth clenched.

Charlie Neal was shivering, more from fear than cold, Grit thought as he looked up at the clear Vermont sky. "A nice day for maple sugaring, and here we are again." He sighed at Elijah. "I thought you said Vermont was one of the safest states in the country."

"It is."

"Yeah. Just not Black Falls. Not lately."

Charlie stood between Elijah and Grit. "What do we do now?" Charlie asked.

Grit took charge. "Elijah will get you back to the lodge. I'll find your sister."

"Not a chance, Grit." Elijah's voice was low, uncompromising.

Most people would be intimidated. Grit wasn't. "I'd take you with me if I could, but you know I can't, Elijah. You have a bullet in your shoulder."

"Graze."

"Take Charlie. The Secret Service must be all over this thing by now. You can fill them in." Before Elijah could argue further, Grit added, "We're wasting time."

Elijah was an experienced soldier and knew how to set aside his emotions and do what the situation demanded. "You're not armed, Grit. Neither am I." He glanced back through the woods, then shifted again to Grit. "It wasn't supposed to be that kind of day."

"I'll grab a big rock or something," Grit said, half-serious. "I'll be fine. Go."

Charlie was close to hyperventilating, his lips purple, the skin at his jaw splotchy. He looked younger than sixteen. "I have a gun."

Grit sank deeper into the snow, the ground underneath soft, beginning to thaw. "Figures. Is it loaded?"

"Yeah. Of course. I wanted to be prepared. Just in case, you know?"

Elijah had the weapon out of Charlie's hand and into Grit's in two seconds flat. A Browning 9 mm. It'd work.

“It’s not mine,” Charlie said without a hint of defensiveness.

Elijah held up a hand. “Stop right there. Don’t tell us anything we don’t need to know.”

“I won’t get arrested. It’s a legal weapon.”

No doubt Charlie could cite the appropriate Vermont and federal laws—or make them up as he went along—but a look from Elijah and Grit silenced him, which wasn’t easy to do.

Despite his bullet wound, Elijah clapped an arm on the boy’s shoulders. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.” Elijah winced as he lowered his arm. “I’ve been shot, you know. I need a damn doctor.”

“The bullet didn’t hit any major organs or veins or arteries,” Charlie said. “You’d be dead by now if it had. How’s the pain?”

“Not as bad as the pain of listening to a kid with a 180 IQ yap at me.”

Elijah’s teasing seemed to energize and steady the teenager as they headed down the path, around the curve. Elijah glanced back just once, his expression grim, penetrating, as if he wanted to beam his strength and determination into Grit. Grit wished he could. He’d figured out early on in life—long before his SEAL training—that he wasn’t Superman.

He ducked past a hemlock and saw blood, still bright red, splattered in the white snow. For a split second, Grit thought he could smell it, then realized that was a memory of a long, violent night a year ago—and the memory of the smell of his own blood.

You can do this mission.

He swallowed at the sound of the familiar voice close to him, as clear and calm as it had been that night in Afghanistan. As real. “Hey, Moose. What are you doing here?”

You’re in love with Marissa Neal.

Grit’s throat tightened. It was true. He was in love with Marissa. It’d started when he’d first met her last fall, just for a few seconds. He’d been chasing hired killers. Charlie had been trying to help on the sly. Marissa had been starchy, annoyed with Grit, annoyed with her brother. Understandably. With the network of killers finally dealt with, she and Grit had been spending time with each other the past month.

“Yeah, Moose. I’m in love with her.”

But Michael “Moose” Ferrerra wasn’t there in the Vermont snow. He was dead, killed in action on that bad night last year in a remote Afghan mountain pass. Grit gripped the 9 mm and averted his eyes from the blood.

He had no illusions. He knew he was alone, and he knew the Secret Service wouldn’t get there in time. He had to find Marissa on his own.

* * *

Marissa Neal shoved a heavy butcher-block island in front of the back door of the unoccupied ski house where she’d taken refuge, but immediately pulled it back to the center of the kitchen. She didn’t want to barricade herself in the kitchen after all. She wanted to be able to run out onto the snow-covered mountain if the man chasing her found her here.

Unless he’s already in the house...

She gave herself a mental shake, refusing to let her fear take control. She’d checked for footprints and signs of a break-in before she’d smashed the door window and slipped into the house herself.

She was breathing hard, but she was no longer dripping blood. She’d torn her hand on a broken branch and had managed to tie her scarf over the cut. It ached, but she ignored the pain. Her thick leggings were soaked and cold from her trek through the snow. She’d fallen twice—maybe three

times. Once in the house, she'd pulled off her gloves and hat but was careful to stuff them in her jacket pockets, in case she had to flee. Hypothermia was a risk...but the immediate threat was the armed man who'd shot Elijah Cameron. She'd gotten a glimpse of the shooter. Enough to know it was a man but not enough for a description—to know who it was.

Marissa tried to focus on what she had to do now. To figure out her options.

I'm not a Cameron. I don't know these woods. I don't know where this place is.

The house was at the top of a dead-end dirt road. How far was she from help? Marissa tried to keep unanswerable questions at bay. Forcing back panic, she kept moving, digging through the drawers and cupboards for anything she could use for self-defense. Knives, bottles, rags, chemicals. She'd already grabbed a gas can from the attached one-car garage.

Elijah's a combat veteran. He knows what to do.

Even wounded, he'd find a way to get help to her. He'd spotted her above him on the trail and yelled for her to run, giving her a chance to get away—to get here.

Going to him hadn't been an option.

Marissa quickly assembled her potential weapons on the floor by the table. She was avoiding windows, wanted to be prepared if the shooter came after her. She paused, peering down the dark hallway that led from the kitchen. The house didn't look as if anyone had stayed there all winter, but the driveway was plowed, the walks shoveled. The owners must have hired a local groundskeeper. Maybe whoever looked after the place would come by, help her.

Except why would they if they'd already been here after yesterday's snow?

Marissa reminded herself that her sisters and brother and parents all were safe. She was a high school history teacher, the eldest of five. It didn't matter that her father was the vice president. She was no more important than the next person.

"Marissa. You okay in there?"

Grit. She recognized his soft, low voice and felt her knees buckle as relief washed over her. She wasn't alone anymore.

And he wasn't the shooter. Not Ryan Taylor, Navy SEAL.

"I am, Grit. I'm here."

He came through the back door, moving with an agility and smoothness that had surprised her at first, given his disability, but now she had come to expect. He was one of the finest men she'd ever known. He was also witty, sexy, ultracompetent and as incorrigible in his own way as her little brother. Except she didn't think of him as a brother. Not even close. Right from the start, even when he'd annoyed her, Marissa had been attracted to him.

"Damn, it's dark and cold out there. Springtime in the frozen North."

Marissa bit back a smile and tears at the same time. "If you can figure out I'm here—"

"So can the guy who's after you."

She studied him for half a beat. He was dark-haired, wiry and quiet, with a quick wit and a steadiness that often took people by surprise. He'd told her he was a mix of Creek and Scots-Irish, a kid from the swamps of the Florida Panhandle who'd always wanted to see the world.

"He's not after me." Her voice was a hoarse whisper as she realized what she was saying was true. "He's not my enemy or my father's enemy, or a Cameron enemy. Grit..." She took a breath. "He's after you."

Grit shrugged. "Even better. Why's he after me?"

"Because you're here. He lured me out here because he knew you'd come after me. It's so clear to me now, Grit. Elijah was a surprise. That's why he shot him. But I could teach yoga in Black Falls for

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