My Heart-Shaped Box

Hilarious romantic suspense loaded with action, adventure, innuendo, and intrigue.

by Erica Ridley, Amie Stuart, C.L. Wilson, Colleen Gleason, Deanna Lee, Debra Dixon, Delilah Marvelle, Jackie Barbosa, Jody Wallace, Julia Buckley, Julia Harper, Karen Lingefelt, Terri Reed, and Virginia Henley.

This interactive choose-your-adventure novella first appeared on the Manuscript Mavens blog and can also be viewed on the Manuscript Mavens website.

Chapter 1

Who the hell would order a stripper on Valentine's Day?

Isn't it supposed to be a couple's holiday? Fancy dinner for two, a dozen roses, a bit of bubbly, maybe even a big rock. And definitely some hip-to-hip action later on.

But a stripper?

I shook my head at the woman standing at the door. "I'm sorry, you've got the wrong address."

She just looked at me blankly--probably because her eyes were so heavy with glittery blue eye shadow and false lashes she could barely keep them open, let alone focused. Her stringy blond hair was piled in whorls and swirls on the top of her head and the clothes she was wearing...well, let's just say, she looked like a schoolteacher, but that hint of fishnet stocking beneath her knee-length skirt, not to mention the four-inch leopard heels, sort of gave it away.

"I didn't order a stripper," I said. And even if I had...well, it wouldn't be a female.

Come to think of it, maybe it wasn't such a bad idea to have a stripper on Valentine's Day--especially if you, like me, didn't happen to have said Valentine.

This year anyway.

Ah, hell. Not even last year either.

That's what came with being a research assistant at a sleep lab. I spend all my waking hours watching people snore in their little

comfy beds in our lab, and much of the day trying to keep the sunlight from blasting through my windows.

People who didn't know me might think I'm a vampire.

Which I'm not. And this isn't a story about vampires, in case you were wondering. I was just making a comparison.

Anyway, I looked at her again, tempted to wave my hand in front of her eyes to see if I could get a reaction. I didn't think she'd blinked once since I opened the door.

"Ma'am," I said again. "I didn't order a stripper. You'd better check the address and see where the mistake was. I'm sure someone," I couldn't help sounding dubious, "is waiting for you."

At last she spoke. Her cherry red lips, plumper than a velvet cushion, moved carefully, as if she was afraid her lipstick would smear. Based on the thickness of it, I'd say not a chance. She was wearing enough color and gloss to cover all of the Baywatch girls. And then some.

"Imelda Branchos?" she said. "1450 Madison Street?"

"Uh, that would be no," I replied. "This is 1450 Madison, but my name isn't Imelda." For some reason, an image of shoes popped in my head. Lots of shoes. "Someone must have written down the wrong address." I smiled a good-bye. "You'd probably better call your...dispatcher or john or whatever. Good luck."

I closed the door.

Why couldn't it have been a male stripper who came to the wrong address? Of course, with my luck, it'd be like the Friends episode where Danny DeVito showed up.

I was just settling back down with a new episode of Grey's Anatomy (one before Katherine Heigl started to get on my nerves) when the doorbell rang again.

I paused it, got up and thought for a moment how pathetic it was that here I sat, on Valentine's Day, watching made-up people save other made-up peoples' lives and falling in love with McDreamys.

I peered through the sidelight at the door. Well, hell-o there! A tall, extremely handsome specimen of male hunkness stood there. Very tall, very straight, and with the best nose I've ever seen on a guy.

I'm a schnozz girl. Because you know what they say about schnozzes, right? The same thing they say about a guy's feet.

It's true.

Trust. Me.

I opened the door, keeping it chained (I may be easily distracted, but I'm not stupid). "Can I help you?" Oh, I'd sure like to!

And....

- **A)** *He said, "Hello, I'm Bradley Bulky from StripWorld (We tease better than anyone!) and I have an...appointment (he gave me a sexy grin) with Imelda Branchos. I hope that's you." (His grin turned hotter.)*
- **B)** *He moved and there was the silver barrel of a gun pointing right at my gut, through the crack of the door. "Well, well, Imelda Branchos. I've been looking for you for a long time. Open the door or I'll do it myself."*
- **C)** *He flipped open his coat to show a gleaming gold badge that looked very official. And pecs that showed through his tight shirt. "Officer Galahad here. Do you live at this residence? Have you ordered a stripper?"*

- **D) Before he could answer, a sharp ping sounded in the air, and something shot into the door that I was holding. Holy crap. A bullet. "Let me in!" he exclaimed, pushing at the door.**

Written by **Colleen Gleason** [web site] [blog] [reader responses]

Chapter 2

The chain, despite his bulk, held. I tried to shove the door back at him to create enough slack in the chain so I could save him and his Manilow schnozz, but he was too strong.

Ping! Ping! Ping! Slivers of wood flew all over my porch as the gunman -- excuse me, gunperson -- continued to demonstrate lousy targeting. Which proved the gunperson was the villain, because protagonists have better aim.

He thrust against the door with a broad shoulder, bending the slot that held the chain. "For Chrissake, open the door! You want me to die on your porch?"

"Quit pushing it!" I snapped right back. "I can't get the chain loose."

Realization hit him like a skillfully-aimed bullet. I pulled him into the house about two seconds after the whole realization thing.

Didn't stop the attack, though. Bullets sprayed the front window, shattering glass all over my living room. I shrieked.

"Get down!" Hunkness wrapped a protective arm around my torso and brute-forced me to the floor. He smelled like leather, or his coat did, and his arm was a muscular band of steel. "She's closer than I thought. We'll have to make a break for it. You got a back door?"

"You're insane. I'm calling the cops." Despite how safe me made me feel, considering he was huge and surely a bullet couldn't pop all the way through him and get me, I shook him off and crawled as carefully as I could through broken glass. I kept the sofa between me and the bullets. "What the hell's going on? Who's shooting at you?"

"Mel, this isn't the time or place to play dumb. They're shooting at us both." He duckwalked into the room, pulling a gun out of an inner pocket.

I wasn't playing dumb. And I wasn't Mel. But I'd address that after my friendly chat with the 9-1-1 operator. Now where had I left the damn cordless? Ah, there it was, on the side table.

I slithered. The bullets stopped. Hunkness peeped out the busted window, his gun inching over the sill.

Another spate of bullets rained into my house, taking out the TV. And the phone I'd been reaching for. The gunner couldn't hit a gigantic guy in a black leather coat silhouetted against a white house but she could murder the phone?

"We have to get the hell out of here before she calls reinforcements." He crawled over to me and hauled me out of the living room. "Come on. Back door?"

Faster than I ever thought I could skitter, considering sleep techs don't do a lot of skittering, I skittered towards the kitchen. "Okay, okay. Follow me."

Like children pretending to be frightened dogs, only without the barking, we scrambled down the hall. His head kept bumping my ass.

"Watch it, Mr. Friendly," I hissed. Was that his nose I'd felt or was he just happy to crawl behind me?

We reached the kitchen, half-stood, and unlocked back door. After he made some kind of military hand signal I'm so sure I recognized, he shouldered past me onto the porch, his gun up and ready. Aimed to one side. Then the other. When nobody shot him, a good sign, I guess, he gestured and took off. I assumed it was okay to follow.

We raced through my scrubby back yard, him silent, me chugging like a pig on two legs. He vaulted the chest-high chain link fence. By the time I'd climbed it, he was halfway to the next street.

I heard an angry female voice beside my house. "They went out the back! Cut them off!"

I fell the rest of the way over the fence and rolled. Rising to all fours, I glanced in my back yard. Stripper lady, her red lips bared, tottered after me, a gun in her hand and murder in her eyes.

"Imelda!" she shrieked. "Imelda! Brixton! Branchos! Get your bigamist ass back here. We had a deal!"

A gun fired near my head, and Stripper ducked behind my algae-infested aboveground swimming pool. Water streamed out the bullet holes, and I heard her cussing up a regular Texas tornado.

Hunkness had come back for me! And he wasn't happy about it. He grabbed my arm, shot up my pool a few more times, and half-carried me through the neighbor's yard. Mrs. Peterson stood on her veranda with her teacup poodle in one hand and a glass of ice tea in the other, goggling as my new friend shoved me into a black car and dashed around to the driver's side.

"Call 9-1-1!" I yelled at Mrs. Peterson. "I think I'm being kidnapped!"

My rescuer-cum-kidnapper revved the car and peeled out in a cloud of vile-smelling burnt rubber. I fumbled into my seatbelt as he two-tired it around the next turn, then another. Bracing my feet on the floor and my hands on the dash, I nearly broke my neck looking for signs of pursuit. Cops. Strippers. Poodles. Anybody.

"I think we shook 'em," he said finally. "You're a difficult woman to track down. I know I told you to go deep, but Nocona, Texas? A job at a sleep clinic? Talk about dull. I never pictured you for this lifestyle."

What was wrong with my lifestyle? And who was this guy? He was driving so fast, I couldn't jump out the door. That would be suicidal. I might be dateless on Valentine's, but I didn't want to kill myself over it. "Maybe that's because I'm not who you think I am. My name's Cara Heart. I've never seen you or that crazy stripper before in my life."

I tried to tamp down my panic, but I'd just been through a gunfight at the not-at-all-okay corral. Minus the corral. And while this guy's nose was to die for, I had no idea if he was the lesser of two evils.

"Cut the crap." He didn't take his eyes off the road. His nose cast a magnificent shadow in the setting sun. "Where's the package?"

"I don't know about any package, and I have no idea who you are besides the guy who ruined my bay windows, my pool, and my day." I crossed my arms and meditated on the scenery to calm myself. It flew past my window, an Impressionist painting of tans and greens. "This is the worst Valentine's Day ever."

"You know who I am," he said. "I'm...."

- **A)** *"I'm your first -- and legal -- husband, Cade Brixton. And I want my share of the money you stole from Sanchos Branchos, the Mexican crime lord you pretended to marry."*
- **B)** *"I'm your new handler, and it's time to bring you back into the fold, Miss Branchos. The Illuminati doesn't like to be kept waiting. Now tell me where the package is before they change their minds and issue the kill order."*
- **C) Before he could answer, a car slammed into the back of ours, giving me Alias Season 4-finale flashbacks and probably whiplash at the same time.**
- **D)** *"I'm really tired of your games...and your smart mouth." He screeched to a halt on the side of the deserted road, undid his seatbelt, and turned to me with a menacing air. Suddenly his nose didn't look as handsome. I kicked and clawed, but in the end, he overcame my resistance. He....*

Written by **Jody Wallace** [web site] [pseudonym] [reader responses]

Chapter 3

Before he could answer, a car slammed into the back of ours, giving me Alias Season 4-finale flashbacks and probably whiplash at the same time.

All I'd wanted was some chocolate and maybe...maybe a dozen roses. Instead, I'd been propositioned by the stripper from hell, shot at and now I had a seatbelt trying to finish me off. I blinked, forced my eyes to focus and forced my shaky hands to free me.

The car rocked, and I glanced through the back window. A tank of a car straight out of a B-52's video was backing up, the shooting stripper at the wheel.

"Dude." I grabbed his shoulder and shook, whimpering when his head flopped around like a bobblehead doll. Blood was dripping a steady trail from a nasty looking head wound. The Buick crashed into us again, throwing me into the dash. Maybe taking my seatbelt off had been a bad idea. "What the heckity kind of savior are you?"

The car backed up again and my little Valentine surprise showed no signs of coming to life anytime soon.

Crapity, crap, crap, crap!!!!

I reached between his legs and grabbed the lever, grunting as I shoved the seat back. David Lee Roth eat your heart out. Climbing over the console I straddled his tree trunk of a thigh. The steering wheel was practically in my chest and the emergency break was working it's way up my rear. I hit the gas and turned back toward the safety of town, praying for a cop, or MacGyver or hell, at this point I'd take Danny DeVito.

We sped down the four-lane highway playing a ruthless game of bumper tag. The emergency brake shifted with every bump and

swerve of the car. I didn't even want to think about what it was doing to my nether-bits but at this rate, I'd never have kids.

"What the hell—" came from behind me as I flew past the Dairy Queen.

"Don't move."

He grabbed me by the waist and shifted me onto his lap. This was worse than crawling through the hallway! "I hope like hell you know where you're going."

The Buick bumped us again, shoving us into the oncoming traffic. I swerved, darting between two pickups, waving at the long horn blasts that followed us. "I'm a little busy." Hello, car chase!

"Look, Imelda—"

"Cara! My name is Cara! You are the dumbest hot man I ever wished I'd never met." And where in hell's half acre was a cop when you needed one? Probably back at the Dairy Queen enjoying the Friday fish fry.

"All right. I'll play. Cara."

"Why couldn't you have been a stripper?" I sighed. This time the Buick hit us hard enough our heads connected and I saw stars. By the time my vision cleared, four huge black SUV's were coming our way in the opposite lane.

"What do we do, Valentino?"

"Valen—"

The back window exploded, and frigid air rushed in. Screaming, I ducked, and my seat cushion swore, shoving me out of the way. The car spun out of control, and I ended up ass over tea kettle, head in the floorboard.

"What do they want?" I demanded, struggling to right myself. The passenger headrest exploded. I didn't even want to think what that bullet would have done to my poor toes.

"I told you. The package." The car spun around again throwing me back down before I could right myself. "And they're highly motivated."

No, really?! "Great. Killers with goals." My feet flapped around, searching for purchase. I couldn't hold back a grin when one connected with Valentino's shoulder.

"God, my head hurts."

"Weenie." I finally managed to shove myself upright but not without a few more well-placed accidents.

"Weenie?" He glared at me.

"Yeah—" More glass exploded, and I screamed again. They'd shot out one of the passenger windows. "Do something!"

"Where's the package, I...Cara."

"In your pants, okay!"

One of the Suburbans pulled along side us and the passenger side windows rolled down. Two very long, very ugly looking guns appeared.

"Dude." I shook his arm again and the car swerved toward the SUV.

He shook me off, glanced to his left and pulled a gun out from behind his back, shoving it at me.

"What am I supposed to do with this?"

The "are you kidding me" look he gave me was priceless. If it hadn't been for the guns pointed at us, I might have whipped out my cell phone and taken a picture. Except, of course, I didn't have my cell phone. It was in the kitchen, on the charger.

- **A) "Shoot them." "You so owe me some chocolate when we get out of this mess." I aimed and squeezed the trigger.**
- **B)** *"Shoot them, shoot me, shoot yourself for all I care, but shoot something!" I aimed the gun at his head. "Stop the car. Now."*
- **C)** *"No way. Not in a million Martian years." I rolled down the window and tossed the gun out onto Highway 82.*
- **D)** *"Are you out of your ever living mind? These things are dangerous," I said, thinking of my poor pool. "I'm not...using this." I threw it back at him. "Guns don't kill people you know--"*

"Men in black Suburbans do. Would you like to trade places with me? I didn't think so." He shoved the gun at me.

Written by **Amie Stuart** [web site] [blog] [reader responses]

Chapter 4

When a gun is thrust unexpectedly into your hand, and you've never fired a gun, you have to be willing to learn "on the job." Here's what I've learned so far: It's probably best not to close your eyes when you shoot a gun. Our driver's door would never be the same.

On the bright side, my killing our door sent our car careening, (the hunk is easily startled). Careening meant our heads were no longer precisely where their bullets were aimed. And, in case you ever need to know, bullets fired into a gas tank don't actually make the car explode. Plus we shook some of them off our tail. I count the whole thing a win-win.

Hunk did not. Weenie. However, the man can cuss an inventive blue streak and never take his eyes off the road or repeat himself. I'm guessing my evaluation will not include a smiley face. Hey, if you hire amateurs, then you have to be willing to live with the consequences. No, I did not say that aloud. I'm an amateur, not stupid. Besides, he was driving and I was very much afraid my survival depended on whether his rites of passage into manhood had included running dirt tracks in some backwater little town. We couldn't win a game of demolition derby, but if he could execute some nice weaves and turns, we might just open up enough daylight to survive. Maybe.

I was counting on that maybe. When you're scared, maybe means a lot. It's all you have to hold onto. When I finally risked another look over my shoulder to check on the Black Death rolling behind us, I realized we had opened up a lead. Unfortunately, I didn't think we were heading in the right direction. We'd passed over a small creek bridge, which meant we were leaving the city and all those lovely get-lost-in streets behind us. All I could remember was a corporate training seminar from my bank teller days in which they continually repeated, "Never let them take you to the second crime scene. Your odds of survival go down."

I didn't want to go wherever he was taking me-especially out of the city, but if he'd wanted to shoot me, he could have done so a long time ago. So, point for him. And to be honest, the careening had sent us in this direction away from town. I didn't think now was the time to bring that up.

"Gun." He held out his hand, calm in a way I hadn't seen before. Like he'd let go of some tension and made a decision. His gaze flicked repeatedly from rearview to the road.

I ponied up the pistol. "Look. I'm sorry, but I didn't sign up for the St. Valentine's Day Massacre."

"And that's what's going to get us both killed, Cara. Because Mel did and you're not Mel." He slipped the gun into what had to be a custom holster just to the side and angled under the driver's seat. "Which means we're going to have to do this the hard way. Hold on."

I grabbed the dash and held my breath as he hit the brakes and yanked the emergency while spinning the wheel. Our car wasn't small but we had turning radius to spare compared to the silent, relentless land shark we now faced. As I said, I'm an amateur but I'm not stupid. We were about to play a game of chicken and if the bad guy didn't give, we would surely swallow more than our recommended daily dose of iron.

"I'm not so sure this is a good idea." Well, I was sure, but I was trying to be polite. "I'd like to get out of the car now. Please."

"Weenie."

"They have guns."

"Yes, because you didn't shoot them."

"Which means they're going to shoot us, you moron." Okay, I was snippy. I admit it. This yahoo was about to get me killed. Again. I took back the point I gave him.

He must have decided he was in range again because he pulled the pistol from the holster and fired. The windshield had shattered sometime back. Targeting wasn't hampered by any pesky safety glass. It wasn't that I didn't appreciate his attempts to keep them from firing on us, but I found myself judging the speed of our car and trying to decide if a skid over asphalt on my ass would actually do anything for my cellulite.

Hunkster wasn't budging from his course. He could give lessons in focused. The man was in it to win it. Eyes on the prize. All those clichés which, quite frankly, were beginning to get on my nerves. What a load of crap. They were all code for "too stupid to quit." And I didn't care if he had silver bullets and nerves of steel. We were out-gunned. Even an amateur could see that. I shot a glance out the side window.

"In or out, Cara mia. Either jump or put your damned seat belt on. This isn't a game."

"You think?"

- **A)** *He squeezed off another round and as I watched fate bearing down on us, I realized he actually had a plan. The last SUV still following us after our careening episode had four wheels on that bridge and nowhere to go but through us or through the railing. Heaven help me. I was trapped in a car with a cowboy determined to replay the Gunfight at the O.K. Corral. We had to hope the other guy flinched first.*

- **B)** *"Seriously, put your seat belt on."*

He didn't look to see if I obeyed, which would probably have pissed me off, truth be told. He slammed on the brakes again and put the car into the weeds at the edge of the bridge. The car tilted, teetered and slammed hard as we found the sloping embankment. I took a hard return trip to the floorboard muttering, "Rat bastard." He knew I hadn't fastened my belt. Just like he knew all along he wasn't going to push the chicken game.

Not an inch of my body escaped bruising as I clawed my way back into the seat, taking a nice jolt to my head from the door support as the car hit a rut that must've exited in China. Instead of stars, I saw one of those long flat-bottomed fishing boats. And, thankyouJesus, it had a motor. A trolling motor.

- **C)** *"I'm pretty sure it's not a game."*

That's when I noticed the blood on the steering wheel, seeping through the cuff of his shirt to drip on his leg. Most of his left sleeve was wet with blood.

"I'm really sorry, Cara mia." He slumped.

- **D) His equally snappy reply was cut off by the sick cough of a dying engine.**

I sputtered right along with the car. "You have got to be kidding me."

"I rarely joke. Jump!"

Written by **Debra Dixon** [web site] [blog] [reader responses]

Chapter 5

Why do the pretty ones always have to be so crazy? I curled my fingers around the door handle, took a deep breath, and pushed it open. "For the record, I think this is a very bad idea!"

"Lady, if you don't jump..."

"What? You'll kill me?" The car slowed and started to jerk. "This has a huge suckage factor!"

He shoved me then, and I started plotting his murder the second I landed on the ground. I hit the side of the embankment seconds before he rolled on top of me. Breathless, I closed my eyes at the sickening sound of metal crunching.

"Get off me, Bucko!" I shoved my shoulder into his chest.

He groaned and rolled off me. "Are you alright?"

"You pushed me out of a moving car, Jerk Face." I pushed myself to my knees and glanced around. "Is she gone?"

"I'd rather not wait around to find out."

I took the hand he held out and let him pull me to my feet. "Look, pretty boy, I don't know what you are into here..."

His hand clamped down over my mouth as he shoved me backward against a tree. The heat of his body was almost enough to make me forget how much trouble we were in.

"Why do the beautiful ones always have be to so mouthy?" he asked softly.

I clenched my teeth into his hand, but let go abruptly when two men with ginormous guns jogged past us and headed toward the tangled mess of the car.

Our eyes met in the darkness. I'm sure I looked like a co-ed in a slasher flick, wide-eyed and waiting to die, but his were hard, determined.

He tucked his face close to mine and spoke softly. "We'll have to move fast. No complaining, no bitching. I promise when we're safe I'll let you bitch at me the rest of your natural life. But, now, I need quiet. Do you understand?"

I could only nod. Amateur, yes. Scared, yes. Too stupid to live, big fat no. I wanted to survive. I wanted to find out if Mr. Too Sexy for Words lived up to his nose.

I closed my eyes as his hand lifted from my mouth and was replaced by his firm, warm lips. Tears slipped past my eyelashes as I opened for his gentle exploration. My fingers dug into his forearms, I wanted to hold onto the moment as long as I could. What would come next was just too hard to think about.

All too quickly, he lifted his head. "Ready?"

"Yes," I whispered. The man gave excellent reassurance.

He brushed the tears from my face, grabbed my hand, and pulled me away from the tree. Our pace was swift, and I did my level best to be quiet, but I'm certain I sounded like a heard of elephants moving through the forest all by myself. Stealth had never been a gift of mine.

"Where the hell is she?"

I jerked at the sound of the stripper's voice and Mr. Dark and Dangerous pulled me close and sought cover behind a large tree. Pressed between him and yet another tree, I sighed softly. "I hate nature."

He buried his face against my neck, a soft laugh escaping his lips. "Shh."

I was going to hold him to his promise. Bitching had always been a hobby for me; but after tonight, I was pretty sure I could make it an art form. The sharp sound of wood breaking to the left of us made him jerk against me, and he lifted his gun. Another movement, another breaking branch, and he fired.

The sickening thud of a body hitting the ground followed the report of the weapon, and I turned my head. The last thing I ever wanted to see was a body. A dead body. A bloody, dead body.

Okay, so I was getting a little fixated.

He moved, jerked me forward, and we started to run. Secret Agent Man was fast, and considering the death grip he had on my hand, I had no choice but to be fast right along with him. Screaming and cursing followed us, and it took everything I had not scream right along with her.

I was never ever ever answering my doorbell again as long as I lived. If I lived. The forest suddenly thinned, and I heard the sound of rushing water just seconds before we broke through, and I saw the river.

"Damn it," he swore.

The fun just kept on coming, didn't it?

- **A) "We have to cross it."**

"No way in hell." I took a step back. "Don't you dare push me, Pretty Boy."

He reached out and grabbed a fist full of my shirt. "My name is Jayson Brant. Special Agent Jayson Brant. And we cross this river or we die."

- **B)** *I started out into the water, and he grabbed my arm. "What?"*

He glanced back towards the woods and then down the river. "Let's go up and try to find another place to cross. The water is too quick here."

"It's not going to matter where we cross!"

His mouth tightened into a thin line. "I can't swim."

"Oh, you're shittin' me." I glared. "Dude, what kind of super secret agent man are you?"

His grip tightened. "My name is Scott Morrison, and I'm a vampire hunter not a secret agent."

- **C)** *We rushed out into the river together, the water soaked up my jeans up to my knees, and I swallowed a scream of shock at the cold water. "Hey, Roger Ramjet, you think we could manage to make this experience a little more miserable?"*

He pulled me up the bank and on to blessed dry land a little rougher than necessary. "My name is James Grimm, and trust me, this situation can only get worse."

- **D)** *"Don't move." The action of a shotgun being primed made my stomach clench. "I got her!"*

We turned together and he leveled the handgun at our would-be captor. "How much is your life worth?"

The shotgun swung from me to him. "Drop the gun, Jared. You've got no where to go."

"You know me, Carson." Jared stepped in front of me slightly. "You know what I'm capable of. You can drop your gun and get the hell out of here or I can kill you."

Written by **Deanna Lee** [web site] [reader responses]

Chapter 6

I howled in pain. He'd grabbed more than just my shirt. Let's just say I should've worn my padded push-up bra this evening. And I would have, too, had I known a hunk as gorgeous as this one was going to ring my doorbell—only without all the guns in tow. But no, I was wearing my skimpy lace bra that hooked in the front and offered zero protection to my poor nipple.

"Quiet!" His breath blew scorching hot in my ear as he nearly pressed his lips against it. "Now they'll know just where to find us."

I gritted my teeth, if only to keep from screaming in agony. "Nice to meet you, Agent Brant. Now would you please let go of my nip—I mean shirt!"

He released his death grip. I rubbed the flat of my palm over my sore shir—I mean nipple.

He lowered his head as if to look at my hand, and I self-consciously snatched it away. Sheesh. I'm not exactly in the habit of feeling myself up in front of hot-looking guys. Or anyone, for that matter.

But maybe he didn't notice—it was getting pretty dark now. "Listen to me, Cara—we have to cross that river."

I gazed across the expanse of water to the opposite bank, as panic swelled in my throat. "How? I can't swim. And aside from it being February, did my scummy backyard pool look as if I'd taken a dip recently?"

"Maybe I was too busy trying to avoid getting shot to notice the state of your pool. Never mind. We'd be sitting—or I should say paddling ducks anyway. What's to stop those maniacs from shooting us while we cross it?" He glanced around. "All right, let's

keep following the river this way until we can figure a way out of here." He grabbed my arm, his knuckles barely grazing the side of my breast. Hot excitement shot through me as I followed him, panting like a hound.

Was I lusting for this hunk, or was I just sweaty and out of breath from running for my pathetic life?

"Can't you go any faster?" he asked.

"Hey, be thankful you rang my doorbell!" I shot back. "Maybe you'd rather have old Mrs. Peterson trying to keep up with you in her fluffy pink bunny slippers."

"Mrs. Peterson doesn't have the package," he ground out. "You do."

"Look, I'm telling you for the last time—" Though I had the bleckiest feeling I wasn't even close to telling him for the last time, "—I don't have 'the package'!"

"You should've gotten it this morning. A big red, heart-shaped box delivered by a driver in a pink van."

My heart tripped as I lurched to a halt. "Did you say a pink van?"

He let go of my arm and turned to face me. "Yeah, why?"

- **A) "Because I saw one pull up in front of Mrs. Peterson's house this morning." The driver, dressed in a bright red jumpsuit and red cap, had delivered the old lady a big heart-shaped box of chocolates. And to think I'd hoped that delivery was for me!**
- **B)** *"Because I think I saw one—" I broke off my words as he swayed and clutched a hand to the side of his head. "Agent Brant, are you all right?"*

He gasped for breath. "Cara... remember when I was bleeding from the head in... the car... ? Well, I think..."

- **C)** *All I could blurt out was, "Who in their right mind drives around in a pink van? What sort of dumb secret agency do you work for, anyway?"*

"The same one that's been watching that little sleep clinic where you work. It seems they're also into—" And then a gunshot cracked through the woods.

- **D)** *I stared at him in shock.*

"Cara, answer me. Did you see a pink van, or didn't you?" Irritation simmered beneath the surface of his hot, sexy baritone.

"Yes," I whispered.

He grabbed my arm again, only this time his knuckles didn't brush the side of my breast. "When, Cara? Where?"

And then a glaring light suddenly flashed in our faces. "Freeze, both of you!" bellowed a man's voice.

Written by **Karen Lingefelt** [web site] [blog] [reader responses]

Chapter 7

I lurched to a halt. "Did you say a pink van?"

He let go of my arm and turned to face me. "Yeah, why?"

"Because I saw one pull up in front of Mrs. Peterson's house this morning." The driver, dressed in a bright red jumpsuit and red cap, had delivered the old lady a big heart-shaped box of chocolates. And to think I'd hoped that delivery was for me. No such luck. I got all the crazies, none of the chocolate. Then again, I ended up with Special Agent Hunky McMuscles and poor Mrs. Peterson ended up with a package of god-knows-what. Based on my experiences thus far, she probably intercepted explosives. With luck, she and her teacup poodle were still alive. "Is the package dangerous?"

"Yes." Brant guided me away from the river toward an invisible path between the foliage. "Money always is."

"Money? How much money?"

He shrugged one leather jacket clad shoulder. "Half the payment."

I lifted my eyebrows. He remained mum. No way was I letting him get away with his strong silent crap.

"Which, in people terms, is...?" I prompted, nudging his bicep with my shoulder.

His fingers threaded through mine. Maybe because he wanted to hold my hand, and maybe because he didn't approve of impromptu moshing. His dark-lashed eyes lifted slowly. "Two million."

"*Dollars*?" I screeched.

He slapped his free palm over my gaping mouth, filling my nostrils with the increasingly familiar scents of man and danger.

"Euros," he corrected softly. "Nobody asks for dollars anymore."

"You sent Mrs. Peterson two million euros?!" I demanded. Or tried to demand. With the warm strength of his hand still pressed against my lips, it came out mostly like, "Ew smurrgle smurrgle oh?!"

He apparently found my garbled outburst preferable to my usual commentary, because he kept his palm cupped over my mouth, tightened the fingers of his other hand around mine, and led me deeper into the woods.

No dappled sunlight streamed through leafy green branches. No leafy anything in February. Matted brown weeds and dry grey sticks covered the grassless ground. The skeletal branches of the densely packed trees loomed over us, their knobby limbs creaking like rocking chairs on a hollow porch.

Being the spooky time of night where the last of the sun's light sank below the horizon but the stars had yet to make their appearance, I didn't remotely mind clutching Brant's hand like a teenage girl at a haunted house. I did, however, mind the continual presence of his palm curved across my face.

So I bit him.

To his credit, he didn't scream like my brothers used to do when I had to get dental in retaliation. Nor did Agent Brant stumble. He was probably used to people taking a bite out of crime fighters. He swore under his breath and soldiered on. Fine. I'd give him something he wasn't quite so accustomed to.

I licked him.

Not any quick, sloppy, eager-puppy nonsense, either. A long, slow glide of my tongue across the length of his palm. He tasted like salt, like man, like... popcorn? Just to make sure he knew it was no

accident, I licked him again, partly because I'm a sucker for popcorn, and partly because licking him sort of turned me on. I traced a Valentine's heart on his palm with the tip of my tongue. Slowly. Softly.

He stumbled. Score.

Then he yanked his hand from my face, jerked me into his arms, and covered my lips with his. By the time my back thumped against the closest tree, I had my fingers jammed into his hair and he had his rock hard thighs plastered against mine.

I suckled his lower lip, teasing him. He slid a hand beneath my shirt, teasing me. My front-clasp bra proved no match for a man whose survival skills made Evil Knievel look like a sniveling wuss. Before I could say, "Good God, take me right now, up against the bark," his five o'clock shadow scraped across the underside of my breast and my nipple elongated itself into his mouth.

I would happily have continued in that vein for another twenty or thirty minutes, were it not for a faint metallic tinkling on the other side of a thatch of trees.

"What's that?" I whispered. "Sniper?"

Brant's lips paused around my nipple for a split second before he breathed, "No... bicycle bell!" and jerked me through the shadows toward the noise.

He refused to let go of my hand, which is why I was still fumbling with my bra clasp when we emerged onto a rutted bike trail. Brant may think he commandeered that royal blue ten-speed, but I take full credit for distracting a pre-teen boy with my bare nipple.

After tossing a couple twenties at the dumbstruck kid, Brant leapt onto the bike and hauled me into his lap. Well, the crossbar between the handles and his lap. His arms locked onto the handles,

his legs pistoned the pedals, and we careened through the woods so fast it took me five minutes to get my boobs situated properly.

I leaned back against Brant's chest. "Are we safe yet?"

"No."

"Damn."

"Why?"

"You promised as soon as we were safe, you'd let me bitch at you the rest of my natural life. Thanks to you, I flashed a twelve-year-old. I'd like to scootch the timeline up a bit so I can start my bitching now."

"Raincheck. I promise." He kissed the top of my head. The zipper of his black leather jacket dug into my shoulder and the barrel of his gun pressed into my rear, but I snuggled against him anyway. The heat from his body spread across mine. "First we have to find Imelda Branchos."

"What does she look like?"

"Right now?" He hesitated for a split second. "Like you."

He couldn't see it, but my eyes just narrowed. "How much like me?"

"Check my jacket."

I slid my hand into his pocket. I felt some keys, a few coins (probably euro), and a crumpled photograph. I pulled out the photo.

"Holy crap," I breathed, staring at a familiar pixie cut and dimpled smile. "It's me."

"No, it's Imelda Branchos. She just looks like you."

"Exactly like me. Is she... is she my secret twin?"

"Um, no. How cliché would that be?" He pedaled a little faster. "Imelda is the famous Latina double agent known to the U.S. government as 1000 Faces. She must've borrowed yours for her last assignment."

"Borrowed it?" My fingers dug into his thighs. "How do you 'borrow' someone's face?"

"Plaster of Paris."

Ah. Why didn't I think of that?

"Why didn't you think maybe I was the original, not the copy?"

"Once I saw you shoot a gun, there was no question." He paused, no doubt to reminisce over the loss of his safety glass. "But when you told me your name was Cara..."

I twisted around to stare at him. "What does my name have to do with some Latina 007 who let me keep my identity but stole my face?"

"Cara is Spanish for 'face'. I thought it was an inside joke."

"You secret agents are a laugh a minute." I glanced over his shoulder, half-expecting to see Stripper Girl following us on a pair of roller blades. "Who was the crazy chick chasing us?"

"Official intelligence believes her to be Nikita Kournikova, a lethal rogue operative and part-time ice cream truck driver. Or maybe it's Imelda having a little fun with another face."

My jaw clenched. "She's a laugh riot, all right. If I ever meet that woman, I'm shanking her with a machete."

His deep chuckle ruffled my hair. "You have a machete?"

"In my closet," I admitted. "Next to my collection of thigh high vinyl stilettos."

Brant sucked in his breath and said nothing.

We coasted in silence until I wiggled against him and murmured, "You have something against a woman's legs being encased in shiny, cherry-red vinyl?"

"Cara mia," he growled, "that's no gun pressing into your derrière, but it still might go off if you keep talking about vinyl stilettos."

Every man has his weakness. Glad as I was to have found his, I'd prefer his "gun" going off somewhere we both could enjoy it.

"I'll talk about something else," I promised. "I'll talk about work. That's plenty boring."

"Good." He shifted. Ostensibly to get comfortable, but I was pretty sure he just wanted to make sure I felt what I was up against. Literally. I hadn't been this close to third base since... well, let's just say it's been a while.

"I spend my nights as a researcher at a sleep clinic," I told him. "I stroll down the quiet halls in a little white nurse's outfit with bare legs and high heels and I bend over each patient to——"

One of his arms left the handlebar to lock around my waist, nestling my heinie tight against his... gun. "You're not funny."

"I'm actually not joking," I admitted. "The costume alone added a zero to my salary."

"No wonder," he muttered. "I could be talked out of my paycheck easy for a chance to see you dolled up like that."

I grinned into the breeze. "Swing by the sleep center any weekday after dusk and show me what you've got."

His hips tilted against my rear. "There's beds?"

"Lots."

"I'm there."

But we weren't there. When our bike burst free from the woods, we were:

- **A)** *Half a block from Mrs. Peterson's backyard. I couldn't see her, her poodle, or the two million euros, because approximately one zillion flashing cop cars cluttered the block. She must've heard me ask her to call 911 when I thought I was being kidnapped. Now we'd never get the damn package.*

- **B) On the bridge heading back into town. His car was still smoldering on the river embankment below. Firemen and cops dotted the river. Brant ditched the ten-speed for a police-issue motorcycle and beckoned me to join him.**

"Are you sure stealing a cop vehicle is a good idea?" I asked doubtfully.

"Of course not," he said with a sexy grin. "Get on."

- **C)** *Face to face with my twin sister. Er, I mean the Bitch of 1000 Faces, who took mine without asking.*

"Next time you wanna borrow someone's face," I shouted, "say 'pretty please'!"

Her smile was feral. I mean feral-feral, like a rabid cougar. And the way she leapt into the air at us... I was pretty sure I shouldn't have provoked her.

- **D)** *Oh. Wait. Yeah, that's definitely the sleep clinic. He obviously wasn't kidding about his desire to get horizontal (and I had to admit I wasn't against that plan, in general) but I had to believe a focused secret agent like Brant had an ulterior motive for instigating Bring A Hottie To Work Day. Were my employers somehow wrapped up in the evil schemes?*

Written by **Erica Ridley** [web site] [blog] [reader responses]

Chapter 8

When our bike burst free from the woods, we were on the bridge heading back into town. His car was still smoldering on the river embankment below. Firemen and cops dotted the river. Brant ditched the ten-speed for a police-issue motorcycle and beckoned me to join him. "Are you sure stealing a cop vehicle is a good idea?" I asked doubtfully.

"Of course not," he said with a sexy grin. "Get on."

What choice did I have? Give myself up to cops on the off chance that they'd believe I wasn't some international Latina double agent known by the US government as 1000 faces?

I'm not stupid.

So I hitched a leg over the back of the bike and settled on the seat behind him, sliding my arms beneath his jacket and wrapping them around his middle. Nice six-pack. And hmmm, he smelled good.

He gunned the engine. The vibration sent a tingle through my whole system. Talk about a thrill.

With a squeak, I tightened my hold as we zipped forward, the wind ripping through my hair. I'd like to think I looked like one of those models in some perfume ad: hair streaming neatly behind me, my face turned up and slightly toward the camera so they could see my sultry smile and kohl-black eyeliner.

But no. Not so.

My hair stuck to my teeth, my eyes didn't have a stitch of make-up and there was no camera. At least I hoped there wasn't. Wait, was I being Punk'd?

Naw. Nothing about Agent Brant gave me the impression he was in cahoots with Ashton Kutcher, or even an Ashton Kutcher-of-1000-faces wannabe. Besides, either those were real bullets flying around earlier or I'm not Cara Heart. Maybe I'm not. No, I am. I'm sure I am.

"Where are we going?" I yelled, trying to be heard over the roar of the engine.

"Your neighbor's," he yelled back.

At least I think that's what he said, since the wind kind garbled his voice. Poor Mrs. Peterson didn't know what she had in her possession. I just hoped my evil twin didn't figure out the package got sent to the wrong house. I was sort of fond of that little poodle when he wasn't nipping at my ankles.

Brant maneuvered the motorcycle through town and back to my neighborhood. In tacit agreement, we ignored the jibber-jabber of police dispatchers crackling through the radio. Suddenly, my breasts crushed against his back as the bike came to an abrupt halt. Untangling my fingers from their death grip around his nipples, I peeled my face off his leather coat and peered around his shoulder. We were about a block from Mrs. Peterson's, I figured, and we weren't going to get any closer tonight.

Oh, man. The place looked like a three ring circus. Lights flashing, police everywhere and poor Mrs. Peterson standing on her porch in her pink fluffy bunny slippers, looking very bemused by all the action while trying to hold on to her little poodle as it screeched like a half-crazed squeak toy.

I should go over to let her know I wasn't kidnapped. Well, not really kidnapped. Just a little kidnapped. Really, more like every-woman's-fantasy-napped. But then the police would take me in, and even spending Valentines Day alone would be better than making a virgin visit to the local jail. Or did probable con-women go straight to the pen?

At least until I figured out how to prove I'm me, I wasn't taking any chances. That should give me at least another day with McMuscles...I mean come on. Finger prints, DNA , the mole on my toe—my litany of excuses could only last so long before I had to accept all we'd ever share was the dusky memory of my boob and a the hilarity of flashing a very fortunate teenager.

"Uh, oh." My hunky escort muttered something a little less PC and gestured with his incredible nose toward to other end of the street.

Crud! A mammoth-sized black SUV rounded the corner and idled at the curb. It hunched like a bulldog in front of a food dish and I got the feeling it was waiting for things to clear. I wondered if the swirling red and blue lights made it as wary as they made me.

"Do you think it's..." I couldn't bring myself to say it.

"Yeah, I do." He gunned the engine and turned us around.

I clung to him as we raced away from my neighborhood and back into the dark streets of the city. I sure hoped Mr. Secret Agent Man had a plan because the big, black monster had figured out who had its bone.

I don't think of SUVs as speed demons, but maybe this one was supercharged because we couldn't shake it. Down one street, up another. No matter how many twists and turns we took, the hunkering beast kept coming.

My heart pounded in my ears. They were going to have to cut my fingers out of the Brantmeister's stomach. I buried my forehead in the hard depression between his shoulder blades and started praying for my Garmin. Then I heard him curse again and looked up in time to catch myself before another sudden stop almost threw me off the bike. Chain link fence. Hello!

Ugh! So much for my hunky spy having a plan.

He skidded us into a turn. The stench of burning rubber scorched my nose and hot bits of asphalt hit me in the cheek. Just as we righted at the alley's entrance, the beast reappeared. Now all we needed was theme song from Jaws to start blaring through the air.

"What's next?" I asked. There was no way we were getting out of this alive.

"Get off on my right," Brant said.

"Get off? Are you nuts?"

"Do you trust me?"

"Well, yeah," I replied, "Sort of." I mean, who didn't trust the guy who kept you from being killed? Or who kissed like he did? Not a good time to be thinking about kissing, mind you, but hey, if I was going to die here, I wanted one last kiss. So I climbed off, hooked one arm around his neck and planted a big one against the side of his full-lipped mouth.

A roar filled the air. My hormones charging up? No, he'd hit the throttle.

"Nice," he said, when I pulled away. But his gaze didn't stray from the SUV and I wasn't sure if he meant me or the fitting way we were about to die.

Obviously, next time I'd have to do a better job of getting his attention.

He slipped an arm around my waist and drew me against his side. "When I dump the bike," he murmured into my ear, "we're heading for that door."

His most excellent plan ran a tickle down my back. I looked to the right and sure enough, there was a door. Now it just needed to be unlocked...

He gunned the engine, planted his feet on the ground and let the bike zoom out from under him. I only had a second to marvel at the bike's upright blitz before Brant slammed into me and thrust me toward the door. Not bothering to check the lock, he kicked it open with his booted foot and hauled me into the yawning darkness beyond. The door banged closed, sealing us in.

And with any luck, sealing them out.

"Follow me." He dumped me to the ground and grabbed my wrist.

Yeah, right. Follow him in the dark. But I guessed the alternatives at this point were prison or death, so I fisted my hand into the back of his leather jacket and tripped along after him.

We'd just found a set of stairs when a second bang ricocheted down the hallway. Stifling my urge to scream, I stumbled up the steps and left Miz. 1000 Faces to find her own way. My breath came in painful bursts as we chugged up to what must've been Heaven at the top of about fifty flights of stairs, and only when I was pretty sure I'd rather give in than keep going did we finally reach yet another door.

Darn it. Wasn't there a bed somewhere?

There might not have been nookie imminent, but there was a little romance to be had. Wow, I'd never seen the view of the city from this vantage. But before I could really take it all in and savor the moment, Brant grabbed my hand and dragged me toward the edge.

Make that the tall ledge. Yawning gap between buildings. Flashes from Batman Begins made me sweat. There could only be one thing Mr. Secret Agent Man had in mind.

I turned to him. "You're a few fries short of a Happy Meal, McMuscles."

He didn't even blink. "We've got jump across."

"Did you hear me?" I asked, though by the determined glint in his eyes and the firm set of his jaw, it wouldn't have mattered if I'd had a bullhorn. He was probably calculating the fastest way to get us into the next impossible situation.

"Watch me," he said. He backed up several feet and then took off at a run. He used the ledge as some sort of inelastic spring board, and the next thing I knew he was sailing through the air, stretched out like Superman, flying over the huge space of nothingness to land in a tuck-and-roll on the next building's roof.

Dumbfounded, I stared. Whoa! The man was an acrobat as well as spy. Who knew.

"Come on," he urged. "You can do it."

I shook my head, visions of me splattered on the street below enough to keep both my feet planted firmly on the roof. No way. I wasn't a gymnast. Nor had I ever taken ballet. I couldn't pull off a Shelly Long from the movie Outrageous Fortune, the one where she does some beautifully executed split jump from one Teton to another without breaking a sweat. Heck, I could barely jump rope.

"Just back up and run. You can make it. It's not that far."

"Forgive me if I find your opinion a little biased," I hissed across the divide. "If I tried that, I'd wind up being Cara jelly on your stud muffin self." If I was lucky enough to even get that far.

I took a step back, considering my options. And I kept backing up until I was all the way on the other side of the roof.

I'd need some good take-off prep.

Wait. What on God's green earth was I thinking?

The roof banged opened. I dove for the shadows and shrank back.

I was toast.

I squeezed my eyes shut and prayed for help. Prayed not to die. Prayed maybe the next time I opened my eyes, we'd be back at my front door and Agent Brant would be trying to pass himself off as a stripper – if God granted me that wish, next time I'd be smart enough to just let him in and enjoy the show.

The loud report of gunfire sent me scrambling farther into the shadows. My stomach heaved. I was going to be sick. I leaved over the side of the building. My jaw dropped open. There was a God. And He liked me.

A fire escape.

I slipped over the ledge and clung to the edge by my finger tips. The drop was at least a story. A sprained ankle, a broken leg, death. Just bend your knees when you land, I told myself. I let go.

I landed on my butt with an oaf. Thank Frito Lays for extra padding.

I didn't hesitate. I jumped up and shimmied down the metal ladder as fast as I could. Sparks flew over my head as a bullet connected with the ironwork.

I lowered my head and scootched down even faster. The drop to the ground from the last wrung was nothing. I landed, knees bent and pushed off to run full steam ahead toward the alley entrance. As I rounded the corner of the building:

- **A)** *I ran into a hard wall of chest. Strong arms wrapped around me, pinning my arms to my sides. Preparing to use my head as a battering ram, I flung my head back and froze as my very own super agent's face came into focus. "Come on," he said, "We've got to keep moving."*

- **B)** *I saw a man getting out of his car. Before he could close the door, I accosted him. "Give me your keys," I demanded as I elbowed him in the gut. The keys dropped to the ground. I snatched them and jumped in. I peeled out of there and headed to the only place I could think of: the sleep clinic.*

- **C) I skidded to a halt. The black SUV blocked the way. The side door opened and out stepped yet another crazy-looking stripper. Her smile was pure evil as she sauntered toward me. I glanced behind me. Dead end.**

I braced myself as blondie grabbed my arm in a vice like grip and hauled me toward the vehicle.

"Get in," she ordered.

I peered inside... and saw myself.

- **D)** *I found myself in the middle of a parade, marching merrily down the darkened street. I gave myself a shake, but I wasn't dreaming. Floats of various sizes and themes streamed past. A man dressed as a clown approached. His big red smile creeped me out.*

"Hey, what's going on?" I asked.

"We're getting ready for tomorrow's festival," clown guy replied as he continued walking, his floppy yellow shoes slapping against the pavement.

A float with a Pooh Bear theme passed and I hopped aboard, scrunching down beside a cut out of Eeyore. The float passed by the alley where the big black SUV was parked at a slant. I held my breath, expecting be fired upon.

I released my breath with relief when we made it past. But then my heart leapt in to my throat as I saw Brant running toward me.

Written by **Terri Reed** [web site] [blog] [reader responses]

Chapter 9

I skidded to a halt. The black SUV blocked the way. The side door opened and out stepped yet another crazy-looking stripper. Her smile was pure evil as she sauntered toward me. I glanced behind me. Dead end.

I braced myself as blondie grabbed my arm in a vice-like grip and hauled me toward the vehicle.

"Get in," she ordered.

I peered inside... and saw myself.

"Good evening, Ms. Heart." I patted the seat beside me. I mean, she patted the seat beside her. "Please, sit down. You must be exhausted."

I shook my head. And this time, I mean I shook my head. (Hey, if you think you're confused, imagine how I felt!) "Hell, no. I know who you are, Ms. Branchos, and I wouldn't cross the street with you, let alone get in a black SUV with tinted windows with you."

How stupid did I look?

She reached inside the jacket of her sleek, black power suit and I flinched, expecting her to withdraw a gun. Instead, she grinned and pulled out a small, black wallet, which she flipped open to reveal a very realistic-looking badge. Or, it looked realistic in the faint glow of the SUV's dome light, at any rate. "Allow me to formally introduce myself, Ms. Heart. Imelda Branchos, Anti-Terror Division, FBI."

I snorted. "And if I believe that, you have a lakefront property in the Sahara you'd like to sell me." Blondie still had a death-grip on my upper arm, her bright red fingernails digging painfully into my flesh. I struggled to wrench my arm free, to no avail. "Special Agent Brant told me who you really are."

She tilted back her head and laughed. "Special Agent Brant, eh? That Brixton, he's full of them."

"Brixton?"

"Cade Brixton, Jayson Brant, James Grimm, Roger Ramjet...that man has as many names as he has con jobs."

Special Agent Brant of the killer schnozz, hot lips, and impressive skill with his...gun was a con artist? No, it wasn't possible.

I swayed dizzily, and my fishnet-clad captor took the opportunity my weakness afforded her to shove me down onto the leather seat beside Ms. Branchos.

"I don't believe it," I said firmly. He'd saved my life more than once today. No way was I buying this imposter's line.

The woman of a thousand faces arched my eyebrow at me, further disorienting me. "Did he show you a badge?"

I had to shake my head in the negative. But then, there'd hardly been time what with the bullets and the kissing and the nipple-flashing.

"How about an ID?"

"No," I admitted.

"Anything to prove he's who he claims to be?"

I frowned. Damn, she had a point.

She rested a gentle hand on my shoulder. "Ms. Heart, you're not the first woman to be taken in by Mr. Brant's smooth talk and pretty nose. That woman who came to your door was one of his former marks. So is Ms. Rose here." She pointed to the scantily-clad musclewoman in stilettos who'd roughed me up.

I didn't answer. I'd been this close to buying Mel's story, but something about these strippers being in cahoots with an FBI agent didn't add up. Then there was the question of why the Anti-Terror Division would be after an Italian con man? And finally, why was Ms. Agent-of-a-Thousand-Faces impersonating me of all people?

I squinted to study her more closely in the dim light. It really was a remarkable likeness. And if it was done with plaster, I'd eat my little white nurse's hat.

"Let me guess," Ms. Branchos—if that was really her name—continued. "Mr. Bardini told you that I'm a rogue agent and that two million euros were delivered to you this afternoon in a heart-shaped box by a pink delivery van. Am I right?"

My shoulders slumped a little.

"It's all part of the con, Ms. Heart. If we hadn't intervened with our sting operation, he would have convinced you to withdraw a large sum of money from your bank account to pay for the delivery of the second half of the payment, claiming you'd be saving the world from me. Then he'd convince you to marry him in a quickie ceremony, withdraw the remainder of your money, and leave. Ask Ms. Rose. She'll tell you."

Ms. Bump-and-Grind nodded in vigorous agreement.

I was on the verge of believing her. I didn't want to, but it made a crazy kind of sense. Still... "Why is the Anti-Terror Division interested in this?"

"Because Mr. Brant funnels his ill-gotten gains to a terrorist group called PETOP."

"PETOP? Never heard of it."

"People for the Ethical Treatment of Poodles. They're violently opposed to the grooming of poodles. Say it violates the dog's dignity."

Thinking of Mrs. Peterson's beribboned toy poodle, I had a certain amount of sympathy for that position.

Hey, wait a minute...

"Are you telling me I was targeted because I live next door to a poodle?"

Agent Branchos nodded. "Exactly. Brant would have ‘napped the dog before he skipped town, thereby saving one more pooch from the ignominy of a bad haircut. Our plan was to intercept you before he arrived and put you in a safe house, while I impersonated you and spoiled his scheme. Unfortunately, things didn't go according to plan—"

Beside me, Ms. Tall, Blonde, and Barely Dressed eeped in alarm. I swung my head in her direction.

Jayson Brant, looking as yummy as ever, stood behind her, the barrel of his gun pressed to her temple. My stomach fluttered. With a nose like that, did it matter whether he was a special agent or a con artist with an unusual fondness for poodles?

"Hello, Mel," he said casually, looking past me to...well...me. "Long time, no see."

"Jayson," she acknowledged stiffly.

"I'm here to cut a deal. Let Cara go, and I'll let your trollop of a henchwoman go."

"And the package?" Branchos asked.

"Cara doesn't have it," Brant said. "The delivery went astray. Leave her out of it."

"Hmmm—"

"Hey, wait a minute!" I wasn't going to let them discuss me like I was some sort of package myself, to be bandied back and forth between them like a trophy. "Don't I get a say in this?"

- **A)** *"No!" Brant and Branchos shouted in unison. Well, at least they agreed on something.*

"Mel, I'm dead serious, here. If you don't hand Cara over, I'll blow this woman's head off." His gaze drifted back to me and his expression softened. "I won't let you down, Cara mia."

My insides softened like caramel at that look on his face, and I was ready to beg him to let me down—on a nice, soft bed—when Branchos laughed evilly behind me.

"Go right ahead. It's no loss, she's already dead anyway."

Suddenly, it all made sense: zombie.

- **B) "Of course!" they said in unison. Well, at least they agreed on something.**

I looked from Brant to Branchos and back again. I did my best to ignore the fact looking at one of them caused butterflies to take up mass migration in my stomach, while looking at the other made me feel like I was looking in the mirror.

One thing was clear. I had to take matters into my own hands. I had to find out the truth for myself.

I pretended to consider my options while snaking my hand closer and closer to Imelda's lap, where the wallet that held her badge lay, forgotten, between her legs. When I was within an inch of it, I struck like a cobra. I grabbed the wallet and launched myself from my seat, sending Gypsy Rose Lee and Agent McStudMuffin sprawling to the pavement.

I took off at a dead run, headed for Mrs. Peterson's. It was time for me to do a little impersonating of my own.

- **C)** *"Of course, Cara." Branchos spoke in soothing tones behind me. "Why don't you ask Mr. Brant to show you his badge and prove he's who he says he is?"*

Jayson's eyes narrowed, their glint steely even in near-darkness. "That's not fair, Mel. You know I can't do that."

Well, that was certainly suspicious.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because secret CIA operatives don't have badges or ID. It would spoil the whole effect."

Hmmm, he had a point. On the other hand, it didn't prove anything, did it?

I looked from him to my doppelganger and back again. Go with my heart or my head? Okay, not exactly my heart. The place I was going with was a little lower.

Either way, I made my decision.

I turned to Ms. Branchos and gave her a syrupy smile. "If it's all the same to you, Mel, I believe I'll go with him."

- **D)** *Before either of them could respond, a strange sniffling, scuffling noise issued from the backseat of the SUV. I turned to look over my headrest to find the source of the sound.*

Mrs. Peterson's toy poodle stared back at me with sad brown eyes. A gag was tied around its muzzle. What kind of monster gags a defenseless canine?

Okay, I admit, I'd thought about it more than once, but still. Wasn't that what muzzles were for?

I turned back to Branchos. "Lucy, I think you've got some ‘splainin' to do."

Written by **Jackie Barbosa** [web site] [blog] [reader responses]

Chapter 10

"Of course!" they said in unison. Well, at least they agreed on something.

I looked from Brant to Branchos and back again. I did my best to ignore the fact that looking at one of them caused butterflies to take up mass migration in my stomach, while looking at the other made me feel like I was looking in the mirror.

One thing was clear. I had to take matters into my own hands. I had to find out the truth for myself.

I pretended to consider my options while snaking my hand closer and closer to Imelda's lap, where the wallet that held her badge lay, forgotten, between her legs. When I was within an inch of it, I struck like a cobra. I grabbed the wallet and launched myself from my seat, sending Gypsy Rose Lee and Agent McStudMuffin sprawling to the pavement.

I took off at a dead run, headed for Mrs. Peterson's. It was time for me to do a little impersonating of my own.

On my street, blessedly quiet though it was, I found that Mrs. Peterson still had some company. I could face her alone, but I wasn't going to face the cops with whatever cockamamie story I managed to dream up. I sighed, standing in the winter darkness, a shadowy figure outside my own home. How had this happened? This went beyond, way beyond, a bad Valentine's Day. This was a nightmare, or a stupid comedy. I guess it depended on how it ended.

All I knew, suddenly, was that I was tired. I longed for the quiet halls of the sleep clinic, the gentle beep-beep of the brainwave monitor, the endless supply of beds, which the man with many names had suggested we might share together. It had seemed like not so wild a dream...

I shook my head. I needed to reclaim my senses and dump all of these people, including the handsome one. I needed my life back, which was looking much more appealing than it had that very morning.

I snuck back into my own house, my lovely warm house, through the back door, after retrieving my spare key from the bird feeder. I left the lights off, slipped off my coat (had I actually let him take off my bra in WINTER?), found my way to the couch, and said, "Ah."

Then I got a whiff of myself. A day of running, riding, jumping, screaming, and sweating had created a powerful aroma. I moved, still in the dark, to the bathroom, where I took a wonderful, steamy, fragrant shower, also in the dark—a remarkably sensual experience. I sang "Some Enchanted Evening," but I started too high and ended up squeaking out the last notes. Then I donned a fluffy towel and felt immeasurably better. Things were going to be okay. I was going to do this.

A shadow materialized in front of me. "Don't scream, it's me." Brant's voice came from the darkness.

I didn't scream, but I yipped. He leaned down to kiss me, but I turned my head and it landed on my cheek.

He inhaled deeply. "You smell amazing."

"You don't. Go away." My eyes had adjusted to the darkness of the hallway, and I could see that he was smiling.

"You shouldn't leave the key in the birdhouse," he said. "Very obvious. I'm going to borrow your shower. Want to join me? I bet I can make you sing even higher."

I blushed, remembering how very badly I had warbled. "No." My face was still heated, but not from embarrassment. I wanted to join him, very much.

He pulled me to him and gave me a real kiss on the mouth, a deep, delicious kiss with just the right amount of tongue. He pushed my towel to the floor with impatient hands, then stroked his palms up and down my shower-soft body. "Stop it," I said, biting his lower lip. "You think I'm easy, but I'm not."

"I don't think there's anything easy about you, Cara. But I like a challenge."

He leaned in for another kiss, but I bent down to retrieve my towel. "It's bad enough that I'd flashed the boy. But God only knows who could show up here: the CIA, Imelda and her gang, the poodle people, or whoever the hell you tell me about next. This day has been like a circus in hell. And I'm sure as hell not going to be naked when the next performer takes the stage. I'm going to be dressed and focused on my goal: getting that stupid package out of Mrs. Peterson's house, giving it to you, and bidding you a final farewell."

He laughed and moved into the bathroom. He was incredibly efficient. In barely two minutes, he came out smelling great and wearing nothing but a pair of jeans. I would have bet all my money he was going commando under there, but that was not something for me to dwell upon. Raising my gaze from that dangerous territory, I looked at his head wound. Clean, it seemed barely more than a scratch.

I tore my eyes away from him and stared back out the window at Mrs. Peterson's house. There was still a light on in her living room, although it seemed the cops might be leaving. Why had they stayed so long?

Brant was next to me then, too close, but his eyes were staring out the window, too. He had donned a turtleneck. Where had he gotten a change of clothes? Was he wearing mine? I wondered dimly. Now he was the one who smelled amazing. "Your plan's not going to work," he said.

"Why not? I have a spare key to her house. She gave it to me when she visited her sister in Cleveland. She told me to keep it in case she ever has a heart attack in there."

"The key's not the problem," he said. "He is." He pointed at a car sitting parked on the street, looking like all the other parked cars.

"He who?"

"That Lexus has a driver. See? He's sitting there keeping watch, just like you are. They couldn't get to the money with all the police around. But obviously the money is still there, because he's still waiting."

"And what about the girls? Stripper lady and mini-me? Are they going to show up, too?"

"I doubt it," he said grimly. "They're out of commission for a while."

I stared at him, shocked yet relieved. "So here's a new plan," I said. "You distract him, and I'll get the money."

"That could work," he said, touching my hair. "But I have a feeling you could distract him better."

- **A)** *I'd rather distract you," I said, inching toward him.*
- **B)** *Are you kidding me? Now you're going to pimp me out just to get your precious Euros? No way," I said.*
- **C) "Fine," I said. "I'm getting tired of the present company." And I left him sitting there on the couch while I donned a black jacket and some quiet shoes.**
- **D)** *"But we're forgetting one crucial thing," I said, sitting up straighter. "What about the poodle?"*

Written by **Julia Buckley** [web site] [blog] [reader responses]

Chapter 11

I stared at him, shocked yet relieved. "So here's a new plan," I said. "You distract him, and I'll get the money."

"That could work," he said, touching my hair. "But I have a feeling you could distract him better."

"Fine," I said. "I'm getting tired of the present company." And I left him sitting there on the couch while I donned a black jacket and some quiet shoes.

He moved like a panther toward the window. "Hold it, Cara. Looks like Mrs. Peterson is leaving with the cops."

I glided silently toward him and looked for myself. "She's taking her poodle with her. I bet she gave the police no choice. She's a feisty old girl, who'd likely kill for that dog."

"That's the way all animal owners should be."

So Steely Muscles is an animal lover. I felt my heart begin to melt, and warned myself to toughen up. When the police cars left, and the street was once again silent, I moved toward the door. I held my breath, waiting for Brant to stop me.

"You'd better hurry, before he gets out of his car and heads to her house to search for the money."

I had a strong urge to kick him between his two big toes. Instead, my resolve hardened and I slipped from my house, and keeping to the shadows, emerged right beside the sleek car.

"Hello, Mel. I was expecting you to pop up any minute."

Damn, he knows Imelda, but I don't have a clue in hell what his name is. "Well, well, Mr. Lexus. Seems we're both hot on the trail."

Through the open car window, he grabbed my hand. "You're always hot, Mel baby." He gave me a look that scorched my skin. I could almost smell the lust. He terrified me, but I'd be damned if I'd let him know it.

"Looks like a draw to me. Why don't we strike a deal, and share the spoils?"

"I might consider your suggestion," he said, running his tongue around his lips, "if you'll throw in a bonus."

"Like hell! We split the Euros fifty-fifty," I said, stalling for time.

His smile was lewd. "You know that's not the bonus I mean."

Mr. Lexus man wasn't talking money, he was talking sex, and we both knew it. I wanted to run, but his grip on my hand was like a vice, and I stood rooted to the spot. I licked my lips nervously, and the swine took it for a sign that I would accommodate him.

"Good girl. Get in the backseat."

"You've got to be kidding!"

He opened the driver's door and got out of the car, but he never let go of me. He was short and thickset, the kind of guy who possessed brute strength and wouldn't hesitate to use it on a woman. He opened the back door of the Lexus, but before he shoved me inside, he brought up his other hand, slid it inside my coat, and squeezed my breast hard. "We won't hurt each other, will we, Mel baby?"

I believe in tit for tat. I brought my knee up swiftly between his legs. He let go of my hand and doubled over. I looked straight into

the angry eyes of Jayson Brant. He brought the butt of his gun down on Texas Lexus's skull, and shoved the randy bull into the back seat.

"Get the box from Peterson's house. I'll make a quick run to the dump and be right back."

My legs trembled as I made my way down the street to Mrs. Petersons. I was relieved and, yes, I hated to admit it, but I was grateful to Mr. FBI man.

I opened the door with the key, and went inside. I didn't need to turn on a light, because the moon had risen and its glow came in through the front window. I saw the red, heart-shaped box immediately, and my spirits sank lower than a snake's hips when I saw it was empty. "Crap! The cops got the money!" I refused to believe it. "Maybe not. Something tells me Mrs. P is one crafty old gal."

My eyes slowly traveled around the room and came to rest on her big old knitting bag. Pure instinct drew me across the room. I went down on my knees, and pulled out some wool and needles. "Crafty indeed!"

The bag of Euros was pretty heavy, but I was so thrilled with my amazing discovery, I managed to haul the loot back to my house, and sank down on the couch to catch my breath.

The door opened. I thanked God and the Devil that it was Brant. "Did you get it?"

"She hid the money in her knitting bag." I held it up gleefully.

"You are one helluva smart, brave woman, Cara mia."

I suddenly began to shiver with delayed reaction. "I'm cold."

"That's because the window was shot out. You need some coffee."

We went into the kitchen and I made some coffee. When it was ready, Brant took a small silver flask from his leather jacket and poured whisky into the steaming mugs.

I took a few sips and groaned. "Hot damn, this is better than sex."

"If that's true, you've had very inadequate lovers, Cara Heart."

As we finished our coffee I glanced at the clock on the stove. "It's eleven o'clock. It's still Valentine's Day."

He took my empty mug and set it aside. "That gives us only one hour to celebrate this special day for lovers." His voice was husky, his hand warm and possessive as he took mine and led me to the bedroom.

I felt breathless and intoxicated, but I knew it wasn't from the whisky. He covered my mouth with his and kissed me. Thoroughly. His lips were demanding, and I gave myself up to the pure splendor of the man.

He slid off my coat, and what was underneath it. His firm fingers made short work of my lacy bra. He took off his own coat, and the turtleneck, then his powerfully muscled arms enfolded me, and we slipped down to the bed.

"Jayson..."

"That would be me." His kisses moved to my throat, along my collarbone, and down to my breast. He licked my nipple, then drew it into his mouth like a chocolate covered cherry.
"Sweet.....Luscious."

- **A)** ***His hands caressed my belly, then stroked my thighs, until I began to writhe. He was dark, dominant, and dangerous, and I wanted Jayson Brant more than any man I'd ever known.***

- **B)** *I shot up from the bed. "What was that? It sounded like broken glass. There's someone in the living room."*

- **C)** *A police siren began to wail. We sat up and listened, as it came closer and closer. A heavy bagging on the door, was followed by a loud voice. "Police! Open up. This is the police!"*

- **D)** *My eyes flew open as a bright light was shone in my face and blinded me. I groaned inwardly. I'd fallen asleep in Jayson Brant's arms and this was the price I had to pay.*

Written by **Virginia Henley** [web site] [reader responses]

Chapter 12

His hands caressed my belly, then stroked my thighs, until I began to writhe. He was dark, dominant, and dangerous, and I wanted Jayson Brant more than any man I'd ever known. I raised my hands and stroked down his broad, muscled back as our tongues tangoed. By the time I reached the waistband of his jeans his tongue had taught mine to fox trot and was now demonstrating a little known rumba from the highlands of Chile.

We staggered together toward my bed—which I'd made that morning, oh, thank you, God!—and fell together. He rolled, placing me firmly underneath, and reached for the zipper of my jeans. A short tussle later and I was naked as a jay bird and he was examining my creative shaving technique.

"Nice," he said huskily as he traced my heart-shaped pelt. "I've never seen anything like this."

"You should see how I celebrate Halloween," I purred, batting my eyelashes. He blinked and then a corner of his mouth kicked up. "Oh, yeah." His fingers had reached the point of my heart and I arched as he delved below the point, hitting the right spot on the first try. I do like a man with a sense of direction. I clutched his round, firm butt and gasped, "Bedside table."

"What?"

I felt myself blush. "In the bedside table. I've got condoms."

He smiled, slow and sexy. "They won't fit."

I felt heat pool low in my belly. "But they're extra large."

"Cara mia," he whispered in my ear. "I take extra, extra, extra large."

Oh, God, a size Triple X condom? I'd heard tales whispered in smoky bars just before closing from women who'd had way too many nachos and Long Island Iced Teas, but I'd always thought the fabled Triple X was a myth. Had I just hit the orgasm lottery or would I be crippled for life? I looked up at his face, dominated by a nose of epic proportions. Either way I was about to find out tonight.

Brant reached into the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out a foil packet the size of a paper napkin. It was black, it was shiny, and three giant X's were embossed on the surface. I watched as he tore the packet open with his teeth. What emerged was purple with pink racing stripes and a growth at the tip that wouldn't look out of place at an ocean aquarium.

He arched a brow just like Spock when he was about to tick Dr. McCoy off. "I hope you like

ticklers."

I was so excited I almost embarrassed myself by coming right there.

He had his jeans, socks, and shoes off in seconds. When he rolled to his back to sheath himself I think I may've heard a heavenly choir. Praise be, the schnoz did not lie. This man was hung like a Clydesdale.

I stretched welcoming arms to him. "Oh, baby!"

But a slight frown marred his handsome, big-nosed face. "Would you mind, uh, rolling over?"

Of course not. If he'd ask that we do it in a bathtub filled with green jell-o I would've hopped right in. In fact, so in lust was I with both the man and his magnificent member that it wasn't until he was at the point of no return, so to speak, that the sinister nature of the position we were in hit me.

Doggy-style.

The words whispered ominously in my brain even as my lover rustled behind me, trying to get just the right angle of approach. Could the tale Imelda Brachos told me in her car be true? Could Brant in fact be a member of PETOP—People for the Ethical Treatment of Poodles?!

I was frozen in a muddy mixture of lust, confusion, and horror when . . .

- **A)** *Brant leaned down and whispered, "Can you bark like a dog?"*
- **B) Mrs. Peterson and her poodle burst into the room.**
- **C)** *Brant did something that made me lose all coherent thought.*
- **D)** *I remembered that I was a lesbian.*

Written by **Julia Harper** [web site] [reader responses]

Chapter 13

I was frozen in a muddy mixture of lust, confusion and horror when…

Mrs. Peterson and her poodle burst into the room.

"Cara, he's coming!" Mrs. Peterson frantically yelled. "He's--" The old woman screamed the moment she saw the two of us in doggy style mode and immediately buried her face into the poodle she was holding. In turn, the poodle started barking at us in frenzied high pitched yaps, its beady little eyes reflecting about the same amount of horror I felt.

Obviously Mrs. Peterson wasn't yelling about Jayson coming. 'Cause we hadn't even freakin' started. Which meant someone else was coming.

If I had failed to mention it anytime before, people, my Valentine's Day sucked. Blowed. Yeah, that's right. You'd better notice the continual use of sexual innuendos. Because this is about as much as any of us were gonna get.

I snatched the sheet off the bed, in an effort to shield myself and scrambled off the mattress, knocking Jayson's naked butt off to the side. "Who's coming?" I demanded, wrapping the sheet tightly around me in a make-shift toga. "Who?"

Though Mrs. Peterson had stopped screaming, her poodle certainly hadn't. "My grandson!" she yelled over the yapping. "He's coming! And he says he's going to kill us all!"

Great. Now there was a grandson. Who was obviously pissed out of his mind. Like everyone else.

"Hello Mel. Hello Brant. Grandma. Let's finish this once and for all."

A cold knot formed in my stomach as I froze right beside the open door of my closet. Mr. Lexus himself stepped into the bedroom holding not one, but two guns in our direction. His hair stood up on all ends and his clothes and face appeared to be smeared with...something. Like he'd been rolling around in garbage. And the smell! Ugh! Jayson hadn't been kidding when he mentioned taking Mr. Lexus to the dump. Though clearly, Jayson hadn't dumped him far enough.

Everyone, including Jayson who had just finished yanking on his jeans, stilled and fell into complete silence. Everyone except for the poodle who kept right on yapping, only this time it focused all of its attention on Mr. Lexus as it pawed the air and leaned out of Mrs. Peterson's arms.

"Shut the dog up!" Mr. Lexus yelled, snapping one of the guns in the direction of the dog. "Shut him up before I blow the fur off his ass!"

"Harold, no!" Mrs. Peterson shielded her dog as best she could, and even tried to place a shaky hand over the dog's mouth. "Why are you doing this? You were supposed to help me and PETOP! Not cash all of our donations and take it for yourself!"

Harold? Pfff. I think I liked Mr. Lexus better. So anyway--

"Help?" Mr. Lexus snarled, flinging something mucky off to the side and leveling his gun back at her. "PETOP is nothing without me! Nothing! And I'm tired of not getting paid! I need the Goddamn money more than your stupid dogs!"

"It's finally catching up to you, Harold," Jayson finally said. "All of it. You might as well give it up." Jayson gestured toward me. "Mel, tell him."

The Mel bit I got. Been there, done that. But the whole telling him bit? Nope. Didn't get it. At all. Was I supposed to make something up? My brain wasn't exactly in high powered mode as of now.

Mr. Lexus snapped his gaze toward me and narrowed his gaze. "Couldn't do it, Mel, could you? Couldn't knock Brant off even after you told me over and over that you could. Told me that after we knocked him off and collected the money, we would quietly take off to Brazil and have a couple of bambinos. Were you lying to me? Is that it, Mel?"

I cringed and glanced over at Jayson, having absolutely no flippin' idea where I was supposed to take this. I hoped to God Mr. FBI man had something else up his sleeve. My brows came together. No, wait. He wasn't even wearing a shirt. Crapity, crap, crap, crap.

Jayson's dark eyes darted over to me. He slowly lowered his unshaven chin and there was now a dangerous look about him. "So you were planning to knock me off?" he hollered, angrily waving a hand toward me. "So was this before or after you claimed to love me? I thought we had something special."

Great. The guy was going to get us all shot. In the head. If only...

I paused, suddenly remembering something, and out of the corner of my eye glanced toward the open closet next to me. And sure enough, in full view was my black leather handled iron machete. Right next to my collection of thigh-high vinyl stilettos. Bingo.

Though come to think of it...I hadn't really done too well aiming a gun, had I? The likelihood that I was going to skewer everyone in the room, including myself, was probable. Very probable.

"She doesn't love you, Brant!" Mr. Lexus now pointed both guns at Jayson. His hands were visibly shaking, as if he'd pull both triggers at any moment. "She can't stand you! Tell me all the time about how you're always taking her assignments, making her look bad! She loves me, damn it! Me! Ain't that right, Mel baby? Tell him!"

Whoa-whoa-WHOA! To go from absolutely no dates in two years to two desperate proclamations of love in a single night was WAYYYYYYYYY too much for this sleep deprived girl to handle. Which is why you could say I finally lost it. But then it's not like I had much to lose (well, except maybe my life, ehm). So I...

- **A) dove for the machete.**

- **B)** *sucked it up and played the greatest role ever bestowed upon a non-Hollywoodonian. Placing my hands on my sheet wrapped hips, I casually turned toward Jayson and drawled, "Brant, honey, I'm sorry. I was just using you. Using you all along."*

- **C)** *screamed at the top of my lungs, "The first man to bring me a box of chocolates is who I'm going with, people! And I mean it! It's freakin' Valentine's Day and I want my chocolate!"*

- **D)** *stripped the sheet from my body and tossed it off to side, ready to use what my Mama gave me. And of course, save us all.*

Written by **Delilah Marvelle** [web site] [reader responses]

Chapter 14

I dove for the machete.

"All right, I've had enough!" I screamed, brandishing the machete like an unlimited charge card at a Nordstrom's One Day Sale.

"Holy crap, Mel! Take it easy with that thing." Jayson held up his hands, eyeing the slashing blade with genuine concern as one of my wilder swings nearly reduced his condom size from Emperor to Mini Mouse.

"Take it easy? Take it *easy!* It's freakin' Valentine's Day! My house is shot up, my pool's shot up! Harold here busts in waving guns in my face-and neither one of you boneheads who claims to love me has sent me anything for Valentine's Day. Not even chocolate!" I gave a primal scream and leaped towards Mr. Lexus, slashing the machete through the air again for emphasis. "I need chocolate, dammit! I'm a woman on the edge!"

Mrs. Peterson's poodle, agitated by the whipping edges of the sheet wrapped around my body, leaped from her arms and attacked my sheet hem in a wild poodle frenzy.

The sheet fell free, giving gun-toting Harold an unimpeded, eye-popping view of my naked boobs and whimsical heart-shaped trim job.

He dropped his guns. They went off with a bang.

I screamed and lost my grip on the machete. The poodle burst into a series of earsplitting yips.

Mrs. Peterson cried, "Twinkles!" as tufts of curly white poodle hair flew up in the air.

Jayson dove for the guns and wrestled Harold for possession. I dove for the machete and wrestled the poodle trying to get my sheet back. Thanks to my accidental machete whack, the aggressive little furball now sported a half-mohawk instead of her earlier neat poodle poof.

Mrs. Peterson leaped towards me with a maniacal look in her eye. She plowed into me, grabbing my machete wielding hand in a surprisingly firm grip.

I grunted as I hit the floor. The pair of us grappled for control of the machete while Jayson and Harold continued duking it out over the guns. Mrs. Peterson and I rolled back and forth, the machete waving wildly. Twinkles yipped again. More poodle hair flew.

Mrs. Peterson caught a handful of my hair and yanked hard. I replied with a sharp jab to her left cheek.

Her nose came off in my hand.

"What the--?" I stared in horror at the pulverized proboscis in my palm. Holy crap! I raised slow, fearful eyes to her face. One too many late night zombie movies left me half expecting to see some gory gaping hole where her nose had been.

Instead, I found another nose. A smaller, definitely younger looking nose. Sticking out from the hole in her face where her other nose had been.

"What the--?" I muttered again.

Mrs. Peterson gave a shriek and the battle for the machete resumed in earnest. Two more chunks of the woman's face fell off during out struggle, and her normally neat gray bun-a wig, I now realized-skewed around sideways to hang over one ear like a furry one-sided ear muff, then fell off completely to reveal long blonde hair. Who was this woman?

The click of a cocking gun hammer made us both freeze.

"Get up." Jayson held one gun to Mrs. Peterson's head and kept the other pointed at the now-subdued Harold Peterson. Jayson spared a quick glance and a charming grin for me. "You okay, Cara?"

I nodded. "What the heck is going on here? Who is she?" I grabbed my sheet and wrapped it around my body-or at least the parts of it that weren't being enthusiastically masticated by Twinkle's tiny canines.

Jayson prodded Mrs. Peterson with his gun. "Ditch the disguise."

With a fulminating glare, Mrs Peterson peeled off what was left of her crumbling flesh-toned mask.

"Cara Heart…meet Imelda Branchos."

Imelda? "But I thought-" I broke off in confusion. It was very late, and I'd had all the twists and turns I could take for one night. None of this made any sense. "If she's Imelda, then who was the other Imelda? The one who looked like me?"

Jayson shrugged. Magnificently. I have to give props where they're due. The man had a fine pair of shoulders. "One of her look-alikes, no doubt, meant to throw us off the track of the real Imelda."

"I don't understand."

"I'm finally beginning to," Jayson said. "It's a triple cross. Mrs. Peterson-the real, Mrs. Peterson-is the treasurer of PETOP, and she had access to all the accounts. Imelda must have seduced dough-boy here into double-crossing his grandma, stealing the account access codes, and then set you up, Cara, to take the fall when the money came up missing. All while she passed herself off as the innocent Mrs. Peterson and waltzed away scot-free with two million Euros. What'd you do, Mel, sleep with the delivery van guy so he'd purposely deliver the money to Mrs. Peterson instead of Cara?"

"What?" Harold stared at Imelda in shock. "You meant to have the money delivered to Grammy? You were planning to take it for yourself all along? You mean…you don't really love me?"

"Of course I don't love you, you buffoon!" Imelda sneered. "Who could love a whiny little grandma's boy like you? My plan was brilliant-and it would have worked too, if not for you, Brant, and that cheap little tart-and that little dog too!"

Twinkles, now sporting a full sleek and spiky Mohawk and a kick-ass abstract body-shave, growled, gave a series of ear-splitting high-pitched barks, and trotted over to lift a leg over Imelda's furry pink bunny slipper.

"Why you mangy little-"

"Hey!" I snatched up Twinkles and glared at the pretend protector of poodle pulchritude. "Back off the dog."

An hour later, as the clock struck midnight on my sex-and-chocolate deprived Valentine's Day, I stood beside the bullet-riddled remains of my front door and watched Imelda Branchos and Harold Peterson ride away in the back of an FBI vehicle. An ambulance carrying the real Mrs. Peterson, who'd been discovered in her bedroom closet bound with a dog leash and gagged with a chew-toy, had left a few minutes earlier.

Once again fully clothed and looking positively edible, Special Agent Jayson Brant stood on my front porch and said his goodbyes. "Look, I've got to wrap things up at the office, then fly up to DC to tie up loose ends with the PETOP task force. I don't know how long I'll be gone. A couple weeks, at least. Maybe I'll see you around when I get back?"

I smiled-bravely, I thought. "Sure. Around." I'd dated enough sexy hunks to recognize a euphemism for never when I heard one. This was it then. Finito. A crappy end to a crappy Valentines. I clutched Twinkles, whom I'd agreed to poodle-sit for the night, and tried not

to cry as the hunkiest man I've ever almost had sex with prepared to walk back out of my life. "I understand."

"Brant!" Jayson's partner shouted from the car by the curb. "Let's move!"

"Gotta run." Jayson leaned down to give me a quick kiss…then lingered to turn that kiss into a bone-melting, better-than-chocolate, tonsil-tickling smoochfest. The kind of kiss that made me forget about chocolate and flowers and crappy Valentines and start thinking about supersized condoms and trying all sixty-four positions of the Kama Sutra. When the kiss ended, we were both breathing hard. "See you around, Cara."

Then he was gone. When the tail lights of his black sedan disappeared around the corner, I glanced down at the Mohawk-sporting poodle in my arms and sighed. "Got any chocolate covered dog biscuits, Twink?"

* * *

Four weeks later, my newly-restored doorbell chimed. I peered through the peephole of my brand new, bullet-hole-free front door and found the entire fish-eye lens filled with the padded scarlet satin of large heart-shaped box.

"Special delivery for Cara Heart."

I knew that voice. Low, sultry, as meltingly sinful as my favorite chocolate. I unhooked the chain and opened the door.

Wearing a pair of snug jeans and a black leather jacket and holding the biggest box of chocolate I'd ever seen, Special Agent Jayson Brant flashed his killer smile and said, "Hi Cara. I've got a package for you."

"I can see that," I purred, but I wasn't looking at the chocolate. I stepped aside to let him in, taking the box of chocolates from him

and tossing them on the entry table. "It's a little late for Valentines."

"Don't say that." He bent down to nibble my lips. "I was hoping you'd still be wearing your heart."

"Sorry, Jayson." I shook my head. "I'm celebrating St. Paddy's Day now." As his eyes lit up, I gave a sultry smile and guided his hands to my jeans. "Feeling lucky?"

THE END

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