

TAKE THE SHOT

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“Ministers don’t usually have a lot of enemies, do they?” she asked.

“Not usually.”

“Could this have been some sort of drive-by shooting? Just a random thing, I mean?”

“Did you see anything that might suggest this?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I was just wondering.”

“We don’t know much yet, Ms. Anders.” He laid his card on the table, then stood, grace and elegance in every move. By contrast, Officer Hastings nearly knocked the chair over when he stood. “Can I call someone for you?” Lt. Parker asked.

Lisa thought of Amy. But then she remembered the “big” date tonight. “Thank you for the offer, Lieutenant.” She smiled wanly. “But I don’t know anyone available tonight.”

He nodded. “Will you call me if you discover that reason?”

“Yes, I will,” she said firmly.

“We can let ourselves out,” he said.

She watched them leave, watched the door latch behind them, walked tiredly over to close the bolt lock, managed to get as far as the couch, then collapsed upon it, crying once again.

It was after midnight, when it came to her. The reason for running, the tears, and the rising fears. Then it all crashed down upon her, a pain that could not be erased by tears.

She had struggled so, these last nine years. She felt confident about her writing in a balanced way. Yes, there was much to be learned, but her present skills produced consistently good material.

It had been more difficult to rebuild confidence in herself. She felt she had done well, except for her hangups about sexual matters.

Now all had vanished. A man she didn’t know had decided she must die. She would leave this city she had come to love as she had once been forced to leave her home. And to leave her friends, as she had back then. And she must abandon her dreams of writing.

It was after two, lying on her pillow, gripping the .38 beneath it, that she asked the questions she knew would haunt her for

a considerable time. She would leave; it was the only sensible thing to do.

But where would she go? Who would she be when she got there?

Chapter 1

TODD HALLSTER laid down the fork and chewed slowly on the last bite of the delicious sirloin steak. Delightful scents and aromas wafted from the kitchen out over the service counter into the cozy room.

The chocolate-brown eyes overflowed with curiosity as he looked about once more. The broad lips curled up at the corners, giving a sense of a smile, of secrets discovered still unknown to others.

The norm here was contented people enjoying good food. A baby cried behind him and a woman cooed softly. The occasional boisterous shriek of a youngster blended with laughter. In the back room, a crowd was singing *Happy Birthday* with more vigor than talent.

He smiled. These were sounds he enjoyed. He had already added Pop Pa Joe's to his mental list. Now he underlined it.

A man of shoulders, the power was largely hidden by the loose fitting, khaki, hip-length jacket. There was an outdoor look about him, hints of snowy, rocky peaks sparkling in bright sunlight.

He reached for his wallet, pulled out a twenty, then dropped it on top of the check, each move deliberate, precise. He was about to stand, when a young women rushed in from the parking lot behind the restaurant. He was surprised at how intensely she captured his attention. He eased back into the chair. Sure, she was tall, with that willowy-slender look he liked, but that wasn't it.

The light, bright, blue eyes were remarkable, particularly in contrast to the near-white Nordic complexion. She moved quickly

between tables as she examined all hastily. When she turned his way, he knew her destination had been determined.

His habitual curiosity was suddenly intensified as her glance locked onto his. He had an unexpected urge to stand and greet her. Then she was upon him. She positioned the chair opposite him, then sat down quickly with an easy grace, a sense of flying skirts, long, slender legs, and female.

"I'll only be a moment," she said in a rich, full contralto. She reached for the water pitcher, filled the glass in front of her, then drank thirstily. She was breathing heavily, as if she'd been running before hurrying inside.

Todd noticed the light, easy mood lingering after a delightful lunch had suddenly vanished. It had been replaced by another, well remembered. He was ready. But what had triggered the change, he wondered.

His feet were now positioned under the chair for a quick exit. He was automatically examining each motion noted. Only when certain no threat lay behind it, did he consider the next. He was keenly aware that the pistol was not available under his left arm.

"Why me?" he asked with an easy smile.

"You were the only man seated alone," she said in a rush. The smile was forced. As she lifted the glass for another sip, he studied the eyes closely. Then he saw it.

Fear was hunkered down low behind the bright intensity. For an instant, he thought he saw something more. Then it was gone. And he wasn't sure he'd seen anything at all.

"The fates have stated their wishes." He spoke quietly as was his habit, but the resonant baritone carried.

"I missed what they said."

"That we only need to decide between your place and mine."

"You have a married look."

"Henpecked? Or abused maybe?"

"You just look married."

"I'm not." He leaned forward. "You're a great looking chick. . . ."

"Woman," she corrected.

He continued as if she hadn't interrupted. "Would you like the job?"

She tossed him a glance overflowing with scoffing scorn.

"I didn't catch the name," he commented, leaning back.

"Lisa Anders," she said evenly. She didn't offer her hand.

"Todd Hallster," he said, settling for a nod to acknowledge the introduction. "What is it you want of me?"

"Nothing at all," she snapped.

"What are you afraid of?"

"You, at the moment."

"Yeah," he sighed. "I always have that effect on women." He shook his head. "Could we get down to it?"

"Somebody is following me. I only want to get away."

She didn't seem whacked out. Or paranoid. He'd seen his share of such types. "Why not just go home?"

She shook her head, then tucked an errant strand of hair back over her ear. "It isn't safe," she said. The fear was more pronounced. The growing tension in her shoulders and neck was easy to see.

"What makes it unsafe?"

"That's my business, not yours."

He reached up and tugged at his ear for several moments, examining her tautly drawn features, particularly the remarkable eyes. He slipped his cell phone out and said, "Want me to call a cop?"

She shook her head decisively.

"Why not?" he asked, tucking the phone away.

"It may be the police who are following me."

She was wearing a long, pale, blue jacket that tended to erase individual features. Not much of the plain white blouse was visible. There was only a hint of breasts. If she had meant to hide her body with her clothes, she'd done an excellent job. It was easy, though, to remember the long, slender legs.

"That's both rude and crude," she snapped.

"Trying to figure what you look like?"

"It's impolite and disrespectful."

"Uhhh."

“You’re a chauvinist.”

He nodded, watching her eyes. “One of the last of a nearly extinct species.”

“Another man who doesn’t get it,” she muttered with a sigh.

“A ‘True Believer.’” He shook his head in mock despair. “Where do you girls . . .”

“Women.”

“. . . collect those twisted absurdities you seem to cherish?”

Lisa took another sip of water and stared at the red and white checkered table cloth.

Todd straightened when he saw two men rush inside through the rear entrance. He forced a broad smile and gazed at Lisa as he watched them peripherally.

“What is that silly grin for?” she demanded.

“Two serious looking dudes . . .”

“Men.”

“. . . just came in the back way. If they’re looking for you, they won’t be expecting a happy couple over lunch.”

When she started to turn, he said quickly, “No. Nod your head as if agreeing with me. Ignore them.”

“This is silly,” she snapped, nodding her head.

“They may be cops,” he murmured. They had quickly scanned the small crowded room. They were now headed for the entrance to the private dining room and the party sounds drifting out from the entry.

“If you want to get loose, do exactly as I say.”

“Or else?”

“I’ll get on about my business and leave you to yours.”

As the two men stepped into the entrance to the back room, he stood, smiling broadly at Lisa. “Stand up and take my arm. Laugh as we walk toward the door. Make like we haven’t a care.”

Her eyes examined him closely; she was clearly unprepared for his size. She trembled with uncertainty. “Do it.” he said, without breaking the smile. “Now.”

Suddenly she jumped up, tucked her arm in his, and they were moving. She tossed a lovely trilling laugh at the ceiling.

It caught him by surprise. She had that kind of tough he liked, and more than a touch of class.

“There’s an older baby-blue pickup,” he murmured, “parked in the middle of the next block to your right. A bunch of toolboxes line the bed. Once we’re outside, get to that truck and inside it just as quick as you can.”

He reached for the door to the left as she reached for the one in front of her. “What are you going to do?” she demanded.

“I’ll let you know when I figure it.”

As the doors swung closed behind them, he said, “Go.”

He needed a bar or wire, something to prevent the two outside doors from opening. He had such things in the truck, but there was no time for that. The instant he spotted the abandoned shopping cart forty feet up the sidewalk, he moved quickly.

He scooped it up, dashed back to the double doors, then rammed the handle up under both doorknobs. He put his shoulders to the task, forcing the front of the cart as far toward the doors as he could with his foot. It wouldn’t stop anyone. He knew that. But even slowing things down could make the difference. He ran.

Lisa was scrambling in on the passenger side of the truck as he dashed around the rear toward the driver’s side. The two men had broken out and were coming hard. He glanced at the traffic starting up from the light beyond them. Then he dove inside and fired the engine.

“Wait,” Lisa cried, struggling to get the seatbelt latched.

He laughed as he shoved the peddle to the floor. The Ford cleared the parked car to his front, but not by much. With an engine not noted for its acceleration, screeching tires and honking horns assured him he’d annoyed several drivers.

As the truck lurched into the hard right at the corner, Lisa braced herself against the dash. He was still chuckling.

“What’s so damned funny?” she demanded, still struggling to get the seatbelt latched.

“You,” he replied. “Running for your life, so to speak, and worried about breaking the seatbelt law.” He shook his head, then laughed again. “Your priorities seem odd.”