



**D**etective Joseph Shanahan hated rain. He hated it about as much as he hated dirt-bag criminals, slick defense lawyers, and stupid geese. The first were scum, the second bottom feeders, the third an embarrassment to the bird family in general.

He set his foot on the front bumper of a beige Chevy, leaned forward, and stretched his muscles. He didn't need to see the metal-colored clouds forming over Ann Morrison Park to know he was in for a good shower. The dull ache in his right thigh let him know this just wasn't going to be his day.

Once he felt the muscles stretch and warm, he switched legs. Most of the time, the only reminder that a 9mm slug had torn through flesh and changed his life was the five-inch scar puckering his thigh. Nine months and countless hours of intense physical therapy later, he was able to forget the rod and pins screwed to his femur. Except when it rained and the change in barometric pressure caused it to throb.

Joe straightened, rolled his head from side to side like a prize fighter, then reached into the pocket of the sweatpants he'd chopped into shorts and pulled out a pack of cigarettes.

2

He pulled a Marlboro from the pack, then lit the end with his Zippo. Squinting his gaze against the flame, he eyed the sleek white goose staring at him from fewer than two feet away. The bird waddled closer, stretched up its long neck, and hissed, angry orange beak wide open, pink tongue sticking out straight.

With a snap of his wrist, the Zippo closed, and he shoved the pack and lighter into his pocket. He exhaled a long stream of smoke as the goose lowered its head and locked its beady sights on Joe's balls.

'Do it and I'll punt you like a football.'

For several tense seconds they entered into a Mexican stand-off, then the bird pulled its head back, turned on its webbed feet, and waddled away, casting one last glance in Joe's direction before it hopped up on the curb and headed toward the other geese.

'Pantywaist,' he muttered and turned his gaze from the retreating threat. More than rain, shifting air pressure, and even slick lawyers, Joe disliked police informants most. He'd never known more than one or two who wouldn't screw over their wives, mothers, or best friends to save their own sorry asses. He owed the hole in his leg to his last informant, Robby Martin. Robby's double dealings had cost Joe a chunk of flesh and bone and a job he loved. The young drug dealer had paid a higher price – his life.

Joe leaned back against the side of the nondescript Caprice and took a deep pull off the cigarette. Smoke burned his throat and filled his lungs with tar and nicotine. The nicotine calmed his craving like a lover's soothing caress. As far as he was concerned, there was only one thing better than a chest full of toxins.

Unfortunately, he hadn't had that one thing since he'd broken up with Wendy, his last girlfriend. Wendy had been a fairly decent cook, and she'd looked downright amazing squeezed into Spandex. But he couldn't face a future with a woman who freaked out because he'd forgotten their two month dating anniversary. She'd accused him of being 'unromantic.' Hell, he was as romantic as the next guy. He just didn't act sappy and get stupid about it.

Joe took another long pull off the cigarette. Even if it hadn't been for that anniversary crap, his relationship with Wendy wouldn't have worked out anyway. She hadn't understood the amount of time he needed to spend with Sam. She'd been jealous, but if Joe didn't give Sam attention, he chewed up the furniture.

Joe exhaled slowly and watched the smoke hang in front of his face. Last time he'd quit smoking for three months, and he'd quit again. But not today. Probably not tomorrow either. He'd just been given a good ream by Captain Luchetti, and if he was going to get fucked over, he damn sure wanted a cigarette afterward.

Through the smoke, his gaze narrowed, then settled, on a woman with a mass of auburn curls hanging halfway down her back. A breeze picked up her hair and lifted it about her shoulders. He didn't need to see her face to know who stood in the middle of Ann Morrison Park stretching her arms upward like a goddess worshipping the gray sky.

Her name was Gabrielle Breedlove, and she owned a curio shop in the historic Hyde Park district, along with her business partner, Kevin Carter. Both were suspected of using the shop as a front for their other, more lucrative, business – fencing stolen antiques.

Neither store owner had a prior record and might never have come to the attention of the police if they'd stayed small-time, but they had bigger ambitions. A famous Impressionist painting had been stolen the week before from the wealthiest man in the state, Norris Hillard, better known as The Potato King. In Idaho his power and influence were second only to God's. It would take someone with a huge set of cojones to steal The Potato King's Monet. So far, Gabrielle Breedlove and Kevin Carter were the strongest leads in the case. A jailhouse informer had given the police their names, and when the Hillards had checked their records, they'd discovered that six months prior, Carter had been in the Hillard home appraising a collection of Tiffany lamps.

Joe took a drag off his smoke and exhaled slowly. That little antique shop in Hyde Park was a perfect front for a fence, and he'd bet his left nut that Mr Carter and Ms Breedlove had the Hillards' Monet tucked away until the heat was off and they could hand it over to a dealer for a wad of cash. The best chance for recovery was to find the painting before it passed to the dealer and went underground.

The Potato King was raising hell with Chief Walker, who'd turned up the heat on Captain Luchetti and the property crimes detectives. Stress caused some cops to reach for the bottle. Not Joe. He wasn't big on booze, and he took another calming drag off his Marlboro as he eyed his suspect. In his head, he ran through the hastily compiled file he had on Ms Breedlove.

He knew she'd been born and raised in a small town in northern Idaho. Her father had died when she'd been

young, and she'd lived with her mother, fraternal aunt, and grandfather.

She was twenty-eight, five feet ten inches tall, and weighed somewhere in the neighborhood of one hundred and thirty pounds. Her legs were long. Her shorts were not. He watched her bend over to touch the ground in front of her, and he enjoyed the view along with his smoke. Since he'd been assigned to tail her, he'd developed an appreciation for the sweet shape of her backside.

Gabrielle Breedlove. Her name sounded like a porno star, like Mona Lot or Candy Peaks. Joe had never spoken to her, but he'd seen her up close personal enough to know she had all the right curves in all the right places.

And her family wasn't unknown in the state, either. The Breedlove Mining Company had operated up north for about ninety years before selling out in the mid-seventies. At one time, the family had been extremely wealthy, but bad investments and bad management had dwindled the fortune considerably.

He watched her do some sort of one-legged yoga stretches before she took off at a slow jog. Joe flipped his Marlboro into the dew-covered grass and pushed away from the Chevy. He set out across the park after her and stepped onto the black ribbon of asphalt known as the greenbelt.

The greenbelt followed the Boise River and wove a path through the capital city, connecting eight major parks along its way. The strong scent of river water and cottonwood trees filled the morning air, while bits of fuzzy cotton blew on the breeze and stuck to the front of Joe's sweatshirt.

He controlled his breathing, slow and easy as he kept pace with the woman fifty feet in front of him. For the past

week, since the theft, he'd been tailing her, learning her habits – the kind of information he couldn't get from government, private, and public records.

As far as he could tell, she jogged the same two-mile loop and wore the same black fanny pack. She constantly looked about her surroundings at the same time. At first, he'd suspected she was searching for something or someone, but she never encountered a soul. He also worried she suspected his surveillance, but he'd been careful to wear different clothing every day, park in different lots, and tail her from different locations. Some days he covered his dark hair with a baseball cap and wore slick jogging gear. This morning, he'd tied a red do-rag on his head and worn his gray BSU sweatshirt.

Two men in bright blue running suits jogged up the greenbelt toward him. The second they passed Ms. Breedlove, they craned their necks around and eyed the sway of her white shorts. When they turned back, they wore identical smiles of appreciation. Joe didn't blame them for straining their eyes for one last look at her. She had great legs and a great ass. Too bad she was destined for a prison uniform.

Joe followed her across a footbridge out of Ann Morrison Park, careful to keep an even distance as they continued along the Boise River.

Her profile didn't fit that of a typical thief. Unlike her business partner, she wasn't in debt up to her eyebrows. She didn't gamble, and she didn't have a drug habit to support, which left only two possible motivations for a woman like her to participate in a felony.

One was thrill, and Joe could certainly understand the

pull of living on the edge. Adrenaline was a powerful drug. God knows he'd loved it. He'd loved the way it crawled across his skin and tingled his flesh and raised the hair on his head.

The second was more common – love. Love tended to get a lot of women in trouble. Joe had met more than his share of women who'd do anything for some worthless son of a bitch who wouldn't hesitate to turn her in to save himself. Joe was no longer surprised by what some women would do for love. He was no longer surprised to find women sitting in jail doing time for their men, tears flowing, mascara running, saying shit like, 'I can't tell you anything bad about so-and-so, I *love* him.'

The trees above Joe's head became denser as he followed her into a second park. Julia Davis Park was lush, greener, and held the added attractions of the historical and art museums, the Boise Zoo, and of course the Tootin' Tater tour train.

He felt something work free of his pocket an instant before he heard a plop on the pavement. He grabbed his empty pocket and turned his head to see a pack of Marlboros laying on the path. He hesitated several seconds before he retraced his steps. A few stray cigarettes rolled across the blacktop, and he hurriedly stooped to pick them up before they rolled into a puddle of water. His gaze shifted to the suspect, who was jogging at her usual sedate pace, then back to his smokes.

He placed the cigarettes into the pack, careful not to break them. He intended to enjoy every last one. He wasn't worried that he'd lose the suspect. She ran about as fast as an arthritic old dog, a fact he appreciated today.

When he returned his gaze to the path, his hand stilled, and slowly he shoved the cigarettes back into his pocket. All that greeted his well-trained eyes was the black trail as it wove through thick towering trees and grass. A gust of wind blew the heavy boughs overhead and flattened his sweatshirt against his chest.

His gaze shot to the left, and he spotted her cutting across the park toward the zoo and kiddie playground. He set out in pursuit. As far as he could see, the park was empty. Anyone with any brains at all had made a run for it before the impending storm broke. But just because the park appeared empty didn't mean she wasn't meeting someone.

When a suspect deviated from a set pattern, it usually meant that something was about to happen. The taste of adrenaline numbed the back of his throat and brought a smile to his lips. Damn, he hadn't felt this alive since the last time he'd chased a dope dealer down an alley in the north end.

He lost sight of her again as she ran past the rest rooms and disappeared around back. Years of experience slowed his steps as he waited for her to appear again. When she didn't, he reached beneath his sweatshirt and popped the snap to his shoulder holster. He flattened himself against the brick building and listened.

An abandoned plastic grocery bag tumbled across the ground, but he heard nothing except wind and leaves rattling above his head. From his position he could see exactly squat, and he realized he should have hung back. He stepped around the side of the building and came eye level with the trigger of a can of hair spray. A blast hit him

full in the face, and immediately his vision blurred. A fist grabbed his sweatshirt, and a knee slammed between his thighs, missing his berries by a mere half inch. The muscle in his right thigh cramped, and he would have doubled over if it hadn't been for the solid shoulder block to his chest. His breath whooshed from his lungs as he hit the hard ground flat on his back. A pair of chrome handcuffs, tucked in the waistband of his shorts, dug into the small of his back.

Through vision hazed over by Miss Clairol, he looked up at Gabrielle Breedlove standing between his widespread legs. He let the pain cramping his thigh wash through him, and he fought to steady his breath. She'd gotten the jump on him and tried to shove his gonads into his throat.

'Jesus,' he groaned. 'You're a crazy bitch.'

'That's right, just give me an excuse to shoot your kneecaps.'

Joe blinked a few more times, and his vision cleared. Slowly his gaze moved from her face, down her arms, to her hands. *Shit*. In one hand she clutched the hair spray, her finger poised on the nozzle, but her other hand gripped what looked like a derringer. It wasn't pointed at his knees but directly at his nose.

Everything within him stilled. He absolutely hated handguns pointed at him. 'Put down the weapon,' he commanded. He didn't know if the derringer was loaded or if it even worked, but he didn't want to find out. Only his eyes moved as he looked back up into her face. Her breathing was erratic, her green eyes wild. She looked unstable as hell.

'Someone call the police!' she began to yell frantically.

Joe frowned at her. Not only had she managed to knock him on his ass but now she was screaming her head off. If she kept it up, he was going to have to blow his cover, and he really didn't want to do that. The thought of walking into the police station with the number one female suspect in the Hillard case, the suspect who wasn't supposed to know she was a suspect, and explaining how she'd brought him down with a can of hair spray filled him with a sick dread that gripped the base of his skull. 'Put down the gun,' he repeated.

'Not a chance! You so much as twitch and I'll fill you with lead, you filthy scum.'

He didn't believe there was another soul within one hundred feet, but he wasn't positive, and the last thing he needed was a heroic civilian coming to her rescue.

'Someone help me – please!' she hollered loud enough to be heard in several distant counties.

Joe's jaw clenched. He'd never live this down, and he didn't even want to imagine facing Walker and Luchetti. Joe was still on the chief's shit list for the fallout after the Robby Martin shooting. He didn't have to think too hard to know what the chief would say. 'You screwed the pooch, Shanahan!' he'd yell right before he busted Joe to patrol division. And this time, the chief would be right.

'Call 911.'

'Quit screaming,' he commanded in his best law enforcement officer's voice.

'I need a cop!'

*Damn.* 'Lady,' he gritted between his teeth, 'I *am* a cop!'

Her eyes narrowed as she gazed down at him. 'Right, and I'm the governor.'

Joe moved his hand toward his pocket, but she made a threatening motion with the small weapon, and he decided against it. 'In my left pocket is my identification.'

'Don't move,' she warned him once again.

Her auburn curls blew about her head, wild and unruly, looking like maybe she should have used some of that hair spray on her head instead of his face. Her hand trembled as she pushed one side of her hair behind her ear. In an instant he could have her on the ground, but he'd have to distract her first or run the risk of getting shot. This time in a place where he was unlikely to recover. 'You can reach into my pocket yourself. I won't move a muscle.' He hated tackling women. He hated slamming them to the ground. But in this case he didn't think he'd mind.

'I'm not stupid. I haven't fallen for that trick since high school.'

'Oh for God's sake.' He struggled to control his temper and barely won. 'Do you have a permit to carry a concealed weapon?'

'Give me a break,' she answered. 'You're not a cop; you're a stalker! I wish there was a cop around here, because I'd have *you* arrested for following me around this past week. There's a law in this state against stalking, you know.' She sucked in a deep breath, then let it out slowly. 'I bet you have a record for some sort of deviant behavior. You're probably one of those psychos who makes obscene phone calls and breathes really heavy. I bet you're on parole for harassing women.' She took a few more deep breaths and tossed the hair spray. 'I think you'd better give me your wallet after all.'

Never in his fifteen-year career had he ever been so

careless as to let a suspect – let alone a female – get the jump on him.

His temples pounded and his thigh ached. His eyes stung and his lashes were stuck together. ‘You’re crazy, lady,’ he said in a relatively calm voice as he reached into his pocket.

‘Really? From where I’m standing, you look like the crazy one.’ Her gaze never left his as she reached for the wallet. ‘I’ll need your name and address to give to the police, but I bet they already know who you are.’

She didn’t know how right she was, but Joe didn’t waste any more time talking. The second she flipped open the wallet and glanced at the badge inside, his legs scissored around her calves. She hit the ground, and he lunged on top of her, pinning her with his weight. She twisted one way, then the other, pushing at his shoulders, bringing the derringer dangerously close to his left ear. He grabbed her wrists and forced them above her head, using the full length of his body to pin her to the earth.

He lay stretched out on top of her, her full breasts pressed into his chest, her hips pressed into his. He secured her hands above her head and her struggles weakened, yet she refused to give up completely. His face was barely an inch above hers, and her nose bumped his twice. Her parted lips sucked air into her lungs, and her green eyes stared into his, huge and filled with panic and fear as she fought to free her wrists. Her long, smooth legs tangled with his own, and the bottom of his sweatshirt was up around his armpits. Against his stomach he felt the soft warm skin of her lower abdomen and the flat nylon of her fanny pack.

‘You really are a cop!’ Her breasts rose and fell as she struggled to catch her breath.

He’d get up as soon as he secured her derringer. ‘That’s right, and you’re under arrest for carrying a concealed weapon and aggravated assault.’

‘Oh, thank God!’ She took a deep breath, and he could feel her relax, feel her turn all soft and pliant beneath him. ‘I’m so relieved. I thought you were a perverted psychopath.’

A brilliant smile lit her face as she looked up at him. He’d just placed her under arrest, and she actually seemed happy about it. Not the kind of blissful happy he usually put on a woman’s face when he found himself in this same position, more like a kind of deluded happy. She was not only a thief, she was ten-ninety six – definitely crazy. ‘You have the right to remain silent,’ he said as he pried the derringer from her fingers. ‘You have the right . . .’

‘You’re not serious are you? You aren’t really going to arrest me, are you?’

‘. . . to an attorney,’ he continued, one hand still pinning hers above her head as he tossed the handgun several feet away.

‘But it isn’t really a gun. I mean it is, but it isn’t. It’s a nineteenth-century derringer. It’s an antique, and so I don’t think it qualifies as a *real* gun. And besides, it’s not loaded, and even if it was, it wouldn’t make a very big hole anyway. I was only carrying it because I was so frightened, and you’ve been following me.’ She stopped, and her brows scrunched together. ‘*Why* have you been following me?’

Instead of answering, he finished reading her her rights, then rolled off to his side. He scooped up the small pistol

and rose carefully to his feet. He wasn't going to answer her questions. Not when he didn't know what he was going to do with her now. Not when she'd accused him of being a pervert, and a psychopath, and tried to make him a soprano. He didn't trust himself to talk to her more than was absolutely necessary. 'Are you carrying any more weapons on you?'

'No.'

'Slowly hand me your fanny pack, then turn your pockets inside out.'

'I only have my car keys,' she muttered while doing as he requested. With her keys held high, she dropped them into his palm. His hand closed, and he shoved them in his front pocket. He took the little pack from her and turned it inside out. It was empty.

'Place your hands on the wall.'

'Are you going to frisk me?'

'That's right,' he answered and motioned toward the brick building.

'Like this?' she asked over her shoulder.

As his gaze moved from her rounded behind and down the length of her long legs, he slid the small handgun into the waistband of his shorts. 'That's right,' he repeated and placed his palms on her shoulders. Now that he saw her this close, he realized that she wasn't five feet ten inches tall. Joe was six foot, and her eyes met his. He moved his palms down her sides, across the small of her back, and around to her abdomen. He slipped his hand beneath the bottom of her shirt and felt the waistband of her shorts. He felt her soft skin and the cool metal of her belly ring. Then he slid one hand up between the mounds of her breasts.

‘Hey, watch your hands!’

‘Don’t get excited,’ he warned. ‘I’m not.’ Next, he patted down her behind, then knelt to check the tops of her socks. He didn’t bother to feel for anything hidden between her thighs. Not that he trusted her, he just didn’t think she would have been able to jog with a weapon in her panties.

‘Once we get to jail, do I pay a fine and then go home?’

‘When the judge sets bail you can go home.’ She tried to turn and face him, but his grasp on her hips prevented it.

‘I’ve never been arrested before.’

He already knew that.

‘I’m not really being arrested like with fingerprints and mug shots, am I?’

Joe patted the waistband of her shorts one last time. ‘Yes, ma’am, with fingerprints and mug shots.’

Turning, her eyes narrowed, and she glared at him. ‘Until this very minute I didn’t think you were serious. I thought you were trying to get even with me for kneeling you in your . . . your private area.’

‘You missed,’ he informed her dryly.

‘Are you sure?’

Joe straightened, reached into the back of his shorts, and brought out the handcuffs. ‘There’s no mistaking something like that.’

‘Oh.’ She sounded real disappointed. ‘Well, I still can’t believe you’re really doing this to me. If you had an ounce of decency you’d admit this is all your fault.’ She paused and took a deep breath. ‘You are creating very bad karma for yourself, and I’m sure you’re going to be very sorry.’

Joe looked into her eyes and slapped the cuffs on her wrists. He was sorry all right. He was sorry he’d been

16

knocked on his ass by a suspected felon, and he was real sorry he'd blown his cover. And he knew his troubles were just beginning.

The first fat raindrop struck his cheek, and he glanced up at the storm cloud hanging over his head. Three more drops hit his forehead and chin. He laughed without humor. 'Fan-fucking-tastic.'