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SHE'D NO MORE than reached the top of the stairs when her mother and Ava slipped out of the TV room with big, expectant smiles.

"So?" Essie began. "How was it?"

"It was fine. It was a drink." If she'd been wearing socks, Phoebe thought as she aimed for her bedroom, they'd have blown clear across Jones Street during that good-night kiss.

Behind her back, Essie and Ava exchanged a look, then headed off in pursuit.

"Well, what's he like? What did you talk about? Come on, Phoebes." Ava clasped her hands together as if in prayer. "Give us dateless wonders the scoop."

"We had a beer in his very nice pub. I enjoyed it. I'm going to work out."

Another look was exchanged when Phoebe went to her dresser to pull out yoga pants and a sports bra.

"What'd you talk about?"

Phoebe glanced at her mother in the mirror, shrugged. She began to

strip and change. She'd lived among women too long to worry about nudity. "This and that. He used to tend bar and drive a cab."

"Hmm. So he's enterprising, isn't he?"

"You could say."

"Where does he live?" Ava pressed. "In the city?"

"I didn't ask."

"Well, for goodness sake." Essie cast her eyes to the ceiling. "Why not?"

"It didn't come up." Phoebe reached in the little silver trinket box on her dresser for a tie, whipped her hair back into a tail.

"What about his people?" Essie demanded. "Who are his family, his—"

"That didn't come up either. I sort of got distracted."

"Because he was charming," Essie decided.

"He was—is—very charming. But I was distracted, considerably, when he told me he won the lottery several years ago, to the tune of a hundred and thirty-eight million."

She sailed out on that, automatically peeking in to check on Carly before moving to the stairs and up to the third floor.

She'd commandeered what had once been a maid's room for a little home gym. An indulgence on her part, Phoebe knew, but it also saved a health club fee and meant she could get an hour in early in the morning or at night, after Carly was in bed.

Work kept her away from home enough without adding gym time to it.

She'd sprung for an elliptical machine, a few free weights, and even a small TV to play exercise tapes. Carly often practiced her gymnastics while she worked out, so that was the big benefit of more mother-daughter time. Her mother and Ava used the equipment, so it paid for itself.

In the end it wasn't only more convenient but more economical. At least that's how she'd justified the expense.

Phoebe smiled to herself as she set the machine and climbed on. Her mother and Ava were already at the doorway, gaping.

"Did you say *million*?" Essie demanded.

"I did."

"I remember that, I remember something about that." Ava laid a hand on her heart. "Millionaire cabdriver. That's what they called him. Local boy. Single ticket. Oh my God! That's *him?*"

"In the flesh."

"Well. God. I think I'm going to sit down." Essie did so, right on the floor. "That's not just rich, not even just wealthy. I don't know what it is."

"Lucky?" Phoebe suggested.

"And then some." Ava joined Essie on the floor. "He bought you a beer."

Amused, Phoebe kicked her warm-up to the next level. "Yeah. And pretzels. Then he drove me home in his Porsche."

"Is he slick?" Essie's brows drew together, and the frown line Phoebe had inherited instead of dimples creased between them. "That much money, he's likely slick."

"He's not. Smooth," Phoebe decided after a moment. "He's pretty damn smooth, but I have a feeling that's innate. He talked me into having dinner with him Saturday night."

"You're dating a millionaire." Ava nudged Essie with her elbow. "Our little girl's dating a millionaire."

Because the idea made her nervous, Phoebe bumped the resistance up another notch—on the machine, and in her. "I don't know about dating. I'm not interested in dating anybody. It's too damn much trouble. What are you going to wear, what are you going to talk about? Is he going to want to have sex—and there I say: Duh. Are you going to want to have sex, which actually does require some thought and consideration."

"Dinner," Ava reminded her. "Saturday night."

"Yeah, well, he's smooth," Phoebe muttered. "He's pretty damn smooth."

The scene was a little storefront operation. Jasper C. Hughes, Attorney at Law. The intelligence Phoebe had indicated that Hughes, one Tracey Percell and an armed individual named William Gradey were barricaded inside.

The tactical team continued setting up outer and inner perimeters. Phoebe grabbed her ready box and headed for the first on scene. She was already unhappy knowing it was Arnie Meeks.

“Situation.”

Arnie wore dark glasses, but she could feel the derision in his eyes as he stared down at her. “Guy’s got two hostages. Witnesses heard gunfire. When I arrived, the subject yelled out that if anybody tried to come in, he’d kill them both.”

Phoebe waited a beat. “That’s it?”

Arnie shrugged. “Subject claims the lawyer cheated him out of six thousand dollars and he wants it back.”

“Where’s the log, Officer?”

The way his lips curled, Phoebe wondered if he practiced the sarcastic look in the mirror.

“I’ve been trying to keep this asshole from killing two people. I haven’t had time for a log.”

“At what time was gunfire heard?”

“Approximately nine A.M.”

“Nine?” She could feel both temper and fear knot up inside her. “Nearly two hours ago, and you’ve just decided to send for a negotiator?”

“I have the situation under control.”

“You’re relieved. You—” She pointed to another uniformed cop as she pulled a log sheet out of her ready kit. “Everything gets written down. Time, activity, who says what and when.” She took out a notebook.

Arnie grabbed her arm. “You can’t just walk in here and take over.”

“Yes, I can.” She wrenched free. “The captain’s on his way, and Commander Harrison is in charge of Tactical. Meanwhile, I’m in charge here, as negotiator. Get the hostage-taker on the phone,” she ordered the cop she’d drafted as second negotiator.

“I’m the one keeping this from blowing up.”

“Is that so?” She whipped around to Arnie. “Have you spoken to either hostage? Have you ascertained that they’re still alive? If they’ve been harmed? If anyone requires medical attention? Where is your

situation board? Your log? What progress have you made toward ending this situation without loss of life in the damn near two hours before you deigned to call this in?"

She grabbed the phone, checked her notebook where she'd already written down names.

"I don't want to talk to you!" The voice that answered screamed with emotion and fury. "I said I'm through talking to you."

"Mr. Gradey? This is Phoebe MacNamara. I'm a negotiator with the police department. You'll be talking to me now. You sound upset. Is everyone all right in there, Mr. Gradey? Does anyone have medical problems I should know about?"

"Everything's gone to hell. It's all gone to hell."

"Let's try to work all this out. Is it all right if I call you William? Is that what people call you?"

"I'm through talking!"

"I'm here to help." She heard it in his voice, he was through talking and poised to act. "Does anyone need anything in there? Medical attention? Water? Maybe something to eat."

"I needed my money."

"You need your money. Why don't you tell me about that, Mr. Gradey? Let me see if I can help you with that." She wrote down *used past tense*.

"I said it all already. Nobody listened."

"Nobody listened to you. You sound angry about that. I understand, and I apologize if you feel your problem wasn't given attention. But I'm listening, Mr. Gradey, I'm listening to you now. I want to help you resolve all this."

"It's too late. It's over."

She heard the gunshot in her head a second before it blasted the air. She'd heard it in his voice.

The lawyer had a mild concussion, some bumps and bruises. The secretary was hysterical but unharmed. William Gradey was dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head.

"Nice negotiating," Arnie said from behind her.

She turned, very slowly, until her eyes burned into his. "You arrogant son of a bitch."

"He took himself out while you were on the line. Not me." With his trademark smirk in place, Arnie swaggered off.

She forced herself not to go after him, not now, not now when her rage was so full and sharp and deep she could—would—do something she'd regret later.

It would wait for later. She promised herself that later she would deal with Officer Arnold Meeks. For now, Phoebe stood and watched Crime Scene walk in and out of the building. A hand dropped on her shoulder.

"Nothing more for you to do here," Dave said to her.

"I never had a chance with him. A minute, maybe two. It was over before I got here. I couldn't bring it back."

"Phoebe."

She shook her head. "Not now, please. I want to debrief the hostages, and take statements from any witnesses." She turned around. "I want all debriefing and statements recorded, and I want you to witness them."

"You and I both know sometimes things go south."

"What I don't know is if this one had to." The rage wanted to make her tremble. She refused. "I'm going to find out. The hostages are en route to the hospital, but the woman didn't seem to be hurt. She can talk. I'd like you to go with me, now, talk to her."

"All right. You may want to talk to the counselor. When you lose one—"

"I didn't lose him, and that I know." She bit off the words, so they both knew how close she was to snapping. "I never had him."

She didn't speak on the way to the hospital, and Dave didn't push. In the silence, she stared out the window and outlined the questions she'd ask, the tone she would take, to build the foundation for what she needed to prove.

Tracey Percell rested on a gurney in the ER's exam room. She was young, Phoebe noted, barely old enough to drink. A well-endowed young blonde who needed her roots done.

Red-rimmed, swollen eyes were weepy yet as she gnawed on her thumbnail.

“He shot himself. He shot himself right in front of us.”

“You had a horrible experience. It may help you to talk about it, and it would certainly help us. Do you think you could do that, Tracey?”

“Okay. I hyperventilated, they said. Passed out. They said I should lie down awhile, but he didn’t hurt me. I’m really lucky he didn’t hurt me. He punched Jasper, and he stuck the gun right in his face. And—”

“You must’ve been scared.” Phoebe sat beside the bed, patted Tracey’s hand before she took out her tape recorder. “Is it all right if I record what we talk about?”

“Sure. They said they were going to call my boyfriend. Brad? My boyfriend Brad’s going to come.”

“That’s good. If he doesn’t come before we leave, I’ll check on Brad myself. How’s that?”

“Thanks. Thanks.” Tracey stopped biting her thumbnail as if the mere thought of having her boyfriend come was enough to settle her. “I feel so weird. Like I watched a scary movie, but I was in it.”

“I know. But it’s over now. You work for Mr. Hughes?”

“Uh-huh. I’m a legal secretary. It’s not much, but it’s okay.”

“And you went to work today, just like usual.”

“I go in to open the office at, like, ten to nine. Jasper got in at the same time today. Lots of times he’s later, but we got there right before nine today. We’d barely opened when he came in. Mr. Grady. He pushed right in the door and punched Jasper in the face. Knocked him down. I screamed because he had the gun. He looked crazy.”

Tracey’s eyes watered again as she snatched out two tissues from the box nested on her lap. “He looked just crazy.”

“What happened then?”

“He said for me to get up and lock the door. He said he’d shoot Jasper dead if I tried to run. He had the gun right to his head, and I was scared; I just did what he said. He said for us to push the desk in front of the door, and when we didn’t move fast enough, I guess, he shot the gun.”

“He shot at you?”

"No. He shot it into the floor, put a hole in the carpet. I guess I screamed again, and I was crying. He said to shut the hell up and do what he said. So we did. Then he hit Jasper again and started yelling that he wanted his money. His six thousand five hundred twenty-eight dollars and thirty-six cents. Every penny." She started on her thumbnail again. "Um, I guess you could say Jasper sort of talked him out of the money, for, you know, expenses and costs for this suit. And, um, the suit didn't really go anywhere."

"He was a client?"

"Well, I guess Jasper didn't really put him on the books. So to speak." Her gaze skidded away. "I don't know all the particulars, really."

"We'll get to that later."

"Okay. It'd be better if you asked Jasper about all that anyway. Jasper told him he didn't have the money, and he said Jasper better get it or else. They were talking about going to the bank, then the cop came."

"The first officer arrived on scene at that time."

"Well, yeah. Sort of. You could hear the sirens, and Mr. Gradey made me go with him to the window and peek through the blinds. Mr. Gradey yelled out something like: 'Get the hell away. You try to come in and I'll kill everybody.' How he had two people in there and a gun, and he'd use it. Gradey told me to yell out, too, so I did, like, please, he means it."

She knuckled her eyes. "Gosh."

"You must've been scared."

"Oh my God, ma'am, I've never been so scared in my whole life."

"Did Mr. Gradey hurt you then?"

"No. No. He made me lie down on the floor, on my stomach. Jasper, too. Then the cop, I guess he had one of those what-do-you-call-it? Bullhorns? He called out how he was Officer Arnold Meeks, and how Mr. Gradey was to put down his weapon and come out with his hands up. Right quick, too, he said, like he meant business. And Mr. Gradey, he just yelled back he was William Gradey and we could all go to hell unless he got his six thousand five hundred twenty-eight dollars and thirty-six cents back.

"Then they just yelled at each other awhile."

"Yelled at each other?"

"Yelled and cursed at each other for I don't know how long. Mr. Gradey wanted to know where the cop was, where the law was when Jasper stole his money. And the cop's like, 'I'm not concerned with your money, and you better get your ass out here, boy, with your hands up.'"

Phoebe glanced at Dave. "How did Mr. Gradey react to that?"

"He got really pissed, you know, 'specially when the policeman said how Mr. Gradey didn't have the balls to shoot us. Honest to God, I thought he'd do it then and there just to prove the cop wrong. I couldn't stop crying."

"You heard the policeman say that?"

"Yes, ma'am. Only he didn't say Mr. Gradey didn't have the balls, he said 'you asshole.'"

Phoebe looked at Dave as Tracey began to shred one of her tissues into bits of fluff. "And so Mr. Gradey, he told the cop to come on in and get him, and he'd shoot him, and us, too. How he needed his money. He had to sell his car, and he didn't have anywhere to live, and the cop's saying he'll be living in a cell and won't need a car. After a while, it seemed like a long while, more cops came.

"Do you think Brad's here yet?"

"I'll go find out in just a minute. What happened next, Tracey?"

"Well, Mr. Gradey, he got more upset. I thought, I really thought he was just going to shoot us and get it over with. I started crying again, loud I guess. He told me not to worry, it wasn't my fault. Cops and lawyers, he said. It was cops and lawyers, and they always fucked over regular people. I think . . ."

"What do you think?" Phoebe prompted.

"I think he was going to let me go on out. I just got the feeling. Me, not Jasper. 'Cause he asked if he let me go out, would I tell the cops about the money, and I said I would. Sure I would. Then the phone rang. That cop Meeks yelled for Jasper to answer. 'Pick up the phone, you son of a bitch.'"

Tracey let out a sigh. "I know it sounds stupid, but that policeman scared me about as much as Mr. Gradey and the gun." She swiped at her

eyes. "I wish he'd just shut up. I wish he had because I think Mr. Gradey was going to let me go, and maybe he wouldn't've shot himself in the head right in front of me. I don't know."

"Okay, Tracey. All right now," Phoebe soothed as Tracey began to sob.

"It was so *awful* to see. He said how I could sit up when he was asking me if I'd tell the police about the money. So I was sitting there on the floor when the phone rang and all. I couldn't hear what the other guy said, but I was watching Mr. Gradey. I was watching and thinking if he lets me go, I'm never coming back to this office. I'll go back, take some more business courses, get me a better job. Mr. Gradey didn't say much, but he looked sad. Scared. Sad and scared like I was, and he hung up the phone. Next time it rang, I didn't think he was going to answer. Then he looked at me and said how he was going to put it on speaker so I could see how y'all treated people like us. So I could see how we didn't have a chance. There was a woman on this time. It was you," Tracey said after a moment. "Sure, it was you. So you know what happened next."

"Yes. I know what happened next."

Phoebe waited until they were outside, away from people, in the balm of spring air. "He incited the suicide. He risked the lives of two hostages with his posturing. He ignored procedure, trampled over every guideline of negotiation. And for what?"

"Not every police officer has negotiation skills, or understands how to handle a hostage situation from that standpoint."

She rounded on it, couldn't stop herself. "Goddamn it, Dave. Are you defending him? Are you, for one second, defending what he did?"

"No." Dave held up a hand. "And I'm not going to argue with you, Phoebe. Not when you're right. Officer Meeks will be debriefed."

"I'll be debriefing him. It's my purview," she said before Dave could argue.

"And you and Arnie Meeks already have considerable friction. You were on the line with the subject when he terminated."

"If I don't debrief Meeks, it undermines my authority. He didn't call it in for nearly two hours. Right there, he's earned a rip. This isn't a matter of him having a problem with me. It's a matter of him being a problem, with a badge."

"You be careful it doesn't smell like payback."
"A man's dead. There's no paying it back."

Phoebe took her time, in fact took the rest of the long day, to gather statements, information, to write up her notes and complete the incident report.

Then she called Arnie into her office.

"I'm going off shift," he told her.

"Close the door. Sit down."

"I'm on eight-to-fours. I go past four, I put in the OT." But he swaggered over, took a seat. Lifted his jaw at the recorder on her desk. "What's this?"

"This conversation is being recorded for your protection, and mine."

"Maybe I need my delegate."

"If you want your delegate present, you're free to call him." Deliberately, she nudged the phone across the desk toward him. "Be my guest."

Arnie shrugged. "You got five minutes before I start clocking OT."

"At oh-nine-eleven this morning you responded to reports of gunfire at the offices of Jasper C. Hughes, Attorney at Law. Is that correct?"

"That's right."

"You responded to this location, running hot, approached the building in question. At that time, an individual inside the premises informed you he was armed, with two hostages. Is this correct?"

"If you're going to go through the whole report, we're wasting time."

"Did you call for backup or for a negotiation team at that time?"

"No. I had it handled. Until you got there."

"You identified yourself as a police officer, via bullhorn."

"I took cover, as procedure, and ID'd myself, sure. I told the guy to put down the gun, to come out. He refused."

Phoebe sat back. "You're right. We're wasting time. The reports are here, including witness statements, statements from both hostages, statements from the officers who arrived on scene subsequently. Which include the fact that you did not follow procedure, did not call for a

negotiation team, did not follow any of the guidelines in hostage negotiation and instead threatened and berated the hostage-taker into an agitated state.”

“Guy shoots up an office, he’s already in an agitated state.”

“And there, you’re correct. You never tried to talk him down.” Though her eyes flashed fury, her voice stayed flat, cold, utterly calm. “You told him you didn’t care, you told him he was going to jail.”

He sent her that tight, smirking smile. “Not supposed to lie in negotiations.”

“You’re going to want to wipe that smirk off your face, Officer. You pushed and you pushed.” She snatched up a page from a report. “‘Officer Meeks then engaged the subject via telephone and advised the subject he’d be better off just putting the gun to his head and pulling the trigger.’”

“Reverse psychology. It was under control until you got on the line. Hostages made it out, didn’t they? No loss of life.”

“There were three people in that office. Only two walked out.”

“Only two mattered.”

“In your opinion, yes, which I assume is why you felt entitled to call the hostage-taker a worthless fuck. Although I see nothing in the report that indicates the hostages mattered to you. You never asked for or ascertained their condition, and took actions that endangered their well-being—including telling the armed hostage-taker he didn’t have the *balls* to shoot the hostages.”

“You want to blame somebody for your screwup, *ma’am*—”

“My actions will hold up, Officer, I promise you. Yours, on the other hand, don’t. You’re suspended for thirty days.”

He came up out of the chair. “Bullshit.”

“The incident will be investigated, as will your actions during it. Meanwhile, you are ordered to report to the departmental psychiatrist for an evaluation within the next seventy-two hours.”

The ugly red spread over his face, as it had in the lecture room. “You’re not running over me this way.”

“You’re free to protest the suspension, but I can tell you you’ll find Captain McVee, who has copies of all statements, in agreement with my decision.”

“He’d agree to flap his wings like a chicken seeing as you’re blowing him.”

She got slowly to her feet. “What did you say to me?”

“You think it’s some secret you’re sitting here because you let McVee bang you? We’ll see who’s fucking suspended when I’m done with you. Bitch.”

“You’re suspended, thirty days, and the tag for insubordination is going in your jacket. You’re going to want to get out of here, Officer, before you make it worse.”

He stepped to her desk, planted his hands on it, leaned forward. “It’s going to get worse, for you. That’s a promise.”

She felt the clutch in her throat. “You’re dismissed. Badge and weapon, Officer.”

His hand moved to his sidearm, his fingers danced over it, and Phoebe saw something in his eyes that told her he was more than just an arrogant son of a bitch.

The quick rap on the door had her fighting not to jolt. Sykes poked his head in. “Sorry to interrupt. I need a minute, Lieutenant, when you’ve got one.”

“I’ve got one. Officer Meeks? I gave you an order.”

He unclipped his weapon, tossed it and his badge onto her desk. When he turned and stalked out, Phoebe allowed herself one shuddering breath.

“You okay, LT?”

“Yes. Yes. What do you need?”

“Nothing. Things looked a little heated in here, that’s all.”

“Okay. Yeah. Thanks.” She wanted to sink down in her chair, made herself stand. “Detective? You’ve been around here a long time.”

“Twelve years.”

“Hear a lot of the gossip, the buzz?”

“Sure.”

“Detective, is it common belief that Captain McVee and I have a sexual relationship?”

He looked so stunned that her stomach instantly smoothed. “Jesus, Lieutenant, no.” Sykes closed the door behind him. “Did that asshole say that?”

"Yeah. Let's leave it inside here, please. Let's leave the whole thing inside this office."

"If that's what you want." Sykes nodded down at Arnie's badge and gun. "I'll say one more thing I'd like to say in this office. It doesn't break my heart to see that. You interested in my opinion, between you and me?"

"I am. Yeah, I'm interested."

"He'd never have had those in the first place without family connections. Guy's a loose cannon, boss. You watch your back."

"I'll be doing just that. Thank you. Thanks, Bull."

Sykes twinkled a little at her use of his nickname. He started for the door, stopped with his hand on the knob. "I guess some of us think of you as the captain's favorite niece. There were grumbles when you came in from the feds and took over here. Some of them were mine. Grumbling stopped pretty quick, from most. You're a good boss, Lieutenant. That's what counts around here."

"Thanks."

When he went out, she let herself sit. Let herself shake.