

Judging the Book

By Kate Simon

Prudence Gwendolyn Holiday was the perfect name for an English rose. Her fair skin was striking against her long dark hair. Her green eyes flashed frustration as she tried to tame her hair into a neat ponytail. “Oh, bugger!” she said to her reflection as a stray hair fell onto her face. There was only one problem for this proper English girl, she was as American as the fourth of July.

Pru’s parents emigrated from England as students. They met at Harvard, where they were both studying chemistry. They married while working on their Masters. Pru came along while they were finishing their doctorates. Her father got a research position with a pharmaceutical company while her mother stayed at Harvard as a tenured professor.

Pru tucked the stray hair back behind her ear and hit it with some more hairspray. She finished getting dressed and prepared her tea. Nothing but a proper rolling boil and steeping for a full three minutes. She liked her tea strong enough to skate on. She sipped her tea and nibbled at a muffin. She glanced at the glass cabinet that held the delicate china she’d inherited from her mother. She longed for those proper teas her mother set. She didn’t have the patience for them when she was a kid but Mum insisted.

“Every lady knows how to present a proper tea, Prudence.”

Her parents were horrified at her behavior growing up. She loved her blue jeans and graphic tees, most of which she got at rock concerts. They called it “so American.” She tried to remind them that The Beatles and The Rolling Stones were all English but to no avail. They were thrilled when she was accepted to Cambridge. Pru was shocked because she’d never applied. Her father had done his undergraduate work there. As the daughter of an alumni, she had a leg up on the competition. After some loud arguments about her parents trying to control her life, she had to admit that was the perfect place for her to study English literature and art history. What she wouldn’t give for one of those arguments now.

Fast forward thirty years and she was the director of the Philadelphia Art Museum. She looked in the mirror and sighed. That was her life, always on fast forward. The rigorous life of academics, blurred into teaching, blurred into traveling the world. When

she finally settled in Philadelphia, she took a job as a curator for the museum. Pru didn't know how ten years had passed. She picked up her car keys and looked around her beautiful apartment. She was successful by anyone's definition. And she was alone.

Vince Kane rubbed his face and looked in the mirror. His hair was getting pretty shaggy, even for him. The longer it was, the more prominent his gray hair. He was getting too old for late nights. Of course, he'd never admit that to his crew. A shower helped wake him and strong coffee got him all the way there. He had a bunch of work at the shop but first he had a meet with Freddie D. Freddie was looking for a couple of Harley knucklehead motors and he wasn't particular where they came from. There was an old expression when you wanted something hard to get, "I know a guy who knows a guy." Vince was the guy.

An hour later he pulled away from Freddie's garage with fifteen grand locked in his tool box. He looked in his rear view and wondered where his life went. He'd been doing what he was doing for nearly forty years. He'd managed to stay under the radar of the local police, for the most part. He'd been more daring in his younger days and it had cost him in hard living and six months in jail for trafficking in stolen goods. He'd stayed out of jail by being a lot more careful. Freddie D paid extra for his knucklehead motors because he thought they were hot. Actually, they were motors he'd bought from some pickers and rebuilt. He had receipts for them in his shop. That didn't mean he was going to tell the IRS he sold them for fifteen thousand.

Vince pulled into his garage and was glad to see his employees at work. Late nights didn't affect these guys the way it did him. He poured himself another cup of coffee and got ready for another long day.

Pru had another long day of meetings and emails and she was ready to call it a day. This wasn't why she studied art most of her life. She grabbed her bag and headed out the main entrance, checking on today's visitor count. She caught a glimpse of Tony, a service tech, who'd been with the museum for years. He was staring at a landscape by Monet. "Beautiful, isn't it?" she asked.

Tony startled when he realized he was being watched. "Oh, I'm sorry, Ms. Holiday. I was just..."

She put a hand on his shoulder. "No, it's alright. Tell me what you see."

He looked back at the picture and smiled. "It's so peaceful. I want to know what's down that lane and beyond. I'd give anything to walk into it and find out." He looked at Pru and blushed. "Silly."

"Not at all," she said. "Great art inspires emotion. This has inspired you to want to know more. That's wonderful."

"It's one of the reason's I love working here. I get to see all of this history. I never saw anything like this in high school."

"You're local, aren't you?"

"Yeah, North Philly. We didn't do field trips. I only saw these in books."

"Have you ever taken one of our courses? You could start with the impressionists."

He looked embarrassed. "Oh, Miss, I have a lot of work around here and I better get back to it."

Pru realized that the classes took place during working hours and he probably couldn't afford the fee and materials. "As an employee, you can take the courses for free. Of course, you'll take them during business hours and you'd be paid."

"Miss?"

"It's important for our staff to have a depth of knowledge of what we do here."

"I'm just the maintenance man."

Pru smiled and touched his shoulder. "You keep the building in good condition for all of us and the art. You're just as important as any other employee. I believe a class starts next week. Come to my office tomorrow and I'll have the materials and your schedule for you."

Tony leaned a little closer. "Mr. Baker may not like this."

Pru smiled. "Well then it's a good thing I'm Mr. Baker's boss. If I like it, he'll like it." She was rewarded with a huge smile.

"Thank you, Miss Holiday. I'll see you tomorrow."

Vince hid in his office. He was tired. Tired from last night. Tired from being up so early deliver the knuckleheads. Tired from this life. He had enough. If he sold his house and the shop, he'd have enough to start over somewhere. Maybe, someplace warm.

He'd been a dumb kid forty years ago. He looked up to the older guys in the neighborhood. They had plenty of money, cars and girls. It was the life he'd wanted. He'd always been good with engines and the guys paid him well to work on their cars and bikes. He didn't ask why a seventeen-year-old kid was driving thirty-thousand-dollar sports car. He didn't have to. He knew, he just didn't care. All he cared about was he made enough money to get out of the projects. Fixing cars, turned into selling cars and bikes. If the papers were sketchy, he was the guy to fix them. Vince was the guy.

He reached for the coffee pot to refill his mug when the office door opened. One of his mechanics stuck his head in. "Hey, Vince. Ya' got company." The door pushed opened and in walked the bane of his existence, Dan Hudson. Hudson had been on the Robbery squad forever. He was forty pounds overweight and his ten-year-old suit barely fit.

"Good morning, Detective. Coffee?"

"No, thanks. I'm here for information."

Vince indicated to the chair across from his. "Okay, let's see. Eagles are looking good this season; Benny's has the best pastrami..."

"Enough. I'm looking for whoever's moving high end cars overseas."

"Why would I know that?" he asked as he sat down. He sipped his coffee, watching Hudson glaring at him. He hadn't heard anything about the operation, but Hudson knew, with Vince's contacts, it wouldn't be hard to find out.

"Look, Kane. I know you're not above moving questionable merchandise. I could have a team in here thirty minutes to match VIN numbers to paperwork. But that would be a waste of my time."

“Yes, it would.” Vince smiled, not because Hudson was wrong about him but the most he would find today was some slightly warm parts, and he would have to look hard to find them.

“But I will be happy to check every bolt in your shop and keep you closed while I do it. Unless, of course, you get me what I want.”

“This is how you ask for a favor? Who raised you?”

“Watch it, Kane.”

Vince stared Hudson down. If he had to guess, there was only one guy who had an organization big enough to handle an operation like that, Frank O’Hara. He’d had the occasional encounter with O’Hara. He bought parts from O’Hara’s men when they were offered. It wasn’t wise to refuse. He wasn’t a big player in O’Hara’s world. Which made him a perfect snitch. “I can’t help you, Hudson.”

“You seem to think this is a request. Get me what I want or I turn this place upside down.”

“What’s your problem, Hudson? From the look of you, you haven’t been laid in longer than you can remember.”

Hudson pushed himself to his feet. “Alright, that’s enough.”

“Why me, Hudson? You could go to any shop in the city. Why mine?”

“Because you’ve been in business with these types forever. You’re smart enough to not get caught.”

“I think there’s a compliment in there.”

Hudson reached for the door. “Shut up. Get me what I want. Don’t keep me waiting.”

Vince stared at the closed door. “Well, shit.” He could give Hudson what he wanted. It wouldn’t take much. The problem was the minute O’Hara even thought Vince was talking to the cops, he’d find himself at the bottom of the Delaware. It was time to get out. Now.

Full of Beans was more crowded than usual this morning. Pru thought it was a ridiculous name for a coffee shop but they had the best Jamaican blend in the city. One large would keep her going all day. It wasn't far from her apartment and it gave her a moment to herself before diving into stacks of financial reports. It also gave her a moment with their amazing vanilla scones. She glanced behind her and was a bit startled by someone she'd never seen before in the shop. He was wearing a leather vest over a black t shirt. She saw several tattoos on his arms, including an eagle tattoo. His jeans were fitted, but not overly so, and tucked into his boots. His salt and pepper hair was brushed back. He caught her gaze and gave her a lopsided smile. He took off his aviator sunglasses and tucked them in the top of his shirt. Pru couldn't suppress a gasp. He had the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. Someone should put those eyes and that smile on canvas.

She turned back toward the counter and waited her turn. "Good morning, Candace."

"Good morning, Pru. Your usual?"

"Yes, please."

A tall man in his early thirties, was standing in front of her in line, waiting for his order. He was wearing a four-figure suit and equally expensive shoes. He reached over and touched Pru's shoulder. "I have a table. Join me."

She gave him a curt, "No, thank you," as she shook off his hand. Pru accepted her order from Candace.

"Come on, sweetheart. You know you want don't want to be alone."

She sighed and looked at the man. "First of all, you need to work on your technique. Not every woman craves your attention. Sometimes, we just want to have a coffee before work. Also, I'm old enough to be your mother. Now, if you'll excuse me." She was shocked when the man grabbed hold of her arm, causing her to spill her scone on the floor.

"I see you here every morning. I know you're looking at me."

Before Pru could respond a firm hand, wearing a skull ring, grabbed the man's arm. It was the man with the tattoos.

"You are giving the lady a hard time. I suggest you rethink your choices," he said in a low, gravel voice.

"Who the hell are you? You don't belong in here."

The man's lovely smile turned frightening. "I'm the man who's about to dislocate your shoulder if you don't leave her alone."

The thirty-something's face paled.

"Now!"

Thirty-something took his order and made a hasty retreat.

"Thank you," she smiled.

"You're welcome." He looked at the startled barista and pointed to the floor. "Can we get another one of whatever that is for the lady?" he asked as he held out a chair for Pru. Candace nodded and brought another scone to the table.

"Would you like to join me?" asked Pru.

"I thought you didn't want company?" he smiled.

"I didn't want his company."

He gave her a bone melting smile. "I'd love too." He extended his hand to her. "Vince Kane."

"Prudence Holiday. Call me Pru."

"It's very nice to meet you, Pru."

"It's very nice to find a gentleman to come to my rescue."

Vince chuckled. "I've never been accused of being a gentleman."

"I'd would say you define a gentleman."

“Hah! How’s that?”

“You have a strong yet quiet male energy. You used your strength to protect me without violence. If this were the eighteenth century, you’d be the subject of a painting. You know the kind that hangs over massive fireplace.” His blush, as adorable as it was, told her she’d gone too far. “I’m sorry. It’s force of habit because of my job. I think of everything as it relates to art.”

“What’s your job?”

“I’m the director of the art museum.”

“*The* art museum. The ‘Rocky’ steps?”

“Yes.”

“Wow.” He glanced around at the other customers, then sipped his coffee.

“You’re thinking about what that tool said, that you don’t belong here.”

“You cut to the chase, don’t you?”

“I prefer being direct. I’m here every morning and I’ve never seen you here before.”

“I have business in the neighborhood. I have a shop in Fishtown.”

Pru smiled. Fishtown and Society Hill were only a few miles apart but they couldn’t be more different. “What kind of shop?”

He grinned and winked. “I’m a florist.”

Pru nearly blew her latte out her nose. “Very funny. What do you do, really?”

“I have a repair shop, cars and bikes.”

“Motorcycles, nice, an iron horse. Definitely, portrait material.”

Vince couldn't get over this woman. She was obviously way out of his league. They weren't even playing the same game. What was he doing talking to her? He had a meeting with a broker in thirty minutes. He just couldn't resist talking to her. She was incredibly beautiful. Her long dark hair was tucked behind her ears. She reminded him of those elegant women he saw as he passed the social section in the newspaper on the way to the sports section. "What was that about being old enough to be that guy's mother? You're not nearly that old."

She smiled as she reached for her scone. "I'm fifty-two."

"Not possible."

"Thank you."

Her smile affected him in a way he hadn't felt in forever. This was crazy. He glanced at his watch and realized he was running late. "I'm sorry, but I have to go. I have an appointment." He extended his hand. "It was very nice to meet you."

"Thank you for coming to my rescue." She reached in her purse and handed him a business card. "I'd be happy to give you a tour. My direct line is on the card."

He smiled and pulled a business card out of his pocket. "If your Harley ever gives you a problem, give me a call. I'll give you the friends and family discount."

"I'll do that," she grinned.

Vince grabbed his coffee and walked out the door, wondering what the hell was wrong with him. He was going to hire a broker to sell everything and get out of town. He had no business flirting with Pru. She was even flirting back. At least it was nice to think she was.

Pru smiled at the thought of her knight in shining armor coming to her rescue. Well, not armor, but leather. That worked. She wondered if he'd ridden his bike to the coffee shop. She tried to shake off thoughts of this morning as she greeted the security guard. She moved toward the elevator.

"Good morning, Pru."

"Good morning, Rose." Rose Tyler was the primary instructor in Cultural Education Division. "How's it going?"

"I wanted to talk to you about Tony Espinosa."

"How's he doing? I hope I didn't push him. He seemed so interested in the art."

"Most of our students are from the local colleges because it gets them off campus and they think it's an easy A."

Pru chuckled. Rose was a demanding but fair professor.

"The rest of the students are society types who don't care about the grades. They just want to say they took the class." They both got in the elevator and travelled up to the office floors. "Tony is the only one in the class who is earning an A. He asks relevant questions and has unique insights."

"That's wonderful."

"I've never had a student like him."

"You've never taught a maintenance man?" Pru smiled.

"No, someone who's so brilliant and he obviously loves the work. He can quote every lesson. I think he has an eidetic memory."

"Really?"

"Do you think he could take another class?" asked Rose.

"I think he should take them all. Someone like Tony could relate to people who normally wouldn't come to the museum. It's in our mission statement, to bring art to everyone."

“I think it’s a great idea, but how will Baker take it?” asked Rose.

“Let me take care of Baker.”

A few hours later, Pru called Tony into her office. He looked nervous and was brushing at his jumpsuit. She extended her hand and smiled. “Tony, it’s good to see you again.”

“Is there a problem, Ms. Holiday?”

“Quite the contrary. I’ve been speaking to Ms. Tyler about your performance in class. She’s told me you’re one of the brightest students she’s ever had.”

“What?” he gasped.

“If you’re interested, I’d like to offer you a placement in the full program.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“I have been in touch with Stephen Bailey, the head of the cultural outreach program. Our mission here is to bring art to those who would not ordinarily have access. After you complete the program, I’d like to offer you a position as a docent.” Pru smiled as Tony’s eyes lit up. “I think you’d be particularly well matched to school children and as a Spanish speaker, you’d be invaluable to groups who need a translation.”

Tony smile turned sad. “Ms. Holiday, thank you for the offer but I have a family to support.”

“I seemed to have missed the important bit. I will, of course, keep you on the payroll including your insurance. If you enter the full program, it will be your full-time job.”

“Why?”

“Excuse me?”

“Why would you do this for me?”

“It’s my job as director to invest in the future of the museum. You love the work and you’re brilliant. Investing in you is investing in the future.” Pru saw he was blinking back tears.

“Mr. Baker isn’t going to like this.”

“I’ve already spoken with him. The next full program starts in a few weeks. I told him he would have your services until then.” Pru’s encounter with Baker wasn’t the best. He couldn’t believe she was willing to invest so much time and money in a maintenance man. She made it clear that Tony was to be treated with respect or she would not be best pleased. Baker knew better than to cross her. She may look like a delicate flower, but she hadn’t risen to this level of her profession without being determined. Pru Holiday got what she wanted. “So, can I assume you accept my offer?”

Tony broke out in a wide smile. He stood and offered his hand to her. “Yes, Ms. Holiday. Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome.”

“If you don’t mind, I’m going to call my wife.”

“Of course.” Tony all but ran out of her office. She smiled as she opened the file on her desk. Today was a good day.

Vince left the broker's office and got on his bike. He assured Vince that he could find a buyer for his shop. There would be plenty of chains that would offer good money. Vince made it clear he wanted it done fast. He wanted all the cash available when he was ready to leave town, and that would be soon. Now all he had to do was sell his house. That shouldn't be too difficult. His neighborhood was in the middle of a wave of gentrification. One call to a realtor and he'd have a dozen offers by the end of the week. He'd buy an RV and just go. He'd keep moving until he figured out where to settle down.

There was one thing gnawing at him. Prudence. He wanted to see her again but that was nuts. He was about to go on the run. The last thing he needed was to get involved with someone, especially someone like Pru.

He drove down the highway and saw the art museum in the distance. It's huge columns and famous steps were hard to miss. No. He couldn't. His timing sucked. He had to focus on getting out of town, not a society woman, no matter how beautiful she was.

Vince got back to his house and spotted the unmarked car across the street. "Shit." He walked over and knocked on the window. "Hudson, what the hell are you doing?"

"It's been three days. I haven't heard from you. Tell me what you've got."

"I don't have anything. I'm not a cop. I'm a business man."

"Bull. I need a name and you know who'd be running an operation this big."

Vince sighed. He as going to have to do it. This guy was never going to leave him alone. If he didn't give him the name, Hudson would say he did. He was that big a shit. "Frank O'Hara."

"Never heard of him."

"That's because he's out of Boston. He's been moving down here because Boston and New York are too hot for him. He's got a big operation and the only one I know of who's got the access to ships." He leaned closer to Hudson and grabbed his jacket. "If you leak my name, I'll hear about it. I will come after you."

"You shouldn't threaten a cop."

“I’m threatening a worthless piece of shit who doesn’t know the biggest player on the east coast.” He gave Hudson a grin. “Now get out of my face. If I see you again, I won’t be so nice.” He turned and walked toward his house before Hudson could reply. Even if Hudson kept his name quiet, it wouldn’t take O’Hara long to find out who turned on him. He had to move fast.

It had taken less than a week to sell his house and his garage. His men were pretty upset until they found out that the corporate uniforms came with better insurance and a 401(K). He'd packed what little he wanted to keep and gave the rest to the local charity, including his car. He knew it would take them longer to transfer the title than it would take for him to get out of town.

Vince went out to the suburbs to buy an RV. He picked a motorized model that no one would have imagined he'd drive. That was the point. The only thing he would not surrender from his life was his Harley. He picked the rack to make sure it was secure enough for his ride. Ride or die. Well, hopefully not the die part. The dealer was floored when Vince handed over a cashiers check for one hundred thousand dollars.

He'd pick up the RV in two days when the rack was welded to the chassis and the engine got a full tune up. He'd have to go to the store and stock up on things for inside. He'd find some unbreakable plates and other housewares. He didn't need too much. The inside was a comfortable size but it was only built for one or two people. He was also going to need bedding. He'd have to get used to sleeping in a queen size bed instead of his king. He'd manage.

Pru was tired from the last few days. She'd defended herself to the board about her giving Tony a full scholarship while keeping him on the payroll. He was a part of her plan to reach out to the community and thereby increase ticket sales and memberships. They set aside their Old Philly society attitudes for the greater good. Money.

Speaking of which, she had to finalize the plans for the fundraiser next month. The patrons loved the art but they also expected to be entertained. She had to find a celebrity with enough star power to amuse the donors out of their money.

She pulled into the parking lot of the big box store. She hated the crowds but it was on her way home. It was the only place she could get groceries and the new vacuum cleaner she needed.

She'd picked out the vacuum she wanted and headed down the housewares aisle. Then she saw him. Vince may have been a few aisles away, but she'd know that eagle tattoo anywhere. He was looking at some coffeemakers. She thought she'd go say hello when another man brushed quickly by her. He was wearing a denim jacket despite the warm day. The man reached into his jacket and pulled out a gun. Everything went into slow motion. She'd seen store shootings on the news but this was really happening. She screamed at the top of her lungs, "Gun!" The man turned on her and fired. Customers started screaming and running toward the doors. She pushed her cart as hard as she could into the man and he fell backwards on the hard tile floor. His gun fell and skidded on the floor. Pru grabbed it and held it on him. "Move and I will shoot you." Vince came running up the aisle.

"Pru?"

"Hi, Vince."

The store manager came running toward them. He froze at the sight of the man on the ground. "What the hell?"

"This man pulled a gun and I knocked him over. It would be great if you could get the police." The man turned to run. "And for God's sake tell them I'm not the shooter."

"Let me take the gun," said Vince.

“No. They’ll assume you’re the bad guy.”

“Pru, you’re hurt.”

The minute he said it she could feel the pain in her shoulder. She glanced at her shoulder and saw blood. The man on the floor took the moment to try and escape. She pushed him back down. “I told you not to move. You’ve ruined my favorite suit. Now, I’m really pissed. Don’t push your luck.”

The man looked up from the floor. “This isn’t over, Kane.”

Pru looked at Vince just as the police ran down the aisle. “Vince?” He shook his head slightly and glanced at several police running toward them.

“Drop the gun!” shouted one of the cops.

Pru pointed the gun to the floor and handed it to the cop as she nodded to the floor. “He’s the shooter. I saw him pull a gun and I shouted. That’s when he fired. I knocked him down with my shopping cart.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, she’s been shot,” said Vince.

“I’m okay,” she said just before her knees buckled. Vince caught her before she hit the ground.

“Who are you?” asked another cop as his colleague cuffed the shooter.

“He was down the aisle. When the man fired, he ran up to help me,” said Pru. She caught Vince’s surprise. The arrival of the EMTs stopped further questions, other than her name and any allergies. They cut away her ruined jacket and Pru made the mistake of looking at the bullet wound. It was the last thing she saw before she passed out.

Vince tried to get out of the store as quick as he could but the cops had other ideas. He stuck with Pru's story that he was just shopping when the shooting started. They insisted on his seeing his ID, but he had already moved out of his house. By the time they figured out he didn't live there any more, he'd be long gone. He checked into a hotel and threw his keys on the dresser. He reached for a beer out of the mini-fridge. Things were spiraling out of control. O'Hara obviously knew he was the source. This shooter wouldn't be the last.

He turned on the TV and the news channel came on. It was film of outside the store. There had to be a dozen cop cars with cops holding back the crowds. There were a couple ambulances. He knew Pru was taken away in one of them. He didn't know which one. He'd gotten out of there as quick as he could.

*"Today, at the Sugarman's on South Broad Street, a gunman opened fire in the crowded store. The suspect was apprehended by Philadelphia police. They have not yet released the suspect's name or and motive for the shooting. Sources who were inside the store tell us, Prudence Holiday, director of the Philadelphia Art Museum knocked the shooter to the ground with her shopping cart and held him at bay until police arrived. Ms. Holiday was injured and was taken to Hahnemann Medical Center. The hospital released a statement that Ms. Holiday is out of surgery and is in satisfactory condition."*

They put up a picture of Pru that must have been taken at a fundraiser. She was in a slinky black gown and her long hair was pinned up in a curly style. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever met. She was also incredibly brave. She didn't hesitate to hold a gun on the shooter. She covered for him when she realized he was the target. Thanks to him, now she was in danger. Frank O'Hara would assume she'd protected Vince because she was involved with him. O'Hara wouldn't think twice about killing them both.

Pru tried to move but her right arm was wrapped tight to her body. She looked around at her hospital room. IV's, beeping machines and more flowers than a florist shop. Word must have gotten out. She was about to reach for a call button when a nurse walked into her room.

"Ms. Holiday, you're awake."

"Apparently so," she replied and then sighed. "I'm sorry, that was rude."

"No problem. It's the pain. You should be due for some meds soon." The woman took her vitals and noted them on a rolling computer. "I'm Val. I'm your second shift nurse. If you need anything, just press your button." She pointed to the call button resting next to her. "This is the TV button, but right now all you'll see is yourself," she smiled.

"What?"

"You're all over the news, how you took out that shooter with your shopping cart. You're a real hero."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. I was just closer to him than anyone else."

Val pointed to all the flowers. "Others would disagree. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Yes, is my purse here? I need my phone."

Val pulled her purse out of a patient belongings bag and set it on her bed. "I'm afraid you'll have to get it. We're not allowed."

"Seriously?"

"I know, but it's the rules."

"It's okay." She dug into her purse until she felt the smooth edges of her phone. She pulled it out and set it next to the call button. "Thanks, Val."

"I'll be back soon with your shot," she said as she pushed the cart out of her room.

Pru dialed her assistant, Susan, who picked up without a greeting.

“Ms. Holiday, are you okay? We’ve all been so worried.”

“I’m fine,” she said, not knowing whether she was or not. “I could use your help.”

“Of course, anything.”

“I’ve been inundated with flowers. I’ll need your help with thank you notes and to keep me up to date with the office. I’m in room 410 at Hahnemann. Bring your tablet and a charger for my phone.”

“I’ll be there in thirty minutes. Can I bring you anything else?”

“No, that’s all. Thanks.” She disconnected the call and leaned back. She knew it was foolish to act as if it was business as usual, but what else was she going to do? She started checking her texts when a knock on the door distracted her.

“Hello, Ms. Holiday. I’m Dr. Morgan. I operated on your shoulder.” He walked toward her and smiled. “The surgery went very well. It was a through and through.”

“Excuse me?”

“The bullet. It went in the front and out the back.”

Pru felt queasy. “Oh.”

“It didn’t hit any bones, so it was a matter of repairing the muscles. You’ll need some therapy, but you should make a full recovery.”

“Good to know.”

“I’ll be back to check on you tomorrow but you should be out of here in a couple of days.”

“Thank you, doctor.” He smiled and left the room. Pru wondered where the nurse was with her shot.

Thirty minutes later, Pru was staring at the TV. She’d had her shot and closed her eyes for a few minutes, but a hospital was no place to get rest. At least the pain was

better. She saw the reports on the news about the shooting. She could just imagine the reaction of the board. They would alternate between being horrified and using this news to raise money for the museum. She turned off the TV and put her head back. She couldn't think about that now. Another knock at the door disturbed her and she was ready to bark at whoever it was, that is until she saw who was standing in her doorway. Vince had on a long sleeve shirt that covered his tattoos. Mirrored glasses covered his eyes. He still looked like the man she'd first met in the coffee shop. Except this time, he was holding an adorable teddy bear.

"Hello," he said from the door.

"Hi. Please come in."

He tucked the glasses in his pocket and handed her the bear. "I thought you'd have enough flowers." He glanced around the room. "Apparently, I was right."

"Yes, it is getting out of hand." She smiled at the bear. It was wearing blue jeans and a t shirt that said 'Get Well Soon'. She gave him a tight hug. "He's adorable. Thank you."

"You're welcome." He glanced over his shoulder at the crowded hallway. He walked over and closed the door. "We need to talk."

"Yes, I suppose we do."

"Why wouldn't you give me the gun?"

"I didn't want to see you shot. The police would have assumed you were the bad guy."

"You don't know that I'm not. The guy was after me. Why did you cover for me?"

"You hadn't done anything."

"How are you so sure? I may have had it coming."

She looked into his eyes and smiled. "Honestly, I don't know why I'm sure, but I am."

“Pru, you don’t understand. That was a professional hitter. He won’t tell the cops anything but his boss will send someone else to finish the job. He may come after you, too.”

She looked at him and realized he was very serious. “Well then, you better tell me why someone is after you. Us.”

“I gave a cop the name of a guy who could be moving stolen, high-end cars overseas. I was at that store getting supplies for my road trip. I’ve sold everything and I’m getting out of town.”

“All because you helped the police? Shouldn’t they be protecting you?”

Vince chuckled. “Yeah, well, I’m not exactly a model citizen. I’ve had my run-ins with the cops.”

“But you’re not a part of this, are you?”

“No, but the cop knew I’d have the contacts. I’d know who they were after.”

“You think they’d come after me too?”

“You stopped their man. They won’t be pleased.” He looked at the closed door. “Look, I shouldn’t stay long.”

Pru reached for his hand. “Vince, please wait.”

“I’ve put you at risk coming here but you needed to know.”

She tugged on his hand when he tried to leave. “Now you need to know. You saw the news coverage. I am well known in the city. That big bouquet in the corner, that’s from the mayor. One call to him and I can have the Chief of Police here.”

“That won’t stop O’Hara’s shooter from coming after you. I have to go.” He walked toward the door, then stopped. He came back to her side and leaned down. “Thank you for protecting me,” he whispered as he gave her a soft kiss. Vince closed the door behind him.

Pru looked at her teddy bear and asked, “Now what?”

Vince picked up his RV and parked in the back lot of a mall. He put away the last of the food and made the bed. He looked around at his new digs. It was small but comfortable. God knows, he'd lived in worse. He should get some rest and get an early start. He'd thought he'd start driving west until he hit the ocean. He wouldn't miss snow. He sat down at the small table and unwrapped his cheesesteak. He clicked on the TV and he stopped mid bite. Pru was on the screen. She was being released from the hospital and it looked half the hospital staff was escorting her. She was a little pale and her right arm was wrapped tight in a sling against her waist. She was helped to her feet by a guy in a white coat and made her way to a podium. A mob of reporters shouted questions until she held up her hand.

"I would like to make a brief statement. First, I would like to thank all the doctors and nurses who took such good care of me. They tell me I'm doing well and I'll make a full recovery. I want to thank everyone for all the well wishes."

"They're calling you a hero," shouted one of the reporters.

"I was just in the right place at the right time."

"Will you be returning to the museum?"

"As soon as my doctors give me the all clear." The reporters shouted more questions but she held up her hand again. "If you please, I'm looking forward to going home. Thank you." The reporters parted as a young woman with short brown hair escorted Pru down the walkway. He clicked off the TV and sat back. He pulled a business card out of his wallet. He looked at the number Pru said was her direct line. He wondered if her direct line was a cell phone. He decided to take a chance. He pulled out his phone.

"Hello?"

"Pru? It's Vince."

"Hello. How are you?"

"I'm fine. I'm not the one who got shot. I saw you on the news. How are you?"

"I'll be fine. I'll have to do some physical therapy, but I'll be okay."

"I'm so sorry, Pru."

"You didn't shoot me."

"I'm the reason you were shot."

"Vince, I don't want you to worry about me."

"I can't seem to help it."

He heard her chuckle. "It's that whole knight in shining armor thing you've got going on."

"Pru, I'm not a good guy."

"Yeah, I'm still not buying it. You said you were going out of town, but you're checking on me."

"I'm leaving in the morning, but I wanted to check on you first. Do you have protection?"

Pru laughed. "Why Mr. Kane, that's a very personal question."

"I'm serious, Pru. You could be in danger."

"I'm sorry, Vince. I'm a bit of a smart ass. My house is alarmed. The museum is the safest place in the city."

"I want you to promise me you'll be careful."

"I will, I promise."

"Good. I'll try and check in when I can."

"Vince, you need to promise me you'll be careful too."

He looked at the .22 sitting next to his cheesesteak. "I will."

Pru maneuvered herself into a blouse with a minimum of swearing. Her shoulder still hurt and all she was taking was over the counter pain medication. The physical therapist came to her house twice a week. She'd improved over the last two weeks but she still couldn't drive. Susan would be here to pick her up soon. She put the sling over her head and rested her arm in the heavy padding. She tossed the Velcro strap around her waist and caught it with her hand. She was happy she caught it on the first try. Sometimes it took several attempts and she hated asking for help. She pulled the strap tight until her arm felt supported. God, she hated feeling impaired. Her pity party was interrupted by the door buzzer. She hit the intercom.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Ms. Holiday. It's Susan."

"Hi. I'll be right down." She pressed the button to unlock the door. She grabbed hold of the railing and steadied herself as she walked down the stairs. Susan gave her a disapproving look from the bottom step.

"Seriously, Ms. Holiday, should you be going back to work so soon? You were shot."

"Believe me, I'm aware."

"I'm sorry. I'm just concerned."

She got to the bottom and smiled. "No, I'm sorry. That was rude of me. I don't know what I would have done without you the last two weeks. I need to get back to my office so I can start writing thank you notes and getting back on track for the fundraiser."

"I have a file of the florist cards matched with a picture of the flowers."

Pru chuckled. "When did you manage all that?"

"In the hospital when you were asleep."

"Of course, you did," she smiled as she grabbed her purse. "I want to stop at Full of Beans on the way in. I'm craving a latte and croissant."

Susan held the door for her as Pru walked into the busy coffee shop. She wished she'd see Vince here, but she knew he'd left town. At least she could get a latte. It felt good to do something normal. Normal flew out the window when the barista recognized her.

"Ms. Holiday! You're here!"

"That's her!" said a woman in the back of the line. "She stopped the shooter at Sugarman's." The shop broke out into applause and Pru flushed bright red. This was really getting out of hand. She acknowledged the customers then turned to back to the barista.

"Could I get a latte and a croissant and my friend would like..." she turned toward Susan, who was equally red.

"That sounds good," she whispered.

"And the same for my friend."

"Of course, Ms. Holiday."

She tried to maneuver her purse to dig out her wallet when the barista put up her hand. "Oh no. It's on the house."

"Thank you."

The order was ready lightning fast. Susan grabbed the drinks, Pru carried the bag of croissants in her good hand and made their way back to the car.

"Well, that was unexpected," said Pru.

"Not really," said Susan. "You've received hundreds of cards and thousands of emails from all over. You're a hero to a lot of people."

Pru looked out the window at the traffic. She had to do something about this.

Vince had taken his time over the last two weeks. He'd stopped at family-oriented campgrounds and took the farthest available spot. He'd gotten used to the strange looks. His black clothes and tattoos made the locals wary. He'd picked up some different shirts and regular blue jeans, but it didn't make much of a difference. So, he stayed in the RV. He kept track of the Philly news but there was nothing about O'Hara. If Hudson was working on the case, it wasn't making the news. For two weeks he resisted the temptation to call Pru. He knew she was recovering but it was killing him not knowing how she was doing. He didn't know if the police were questioning about the shooting. He pulled out his phone.

"Vince?" asked Pru.

"You didn't save my name in your phone, did you?"

"Hello to you too. No, I didn't. I remembered it from the last time you called."

"I'm sorry. Hello, Pru. I wanted to see how you were doing."

"Today's my first day back to work."

"So soon? Is that wise?"

"I'll be fine. Susan, my assistant, is looking after me like a mother hen."

"That's good."

"That's not what you wanted to ask, is it?"

"I do want to know you're okay."

"I know that, but there's something else."

"Have the police questioned you?"

"Other than the first day, no. The only contact I've had with them are the flowers the Chief of Police and the Mayor sent."

Vince sighed with relief. "Good."

"Are you safe?"

“Yeah. No one would look for me here.”

“It’s not fair that you have to give up everything because you did the right thing.”

“I’ll be fine. I want to make sure you’re safe. I haven’t seen anything about the case on the net. Have you heard anything?”

“No, I haven’t, but I should soon.”

Vince’s heart began to race. “What does that mean?”

“It means the Mayor and Police Chief are joining me for lunch.”

“Pru, please be careful. O’Hara is still a threat. He could go after you and your family.”

“I’ll be careful, I promise. Just so you know, I don’t have any family, so no one is at risk.”

“Any...um...”

“Men?” she laughed. “No, not for a long time. The only person I spend any amount of time with is Susan. We spend most of our time in the museum and there is no where in the city more secure. Today, at lunch, I intend to find out where they are with the case.”

“Pru, no. I don’t want you to put yourself at risk. The more they know you’re involved the more likely O’Hara will come after you.”

“As long as O’Hara is at large, we’re both at risk.”

He didn’t know how to answer that. She was right.

“I want this over as much as you do. Don’t worry. I promise to be careful.”

“What makes you think the Police Chief and the Mayor won’t drag you into this.”

“Because they couldn’t afford to drag the city’s favorite hero through the mud.”

“Excuse me?”

Pru chuckled. "Apparently, everyone in the city knows who I am. I got a standing ovation along with a free order at Full of Beans this morning. I've got boxes of cards and hundreds of emails. I'm in a bright spot light right now. I intend to use it to our advantage."

"Pru, please. You saved my life. I couldn't handle it if something happened to you because of me."

"I promise to be careful. I still owe you that private tour of the museum. I want the chance to fulfill my promise."

"I can't come back."

"You can once O'Hara's in jail."

"Pru..."

"Don't worry. I'll call you tonight and let you know how it went."

"Okay, I'll be waiting for your call." Vince hung up and pulled his gun out of the drawer. It was time to go home.

Pru thanked the café staff as they finished setting a lunch for three. She'd asked for her meal to be something she could handle with one hand. She was still in a sling and she didn't need to add to her pain by trying to cut food. She wanted everything ready before her guests arrived. She wanted to talk to them alone.

"Ms. Holiday, the mayor is here." Susan held the door open for Mayor Steven Franklin. He was a direct descendent of Ben Franklin and he slipped it into every possible conversation. He always left out the part that his ancestor was Franklin's illegitimate son, William.

"Prudence! You look great," he said.

Pru laughed. "I look like crap, Steven, but thanks."

The door opened again and the Chief of Police joined them. Martin Brooks was a good guy. She'd had many meetings with him over the years about the museum and safety protocols. "Prudence, it's so good to see you."

"Thank you, Martin."

"How are you feeling?"

"Not too bad, thanks." She indicated the conference table that now doubled as a dining table. "Let's sit." They sat down at the table and started their lunch. "Thank you both for the lovely flowers."

"You're very welcome," said Steven. "I had no idea you were such a badass."

Pru chuckled. "I don't think pushing a cart into a guy constitutes badass."

"That's not what I heard," said Martin. "You were shot and you still got the gun and subdued the shooter until the police arrived."

"Well, I didn't realize I'd been hit until later."

They ate their walnut salads and talked about the next fundraiser. Pru wrenched a promise from each of them to bring at least one whale contributor with them.

Martin smiled and set down his fork. "You didn't ask us here to say thank you for the flowers."

Pru nodded and smiled. "There's a reason you're the police chief."

"What's going on?" asked Steven.

"I want to know where you are with the case," said Pru.

"The shooter's not talking. He's out of Boston and we don't know why he picked a store in Philly to go off the deep end." He looked at her and she realized he was waiting for her to tell him.

"You already know who he works for, don't you?"

"So do you," said Martin.

"Somebody better read me in," said Steven.

"The shooter worked for a mob boss named O'Hara out of Boston," said Martin.

"What has that got to do with the director of an art museum?" asked Steven. "Pru, you haven't gotten involved with the wrong people, have you?"

"No, of course not," she said. "He wasn't after me. He was after Vince."

"Who?" asked Steven.

"Vince Kane, the former owner of a body shop in Fishtown. Immediately after the incident, he sold everything and left town," said Martin.

"Well, it seems you know a lot."

"That's my job. Now I need to know why he was after Kane."

She sat back in her chair. He didn't know everything. "That's your fault."

"Excuse me?"

"One of your detectives, Hudson, asked Vince for the name of someone who could have the resources to move high end cars overseas. He told him O'Hara. Your man must

have used Vince's name to the wrong person and that's why they sent someone after him."

Martin tried to cover his surprise at something he didn't know. She imagined someone back at headquarters was due for an ass chewing. "How do you know Kane?"

"I'd met him a few days before. He'd saved me from a handsy guy at a coffee shop. We had a nice conversation. When I recognized him, I began to walk down the aisle to say hello. That's when I saw the shooter."

"Why didn't you say that at the time?" asked Steven.

"Because the police would have assumed Vince had done something to cause it."

Martin reached his hand to hers. "Pru, Vince Kane isn't a good guy. He has a record. He's not someone you should be involved with."

There was nothing Pru hated more than someone being condescending toward her. She pulled back her hand. "Martin, I appreciate your concern but I know about Vince's record. I also know he has nothing to do with this investigation."

"You've been in touch since the shooting?" asked Martin.

"He visited me in the hospital. He was concerned for my safety. That's when he told me about O'Hara."

"If he contacts you, let me know. We need to bring him in."

"No, you don't. The case against the shooter is iron-clad. It was all captured on store video, which has been splashed all over the news. The only thing Vince did was give Detective Hudson a name. That's it. Your cop fucked up and Vince lost everything." They looked surprised at her language.

Martin tried to recover "You seem to know an awful lot about this case."

"Not enough. I need to know where you are with it."

"That's a police matter."

“Do you think that will work on me?” she smiled. “You know me better than that, Martin.”

“Yeah, I do. I think it’s time you come into the station for questioning.”

“Oh, please. You know you can’t do that.”

“Excuse me?” asked Martin. “I’m the Chief of Police. If I want you for questioning, it will happen.”

Pru looked at the mayor and smiled. “Tell him, Steven.”

“You can’t take her in. Philly hasn’t had a hero this popular since Rocky ran up the steps of this building. We’ll both be crucified in the press.”

“So, let’s save us a lot of time and aggravation and tell me where you are with the case.”

Martin sighed and looked at Pru. “We’ve been seeing a lot of high-end car thefts, the kind that don’t show up in chop shops. These are the type that you have to order.”

“You can order a car to be stolen?”

“If you know the right people. They’re like art thieves. These cars are very rare and very expensive. A nine-million-dollar Bugatti was stolen last week.”

“What moron spends nine-million dollars on a car?” asked Pru.

“The same ones who spend millions on a painting,” said Martin.

Pru felt duly chastened. “Point taken.”

“This particular moron is also dead. He had the misfortune to come home early from a business trip and found someone relieving him of his expensive toy. It’s a homicide investigation now,” said Martin.

“Are you anywhere near making an arrest?” asked Pru.

“The shooter we have in custody isn’t the same guy who killed the Bugatti owner. That was messy, not planned. The shooter you took down is a pro.”

“Has he said anything?” asked Steven.

“No, and he won’t. O’Hara doesn’t allow failure and his guy was taken out by a woman with a shopping cart. He’s in protective custody.”

“That’s all?”

“For now.”

“You’ll keep me informed?”

“I can’t discuss an ongoing investigation.” Martin shook his head and smiled. “I realize how ridiculous that sounded as soon as I said it. “I will tell you what I can.”

“Thank you, Martin.”

“Martin, if this guy is as bad as you say you need to put a detail on her,” said Steven.

“That’s not necessary. My house is alarmed and in case you haven’t noticed,” she pointed around the room. “I work in one of the most secure buildings in the country.”

“I still think it’s a good idea,” said Steven.

“And I’m tired of telling people I’m safe.”

“Who else is asking?” said Martin.

Pru smiled. “Vince.”

Pru sat back against her chair and closed her eyes. She was exhausted. The surgeon warned her that would happen. The pain wasn't too bad but she felt like she could sleep for a week. Her phone beeped and she opened her eyes. "Yes, Susan?"

"Ms. Tyler is here to see you."

"Send her in."

Rose entered and sat down opposite her. "Pru, how are you feeling. You're looking a bit pale."

"I think I will make a short day of it. How is Tony doing in class?"

"He's my star student. It's so gratifying to have someone invest so much of themselves in learning."

"That's great."

"I hate to hit you with this on your first day back but you'll want to know. In your absence, the board is giving me a hard time about expenses."

"Let me guess, they want you to drop your scholarship student."

"Correct. Elizabeth Lamb is leading the charge. She feels he doesn't set the right tone."

"Hah! More like he doesn't have the right skin tone. I'll handle her. I have a Zoom meeting with the board in thirty minutes."

Rose smiled and stood. "Okay, I'm going to get out of your hair. If you need anything, call me, anytime. I mean it."

"Thank you, Rose." Pru waited until she was alone to lean back against her chair. This was not going to be pretty.

Susan set up Pru's monitor for the meeting. "Everyone should be on in a few minutes. "But first," she opened Pru's desk drawer and pulled out a bottle of acetaminophen. She opened the lid and handed her two. "You look like you need them."

Pru smiled and took the pills. "You're a godsend. After this meeting, I'm going to call it a day."

"Excellent idea."

"I'll work on some of those thank you notes from home."

"No."

"Excuse me?" Pru smiled.

Susan took a deep breath. "With all due respect, Ms. Holiday, you look like hell. My job as your assistant is to make it easier for you to do your job. I can't do that if you pass out at your desk. You take your meeting. I'll sit out of sight and take notes. Then, I'll take you home." She exhaled and looked a bit pale herself.

Pru chuckled. "You're absolutely right." She smiled at Susan's sigh of relief. "You have taken great care of me these past few weeks and I don't know what I would have done without you. Thank you."

"You're welcome," she said as she blushed.

"You also have my permission to call me on my stuff when I get out of hand."

"Thank you."

A voice came from her computer. "Are we on?" Pru turned to see Harry Stevens looking at her from her monitor.

"Hello, Harry." In short order, Ashley and Devon Walker and Elizabeth Lamb joined the meeting.

"Let's begin with the fundraiser," said Elizabeth.

"Elizabeth, first, let's welcome Prudence back and tell her how proud we are of her."

“Yes, of course we are,” said Elizabeth through clenched teeth. “Very proud. Now, the fundraiser.”

“No,” said Pru.

“I beg your pardon,” said Elizabeth.

“I’m going to shorthand this meeting. First, the scholarship program stays as it is. I’ve received a report from Rose Tyler that our student, Mr. Espinosa, is exceeding all expectations not to mention all his fellow students.”

“The expense of the class, payroll and insurance…” Elizabeth started.

“He stays. That’s it.”

“You can’t dictate what is a board decision.”

“Yes, actually I can. Every year we count on a celebrity to bring in the big whale contributors. Well, this year, that’s me. Everyone is going to want to talk about how I got shot. If you want me there, you won’t touch my scholarship program. Otherwise, I will be staying home, resting from my devastating experience.”

“You wouldn’t,” Elizabeth whispered.

“In a heartbeat.”

“We’ll remember this when your contract is up,” said Elizabeth.

“Shut up, Liz,” said Devon. “Prudence has raised more money for the museum than any director in the past. Membership is up thirty percent over last year and that’s before…what happened. I’ve talked to Rose and Mr. Espinosa is making the most of this opportunity. She is convinced he will be a huge asset to the museum. Our duty as board members is to make art available to everyone, especially to those who, historically, lacked access. Pru, you have our support.”

“Absolutely,” said Ashley.

“Well, I…” Harry started.

“Harry, do you want pass on the biggest fundraising opportunity in years?” Devon looked suddenly embarrassed. “No offense, Pru.”

She held up her hand and smiled. “None taken.”

“Of course not,” said Harry.

Pru thought if Elizabeth clenched any harder her teeth would crack. “Alright, let’s wrap this up. I’m more than ready to call it a day. Ashley, you usually run the fundraiser details past me. My assistant, Susan, will be handling a lot of my duties for some time. If you have any issues, please contact her.” She glanced over at Susan who looked shocked. “She has my complete confidence. Now if you’ll all excuse me.”

“Take care,” said Ashley. The others said their goodbyes, with the exception of Elizabeth, who disconnected without saying anything, which was probably just as well.

“Okay, that’s done. I’m ready to go home.”

“You want me to handle the fundraiser?” asked Susan.

“Ashley does the bulk of the arrangements but she runs most of it past me. You’ve been with me through three fundraisers. If you have questions, you’ll ask me. You can handle it.” She reached for her bag. “Now, let’s get me home.”

Vince parked his RV in a lot in New Jersey. It was probably crazy to come back in the area but he needed to check on Pru. The further away he'd driven from Pennsylvania, the worse he felt. She saved his life. She was using her influence to pursue the case. All he was doing was running. He picked up his phone and dialed.

"Hello?"

"Pru? It's Vince."

"It's good to hear from you. How are you?"

"That's my line. Are you taking it easy?"

"Yes, I am. I'm only going into the office if absolutely necessary. I'm working from home and doing meetings over the computer."

"I'm glad to hear that. Look, I...I want to see you."

"Really?"

Vince could hear her chuckle. "Pru, I need to see that you're okay."

"I'd like that. I'll text you the address."

His phone beeped. "Got it. I'll see you in about an hour." He unlocked his motorcycle from the rack. He could cross the Ben Franklin bridge and be in Philly in thirty minutes, depending on traffic. Another thirty and he'd finally see for himself if Pru was okay.

Vince pulled up to the end unit of historic homes. He and his bike stood out on the perfectly groomed block. He took a breath and knocked. He was relieved when Pru opened the door. She looked so much better than she had in the hospital. In fact, she looked beautiful. Her long, dark hair was loose about her shoulders. She didn't look like the director of a world-famous art museum in her t-shirt and shorts. "Hello."

"Hello," she smiled. She glanced at his bike. "I have a garage just past the gate. It would be safer there." She pushed button on a panel and the gate swung open. He moved

the bike off the street and past the gate. A garage door opened and he pushed his bike next to a newer but unpretentious sedan. He thought about the millions a place like this would cost and knew he wasn't in Fishtown anymore. Pru was still standing at the door.

"Are you all set?" she asked.

"I am."

She shut the door behind him and activated a code on the panel. She turned and smiled. "This activates the alarms on the gate and the garage so you won't have to worry about your bike. I've also set the alarm on the doors and window. I told you I was safe here."

"I'm not worried about my bike. Now, how are you doing, really?"

"It still hurts, but as you can see, I'm finally free of my sling. Would you like some coffee?"

"Yes, thanks." He followed her into the kitchen and watched her maneuver with one arm. "Please, let me."

"Okay," she said with a smile. He took off his jacket and put it over a chair. She sat at the large kitchen island as he put a pod in the brewer. "The mugs are in the cabinet above." He grabbed the mugs and quickly made them each a mug. She grabbed the milk from the fridge for her coffee. He took his black and sweet.

He sat down and sighed with relief. He could see for himself Pru was recovering. "You look a lot better than you did in the hospital."

"That's a compliment, I think," she chuckled.

He reached for her hand. "I'm serious. You were shot because of me."

She squeezed his hand. "I'm okay, Vince, really I am." She took a sip of her coffee. "You haven't asked about the case."

"You're changing the subject."

"I'm uncomfortable being the center of attention."

“You were all over the news. This must be hell for you.”

“It’s awkward, but I decided to use it.”

“To get information on the case?”

“Not just that. The fundraiser is next week. I’ll make the most of my new found fame,” she said making air quotes. “I’ll be able to guilt people into bigger donations. At least it’s better than getting the money because I’m pretty.”

Vince snorted his coffee. “Excuse me?”

“I don’t say that to brag.” She pointed to her face. “I had nothing to do with this. This is a result of my parents and God. I realize from a societal view; I’m considered a beautiful woman.”

Vince smiled. “I agree with society.”

Pru blushed. “Thank you.” She took a sip of her coffee. “When I started with the museum, I was more interested in acquisitions and education programs but the board had other ideas. They realized that wealthy men will give more money to a pretty woman. I went to all sorts of events, representing the museum. I wanted to discuss the various artists we were featuring, different schools of art. All they wanted to know was if I would meet them later for drinks, whether they were married or not.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It was frustrating. I’d spent decades studying all over the world but they didn’t want my opinion, just my phone number.”

“But that’s changed, hasn’t it? You’re in charge now.”

“I still have a board to answer to, but I’ve learned how to deal with them. I get my programs and they get their donations.”

“And you don’t have to give out your phone number.”

“No, I don’t,” she smiled.

“You gave it to me.”

“Yes, I did,” she smiled.

“I still don’t understand why.”

“Yes, you do,” she smiled. She stood and took her mug to the sink. He came up behind her with his.

“Pru, I’m nobody.”

She put her hand on his chest. “You forget. You’re my knight in shining armor. You came to my rescue.”

“I’m no hero.”

“I disagree and I’m a very good judge of character.” She leaned up and gave him a soft kiss.

Vince wanted to lose himself in her but he forced himself to pull away. “Pru, I don’t know what to say.”

“You can’t say you’re not attracted to me.” She chuckled. “I’m not being vain. I can see how you look at me.”

“Of course, I am but that’s not why I came here. I needed to know you’re safe.”

“You can see for yourself, I’m safe. I’m recovering.” She grabbed both mugs and put them in dishwasher. He put his hand on her good shoulder.

“Pru, please. I was so worried about you I came back from Colorado.”

“What?”

“All I could think of was you were here and I was running.”

“Oh Vince,” she whispered as she put her good arm around his waist. “I never thought of you as running. You’re doing what you have to because of O’Hara.”

He kissed her forehead. “Thank you,” he whispered.

She smiled and stepped back. “Okay, the case. It’s a little more complicated than we thought. A guy came home early and found someone stealing his nine-million-dollar

Bugatti. The thief killed the owner. I looked the guy up. He was a corporate lawyer and the son of a powerful player in city politics. Everyone's under a lot of pressure to find the thief. Hopefully, they will tie him back to O'Hara and we can all relax. I have the chief's promise to contact me as soon as there are any developments.

Vince closed his eyes and sighed. He sat back down at the island. "Do they have any leads on the thief?"

"No. What's going on, Vince."

"It takes a special kind of thief to boost a car like that."

"Do you know who it could be?"

"Not personally, but I've heard things."

"I think it's time I make a phone call."

He reached for her hand. "Pru, this could put you in more danger."

She smiled as she reached for her phone. "Trust me. Hello, Prudence Holiday for Chief Brooks." She didn't have to wait long for the chief to pick up.

"Prudence, how are you?"

"I'm doing better but I'm hungry. How about joining me for lunch?"

"I'm booked up this afternoon."

"Clear your schedule. And stop at Arthur's Deli. I've been missing their Reuben's. Martin, bring three."

"I'll see you in an hour."

Pru was ridiculously happy to see Vince. She'd thought he was gone for good. Not only was he back, he was back to see her. Right now, he was wearing a hole in her floor, pacing back and forth. She understood why he was so concerned. He was afraid Martin would think he was a part of this.

"Do you want the tour?" she asked.

"Excuse me?"

"My house. I don't get a chance to show it off very often."

"Yeah, sure, okay."

"The house was originally built in 1825. Obviously, I've updated it a bit."

"Obviously," he smiled. He took a look at the picture hanging over the couch. It was a cityscape of Rome. "That's really nice. Is that somebody famous?"

"You have a good eye. No, he's not famous yet. His name is Mario Bianchi. He was selling his work in a market in Rome. I think he's brilliant." Pru took him through the first floor, kitchen and living room area. The second floor were guest rooms and an office. They walked up to the third floor which was her master suite with a bathroom that rivaled the best hotels.

"Wow. How many people fit in that shower?" he smiled.

"Just one...so far," Pru smiled when he missed a step. The front door buzzer sounded and Pru presses a button on a panel by the door. "Hello."

"Prudence, it's Martin."

"I'll be right there. Did you remember the sandwiches?"

"Of course."

Vince followed Pru downstairs. She pushed a button on alarm panel and a small video screen lit up. At her front door was the chief of police of Philadelphia with a large bag from Arthur's. She punched in the code and opened the door. "Come in, Martin." He

walked in and handed her the bag. "Did you remember the pickles?" Martin drilled her with a look that made her chuckle. "Don't worry. I'm a good tipper."

"Very funny," he smiled as he handed her the bag.

"Martin Brooks, this is Vince Kane."

Martin extended his hand and Vince took it. "I thought you left down, Mr. Kane."

"I'm back, and it's Vince."

"Let's sit down and eat," said Pru. She led them into the kitchen table and set down the bag. Vince pulled the sandwiches out of the bag as Pru set out the plates. "Soda or ice tea?"

"Soda," said both men.

She got the glasses and poured soda. "Now, let's eat."

"You didn't just call me here for a delivery," said Martin.

"No, I didn't. Eat first. Then we'll talk." They finished their meal in an awkward silence. Pru watched the men sizing each other up.

"Okay, now what's the real reason I'm here?" asked Martin.

"Pru filled me in on what you told her," said Vince.

"Excuse me?"

"Martin, let him talk."

"She told me about the Bugatti and the owner who was killed. You said it was messy. Was it overkill?"

"How did you know?"

"First, the only reason I know about this guy is because I've been around forever, not because I hired him."

"Uh huh," said Martin with more than a tinge of doubt.

“Martin, Vince didn’t have to come back. He’s back to help.”

“There’s any number of guys in town skilled enough to lift a car like that. You have to bypass very tricky alarm systems. When Pru told me about the murder I thought of one guy, Sam Wilson. He’s got a hair trigger. I was in a bar one night with some friends and saw him beat a guy unconscious for saying hello to his girlfriend. If we hadn’t pulled him off, I am sure he would have killed him.”

“Why are you coming forward with this now? You left town.”

“Pru’s in danger. She’s been all over the news. If Wilson is your guy, he’s going to want to clean up loose ends.”

“He’d come after you, not her,” said Martin

Pru’s heart raced and she reached for Vince’s hand. “You shouldn’t have come back.”

“Pru, they’re already after me. We know that. You stopped their shooter. That’s not something a guy like O’Hara will ever forgive. With the shooter in jail, O’Hara will task Wilson to finish us off.”

“Oh, God,” she whispered.

Vince squeezed her hand. “I won’t let anything happen to you.” He looked at Martin. “You’ve got to get this guy.” Martin suddenly looked awkward. “What?”

“The FBI have taken jurisdiction. The cars are being stolen in multiple jurisdictions and shipped overseas. That’s makes it their case.”

“When were you going to tell me!” said Pru.

“I just found out about it.”

“Look, Chief, I don’t give a damn about the cars or the FBI. I’ve just given you the name of a murderer. You need to find him and get him to flip on O’Hara. It’s the only way Pru will ever be safe.”

“You don’t know Wilson is the killer.”

“Unless your people have the name of another psychopathic car thief, then he’s probably your guy.”

Vince watched Pru close the door behind Martin Brooks and set the alarm. He took some comfort from the way it seemed natural for her to secure the house. "He thinks I'm involved."

Pru turned and smiled. "No, he doesn't. I know him. He's trying to keep you off balance. It's what he does."

"It's working."

She walked toward him and put her hand on his arm. "You didn't have to come back."

"Yeah, I did."

She leaned up and gave him a soft kiss. "No, you didn't. You've put yourself at risk to look after me."

He stroked her hair over her shoulder. "You did the same for me." He placed a kiss on her cheek. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"I should get going."

"Where are you staying?"

"I parked my RV in Jersey."

"Why don't you stay here?"

"What?"

"I'm guessing my house is more secure than your RV."

"That's true."

"I have the room," she said.

Vince noticed her blush. "What's going on?"

"Honestly, I feel safer with you than I do with all the alarms."

“Oh, yeah?” he chuckled.

“I’m serious. That day in the coffee shop, you stopped that guy with just your voice.”

“Ah, if I remember correctly, I had a grip on his arm.”

“That’s not what stopped him. He knew just from your voice; you were not to be ignored.” Pru slipped her arms around his waist and rested her head on his chest. “I never felt like that before.”

“Like what?”

“Sheltered.” She took his hand and they sat down on the sofa. “I was an only child. I was raised to be independent and for the most part that served me well. Then you came along, a knight in shining armor looking out for me.”

Vince chuckled. “I don’t know if that’s me.”

She traced her finger over a star tattooed on his arm. “Okay, a badass knight.”

He laughed and hugged her close, but pulled back. “Oh, I’m sorry. Did I hurt you?”

“No, I’m good,” she smiled. “When my parents taught me to be independent, they also taught me to trust myself and my instincts. I know I’m safe with you.”

In all his life, he’d never felt the way he did with Pru.

Vince sat next to Pru on the couch. They’d had Chinese for dinner and now they were watching a movie. He was delighted to find out she had a penchant for disaster movies. They were watching ‘Die Hard 2’. A bad guy had just ambushed some good guys on a moving walkway.

“A sitting duck,” said the bad guy and Pru at the same time.

Vince chuckled. “Isn’t this a little low brow for you?”

Pru smiled. “I could give you a long explanation of how the movie is actually an illustration of man versus society but that would be bull. I just like watching stuff blow up.”

“You are something else,” he smiled and leaned in for a quick kiss. It felt as natural to him as breathing. Vince tried to focus on the rest of the movie but all he could think about was Pru. He couldn’t let himself think this was normal. He was a rough hewn, tattooed biker who barely finished high school. She was a brilliant, sophisticated woman who could have stepped out of one of the paintings in her museum. The movie finished and Vince decided he needed some space from Pru before he said or did something he couldn’t take back. “It’s been a long day and you need your rest.”

She smiled and patted his leg. “It’s been a long day for both of us. Let me show you your room.”

Vince followed her to the second floor and she showed him to one of the guest rooms. It had it’s own bathroom and he would be very comfortable, if it wasn’t the fact that Pru would be directly above him.

“I think you’ll find everything you need except something to sleep in.” Pru smiled.

“I don’t normally bother,” he said without thinking. He found himself oddly pleased with her blush.

“If you want anything, help yourself to anything in the kitchen. My assistant has made sure I’m well stocked.”

“I’ll be fine, Pru.”

“Okay, good night.”

He touched her arm and whispered, “Good night,” as he gave her a soft kiss on the cheek.

Pru glanced at her alarm clock. She'd been staring at the ceiling for two hours. She was trying to send her mind to wandering the streets of Paris. Walking through the Louvre. High tea at Fortnum and Mason's. None of her usual tricks worked. The truth was, she was scared. She was so used to being in control of everything but this, as much as she hated to admit it, was out of her control. She was in the sights of a killer when all she wanted to do was help a friend. Vince. Was he a friend? Was he more? He was different from any man she'd ever known. Considering that she was in her fifties and single, different may not be a bad thing.

She pushed back the covers and sat on the edge of her bed. What was she thinking? Yes, they'd shared a few innocent kisses, but he'd come back to help with the investigation. She got up and looked out the window. The view from her top floor was one of her favorite things about her home. Beyond her tidy garden she could see the lights of the city. Some where out there was someone who wanted her dead. Not just her, Vince too. She walked to the other side of the room and looked out the other window. A different view didn't change her reality. She sighed and headed toward the stairs. Maybe a couple of cookies would help. Well, they couldn't hurt.

She was wrong.

Vince couldn't sleep. Despite the house's alarm system, he was still worried for Pru's safety. Every creak put him on alert. There seemed to be a lot of creaks in an eighteenth-century house. He heard a loud thump and was out of bed before he heard Pru yell. He ran into the hall and saw a figure on the stairs. He found a light switch and turned to see Pru sprawled halfway down the stairs. "What the hell happened?"

"I wanted a snack but I tripped going down the stairs."

He walked up the stairs and stood next to her. She was obviously in pain. "Why were you doing it in the dark?"

"I didn't want to wake you."

“Oh, for Christ’s sake.” He reached for her arm. “Let me help you up.” He could see her eyes watering.

“I wrenched my shoulder.”

He grabbed her around the waist and pulled her to her feet.

“Fuck,” she muttered.

Vince chuckled.

“Are you amused, sir?”

“You cursing? Yeah, it’s pretty funny.” He turned on the bedroom light. “Let’s get you back to bed.” He helped her back to bed and she sat on the edge. “You’re in pain. What can I get you?”

“There is my surgical wrap in my linen closet in the hall. The ice pack that goes in it is downstairs in my freezer.”

Vince went out to the hall and came back with an oddly shaped grey wrap.

“Damn.”

“Isn’t this right?”

“It is. I just thought I was done with it.”

“It’s just for tonight. Now let me go get the ice.”

Pru sat on the edge of her bed and half cursed her clumsiness. The other half of her couldn’t get past seeing Vince in nothing but boxers. She couldn’t get the vision of his multiple tattoos on his well defined chest and arms out of her mind. She also got a good look at his tree trunk legs. All this highly inappropriate thinking was keeping her mind from thinking of her straining the muscles in her shoulder and pulling the barely healed bullet wound. She gasped when he walked back and moved too quick. Her shoulder reminded her quick movement was a mistake.

“Ow, damn.”

“Let me get the ice pack on.” Vince set a bottle of water and a package of Oreos on her nightstand.

“What’s that?”

“Your snack. You’ll need it with your pain med.”

“I haven’t taken any of that for two weeks.”

“You’re going to need it tonight. Where is it?”

“Nightstand.”

He dug into the drawer and found the painkiller. “Okay, let’s get your icepack set.” He put the icepack inside the wrap and then placed it on her shoulder. Pru tried to wrap the long pieces around her waist and winced. “Will you let me help you?”

“Sorry. Force of habit.”

He wrapped the straps around her waist and secured the Velcro. “How’s that?”

“Okay”

He wrapped the small straps around her upper arm. “Is that tight enough?”

“Yeah, it’s good.”

Vince opened the pill bottle and handed her one. He opened the water bottle and handed it to her. “Take this.”

“You’re pretty bossy,” she smiled.

“That’s not going to work on me.”

“What?”

“That ‘I’m so pretty I just bat my eyes and get my way’ look.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, please.”

“Look, Pru, you not only hurt your incision, you landed hard. It doesn’t hurt yet, but it will. You’re going to have some good size bruises on that adorable ass.”

She smiled and took the pill. “You think I have an adorable ass?”

“I’m not blind. Now lay back.”

Pru carefully got back under the covers, sure that Vince’s diagnosis of her bruised butt was correct. He smiled as he handed her a cookie.

“Eat this. Those pills are strong.”

“Yes, sir,” she smiled as she nibbled on the cookie. “I’m sorry I woke you up.”

“I was awake.”

“Is your bed comfortable?” she asked as she rubbed her nose. The drug was starting to kick in.

“Of course, it’s comfortable. I was awake for the same reason you were.”

Pru smiled and reached for his hand. “It’s all going to be okay,” she whispered. “I really like your tattoos.”

“Thank you. Do you need anything else before I go back to my room?”

“Yes. A kiss.”

“Excuse me?”

“I need a kiss from you so I have sweet dreams,” she said with her eyes half closed. He leaned over and gave her a soft kiss. “A knight in shining armor can do better than that.” She grazed his stubbled cheek. She pulled him into another kiss, more passionate than the last. She leaned back and smiled. “Much better.” As she closed her eyes, she thought she heard her knight whisper to her.

“Sweet dreams, princess.”

Pru woke up to pain she hadn't had in weeks. The pain in her shoulder was matched by the pain where she hit the step. She rolled out of bed on her left side, so she wouldn't roll on her injured shoulder. She walked into the bathroom and tugged down her shorts. Vince had been right. Bruises were blooming across her bottom and they were only going to get darker. "Shit," she muttered. She stripped off the surgical ice pack and the rest of her clothes. She walked into her shower and stood in the middle of the hot sprays. She smiled at the thought of sharing it with Vince. She'd gotten used to getting clean while using one arm. She slipped on a pair of sweatpants and an oversized t shirt. She could pull it over her head and pull her arms through with a minimum of pain.

She walked downstairs and saw through the open door; Vince was up and had made the bed. The smell of coffee drew her to the kitchen. "Coffee," she growled. Vince turned from the counter and smiled at her, despite her wet hair and baggy clothes. He grabbed the mug from the coffee maker and handed it to her. She added some milk and sugar before taking a deep sip. "Ahh, better."

"Have a seat. I found some omelet fixings."

"Omelet yes, sitting no."

"That bad?"

"My butt looks like a relief map of the Poconos."

His smile faded. "How's your shoulder?"

"It's okay."

"Bull. You're not moving it." He moved closer. "May I look?"

"Sure."

Vince pulled the edge of her t shirt aside. He could see the still-red bullet wound. It was a little swollen, but not bruised. "Ah, damn," he whispered. "This is because of me."

"No, it's not. It was because of that asshole with the gun."

Vince chuckled. "Pain makes you swear like a sailor."

“I swear at stupid. When I slipped, I grabbed the railing with my right hand. That was stupid.”

“That was instinct.” He looked at her wound. “You should call your doctor.”

“I’m fine.”

“Can you hold your coffee in your right hand?”

Pru transferred her mug to her right hand. Her smile turned to a gritted teeth wince. “Son of a bitch.”

Vince took the mug from her hand and set it on the counter. “I’m right.”

She shook her head. “Fine. I’ll call my doctor.”

“Go make the call and I’ll finish making breakfast.”

Pru went back to her bedroom and got her cell phone. She hated that Vince was right. She couldn’t stand the idea that she may have set back her recovery. She waited for the receptionist to answer.

“Dr. Morgan’s office.”

“Hi. This is Prudence Holiday. I’ve had a bit of an accident and I wanted to get Dr. Morgan’s opinion.”

“Oh, Ms. Holiday. Let me get him. I know he’ll want to speak with you.”

Pru shook her head. This kind of treatment wouldn’t last forever. Dr. Morgan came on the line sounding very concerned.

“Prudence, what’s happened?”

“I tripped on the stairs. I grabbed the railing to stop falling but I hit the step. It yanked my shoulder hard.”

“Can you move it?”

“Yes, but it hurts. I had to take a painkiller last night.”

“Okay, take it easy for today. Do you have enough med?”

“Yes. I didn’t take that many. They knock me out.”

“Do you have someone who can look out for you?”

Pru had a quick vision of Vince taking care of her last night. Her heart raced at the memory of the kiss. It wasn’t a dream. “Ah, yes.”

“Rest for today. If you’re not feeling better tomorrow, I’ll want to see you.”

“Okay. Thank you, Doctor Morgan.”

“Ben, please.”

“Thanks, Ben.” Pru disconnected the call and smiled. Ben Morgan was handsome, successful and was the kind of man she dated. The last few weeks was going to change more than her social life.

Pru walked back into the kitchen as Vince was setting the omelets on the table. “This looks great.”

“Thanks. Did you get your doctor’s office?”

“I spoke with him.”

“Your surgeon picked up?”

“Yeah. The publicity hasn’t worn off yet. I’m first on everyone’s call list. He said I should take it easy today and let him know if I don’t feel better tomorrow.”

“Okay, good. Sit and eat. Then I’ll help you get back in bed.”

“Oh, really?” She smiled at his blush.

“You know what I mean. Now sit and eat.”

She glanced at a sofa throw pillow that was on her kitchen chair. She sat down carefully. “Thanks for this.”

“You’re welcome,” he smiled as he sat down.

Pru took a bite of her omelet and smiled. "Umm, this is great."

"Thanks." Vince took a breath and set down his fork. "I want to talk about something."

"Shoot," she stopped and smiled. "So to speak."

"I don't want to leave you here by yourself."

"I promise not to walk down the stairs in the dark again."

"Just until you're feeling better."

Pru saw the genuine concern in his eyes. It would make sense to have someone here while she recovered from the fall. The fact that Vince had the bluest eyes she'd ever seen had nothing to do with it. Well, maybe. "I guess I should take it easy for the next couple of days. I'll call Susan and tell her to clear my schedule."

Vince was glad Pru didn't argue about him staying until she'd recovered from the fall. He cleaned up the breakfast dishes while she finished her coffee.

"I could get used to this service," she smiled. "You're a great cook. I had no idea I had the stuff you put in the omelet."

"I want to make sure your okay," he said as he finished loading the dishwasher.

"Vince, I know your motivation is to protect me." She took another sip of her coffee. "The truth is I don't want to think about the reason you have to be here."

He walked over to her and took her hand. "What's going on?"

"I put on a good show but I'm scared. I'm scared for both of us."

Vince set his hand on her waist. "Pru, I swear I won't let anything happen to you." He was surprised when she chuckled. "What?"

"You keep saying you're not a knight but you just took an oath like a knight would do to protect the queen."

"That would make you my queen in this scenario," he smiled.

"I wouldn't presume."

"You look pretty queen-like to me."

"That's sweet," she blushed. "Vince, about last night. I need to apologize."

"You didn't mean to fall."

"Not about that, about the kiss. I remember making you kiss me."

"That medication is pretty strong."

"It wasn't the medication, at least not entirely."

He smiled and ran his hand around her back. "Tell me."

"I wanted you to kiss me, really kiss me. I wanted to know what it would be like."

Vince smiled. "And?"

“It was as wonderful as I imagined.”

“You imagined kissing me?”

“Ever since that day in the coffee shop.”

“I don’t understand you. I’m so far away from your world we could be from different planets. Why me?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe because you came to my rescue. Maybe it’s your amazing blue eyes. Maybe I don’t know why I think about you so often. Maybe I just do.”

Vince smiled. “I know why I think about you. You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met, but that’s not why.”

“No?” she smiled.

“It’s not because you were such a badass when saved my life. Not because you have an impressive vocabulary of curses.”

“Not even that?” she laughed.

“No. It’s because of all of it. You are an amazing woman, Prudence Holiday.”

“You’re too kind, Mr. Kane,” she grinned.

He knew this was trouble. He shouldn’t be here. He shouldn’t want her this much. He had no business in her life. He knew. He leaned in and kissed her the way he’d wanted to the moment he’d met her. When he finally pulled away, he caressed her cheek. “I have no business doing that.”

“Did you hear me say stop?” she smiled

“I mean it, Pru. We shouldn’t do this. We can’t be involved.”

“I might argue that we are already involved, but I see your point. We should be focused on the psychos that may try to kill us.”

Vince nodded. That wasn’t his reason for not getting involved, but for now, it would do.

Pru finally accepted the fact she should lie down. Vince wouldn't let her help clean up after breakfast. The truth was, she was in pain. Vince had setup her surgical ice pack again. He came in to her bedroom with a water bottle and handed it to her.

"You should take your pain pill."

"They make me loopy."

He noticed she had her phone and her laptop on the bed.

"What's all this?"

"I can work one handed."

"Do you really want to be making decisions on painkillers?"

"That's why I shouldn't take it."

"Is there any reason your assistant can't handle things for a couple of days?"

"No."

"Then take your pill and get some rest." He leaned over her to grab her laptop. "You can get this back later." He handed her the remote to the TV. "Watch some mindless TV until you fall asleep."

Pru smiled. "Your bedside manner is pretty tough."

His voice softened. "I'm just looking out for you."

"I know you are." She reached for the prescription bottle and took a painkiller. She took a sip of water and looked at him. "Happy now?"

"Yes. Now get some rest."

"Vince, 7388 is the code to the alarm."

"Okay, good."

"One more thing. Look in the left top drawer of my dresser." She heard his gasp when he opened the drawer.

“What’s this?” He pulled her handgun out and held it up.

“That’s a gun.”

“I know that. Why do you have it?”

“Do you know how many rich people belong to gun clubs? I found it a good way to make connections for donations. I also became a very good shot.”

“Why do you want me to have it?”

“I don’t want to make decisions on painkillers. Do you know how to use it?”

“Yeah, I know.”

Pru nodded. “Good. Then maybe I will get some rest.”

Vince walked to her side and touched her cheek. “I swear I’ll protect you. You don’t have to worry.” He leaned down and gave her a quick kiss as he pulled the comforter up around her. “Sweet dreams, princess.”

She slid under the comforter and closed her eyes, wishing for a dream of a knight on a metal horse.

Vince sat on the couch and flipped through channels. He wasn't really seeing anything. He'd checked on Pru and she was still sleeping. He checked out the windows and didn't see anything that didn't belong. Only him.

He was checking what he would make for a late lunch when the doorbell rang. He looked at the monitor and saw the Martin Brooks standing at the door with a bag from Arthur's. What kind of world did Pru live in where the chief of police delivered lunch? He deactivated the alarm and let him in.

"Where's Prudence?"

"Resting. She slipped on the stairs and reinjured her shoulder."

"What? Where is she?"

"Upstairs, resting." Vince saw Brooks notice the gun in his waistband. Brooks reached to his waistband and unhooked the snap on his holster. "Take it easy, Brooks. It's not my gun."

"I've heard that before."

"Calm down, Martin. It's my gun. It's registered and I gave it to him." They looked up and saw Pru on the landing. "I smell pickles."

"What happened?" asked Martin.

"I slipped on the stairs and wrenched my arm. Vince has been looking after me."

"He needs a gun to do that?"

"Doesn't he?"

"That's why I'm here." He handed Vince the take-out bag.

Vince pushed the bag back at Brooks and went up the stairs. "Are you okay?"

"I'm better."

"Good," he said as he took her left arm.

"I can manage."

“Indulge me,” he smiled. Pru took his arm as she carefully held on to the banister. Brooks followed them to the kitchen table. “Do you need the cushion?”

“No, I’m good.”

They sat down at the table and Vince set out plates for the sandwiches. “Would you like a soda?”

“Yes, thanks,” said Brooks. He looked surprised that Vince was waiting on them both. He handed Pru a soda and sat down with his pastrami on rye.

Pru took a sip of her soda. “Unless you’ve taken a job with a delivery service, you’re here for a reason.”

“Yes, I am. Once you gave us the name, we knew what we were looking for. We were finally able to match the prints we found at the crime scene. My detectives found Sam Wilson to question him. He didn’t take well to our presence and tried to draw on them.”

“You didn’t kill him, did you? You’ll never get O’Hara if you did,” said Vince.

“No, my team is good. He was taken with minimal injury. We told him what we have on him and we offered him a deal. We’ll take the death penalty off the table if he flips on O’Hara’s organization. His lawyer advised him to take the deal.”

“Good luck with that,” said Vince.

“I think we’ll do okay. We’ve offered his girlfriend and their son witness protection. He may be a violent criminal but he has a soft spot for his family.”

“Does that mean it’s over?” asked Pru.

“The FBI is moving on O’Hara.”

“So, it’s over,” said Pru.

“Almost. I’ll let you know when they’ve taken O’Hara into custody.”

“Thanks, Martin.”

Martin took a sip of his drink. He set it down and took a deep breath. "Mr. Kane, thank you for your assistance in this investigation."

Vince tried not to smile. "You're welcome."

"I also owe you an apology. Your name should have never have become public in the investigation. Detective Hudson has been dealt with."

Vince had to chuckle. "Thanks for that. It had to kill you to say it."

Brooks shook his head. "You have no idea."

Pru finished her sandwich and wiped her hands. "So, this means we can go back to our lives. That's good because the fundraiser is this weekend."

"I think you should cancel, at least until they pick up O'Hara."

"Pru, I think he's right," said Vince.

"I can't cancel. It's the biggest fundraiser of the year."

"You're still at risk until O'Hara's in custody,"

"I won't be if you're with me," said Pru.

"Of course, I'll be there," said Brooks. "I'm bringing Tom Hardwick and his wife."

"The actor?" asked Vince.

"Yeah. He's playing a police chief in his next movie and he wants to shadow me."

"That's great, Martin," said Pru. "But I wasn't talking about you."

"Me?" asked Vince.

"I promised you a private tour. We could do that before the gala."

Vince couldn't believe what she was saying. "Pru, I'm not exactly the gala type."

Brooks stood. "I'll let you two to sort this out. I have a department to run and my staff is not happy when I disappear like this."

Pru stood and kissed his cheek. "Thank you for lunch, Martin."

“You’re welcome.”

“You’ll keep us informed of any developments?”

“Of course.”

Vince cleaned up the lunch dishes as Pru saw Brooks to the door and reset the alarm. “Pru you can’t be serious about me going to this fundraiser with you.”

She walked up to him and slipped her arms around his waist. “I’m very serious. I feel safer with you than I do with anyone else. Also, the museum is one of the most secure places in the city.”

“Pru, I don’t...”

She stopped his protest with a kiss. “Please, Vince, for me.”

He sighed and gave her another kiss. “Fine.”

“Thank you,” she said, then bit her lip. “There is one thing.”

“What?”

“It’s black tie.”

Vince turned onto I-95 and headed north. "I don't think this is a good idea."

"You need a tux and I need to get out of the house."

"You should at least have let me bring the gun."

"We're going to a mall where no one would expect us."

"Excuse me? Did you forget where all this started?"

"No, I haven't forgotten. It's my gun and I'm not strong enough to use it yet. If you have possession of it, someone is going to think you mean trouble."

"Fine, just stick close to me."

"I plan to," she smiled.

Thirty minutes later, Vince parked Pru's sedan and helped her out of the car. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

He held open the mall door and walked close to her down the hall. They checked the directory and found the tux shop. The salesman gave him a side glance until he saw Pru at his side. He understood his confusion. Vince didn't look like he belonged there.

"Can I help you, sir?"

"Yes." He pointed to one of the mannequins. "I need the whole kit for Saturday."

"Ah, we don't rent, sir."

"I didn't think you did. That's why it will have to fit well."

The man blushed and pulled a tape measure from his pocket. "Of course, of course. Let's go in the fitting room and I'll get some measurements."

"Pru, why don't you have a seat? This may take awhile." She took a seat that faced out toward the mall. He leaned over and pointed to the chair opposite. "Take that one,"

he whispered. Pru rolled her eyes but complied. He stood and smiled. "You'll have a better view for this fashion show."

Vince stared at himself in the mirror while the clerk took his measurement. He was in pretty good shape for a guy pushing sixty but the years had taken their toll. He never gave that much thought but now he'd be in a gathering of Philadelphia's elite. At least he could try to put on a good show. He didn't want to get dressed up in a monkey suit but it was the best way to keep an eye on her. Museum security was trained to look for thieves, not hit men.

"This is for the art museum's fundraiser, so it needs to be good."

The salesman tried to hide his surprise. "Of course, sir." He left the dressing room and came back with a tuxedo and a pair of high shine shoes. Once Vince tied the bow tie and looked in the mirror, he barely recognized himself. He hoped Pru would approve. He took a breath and walked out to the sales floor. He was rewarded with Pru's bright smile.

"Wow," she whispered. She walked toward him and smiled. "You'll be the best-looking man at the ball" She leaned closer and whispered. "The tux isn't bad, either."

He tried to hide his blush and told the salesman to start writing it up. He went back into the dressing room and changed back into his regular clothes. He looked in the mirror and thought he looked the same, but everything had changed.

Vince slung his clothing bag over his shoulder and Pru carried his new shoes. "Oh, do you smell that?" she asked. "Cinnamon Heaven. I haven't had one of those in ages." He looked around and no one seemed to be paying them any attention.

"Okay, let's get one."

"One? I'm not sharing," she smiled.

Vince found them a table in front of the small kiosk. He got them each a cinnamon roll drenched in icing and two sodas. "These things are the size of hubcaps."

“Yeah,” she said. “Isn’t it great!” She took a bite and rolled her eyes. “They are so good.”

“I never had one before. I have to admit, they’re pretty good.”

Pru stopped mid bite and stared at him. “You have never had this bit of ridiculously high caloric heaven? How is that possible?”

“I don’t normally go to malls.”

“Vince, I do wish you’d let me reimburse you. I didn’t mean for you to pay for the tux. It’s my fault you’re going.”

“I don’t mind. It was worth just to see the look on the clerk’s face when I handed him cash.”

“That was pretty funny.”

Vince was suddenly on alert when two women approached them. He knew this was a bad idea.

“It’s her, I told you, Gloria, it’s Prudence Holiday. We went to high school together. Tell, her Prudence. We had such fun together.”

Vince was shocked when Pru slipped into an aristocratic British accent.

“I’m terribly sorry, you must have mistaken me for someone else.”

The woman’s face went red and her friend chuckled. “Stop it, Prudence. You know it’s me, Marianne.”

“I’m sorry madam, I don’t know you. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to finish my bun before it gets cold.” Marianne’s friend dragged her away and they heard a whispered, “Bitch.”

Pru waited until the women were out of earshot when she started laughing.

“Let me guess,” said Vince. “You know her.”

“Unfortunately, she’s someone I can never forget.”

“High school mean girl?”

“She invented the term. She delighted in tormenting me.”

“What was with the accent?”

“I picked it up when I went to Cambridge. When I first got there, no one would speak to me. I asked my roommate why and she said I was too American.”

“Excuse me?”

“My parents were born in England. They always said I was too American, despite the fact that I was born and raised here. I adapted my accent and I suddenly had friends. I slip into it sometimes when I’m tired or I run into a pretentious bitch.”

Vince chuckled. “Nice.” He put his fork down and looked around. “We should get going before someone else recognizes you.”

Pru ate the last of her bun and set down her fork. “Okay, I’m done,” she smiled. “That was better than all the painkillers in the world.”

“The food or the bitch?”

Pru smiled. “Both.”

Pru watched as Vince cleaned up the dinner dishes. She was getting too comfortable having him around. She knew he would leave the moment the case was resolved. "Thank you for taking such good care of me."

Vince dried his hands and walked over toward her. "I wish it wasn't necessary."

Her heart pounded. "I told you it wasn't necessary. You gave the police everything they needed. You didn't have to stay."

He took her by her good hand and pulled her to her feet. "I had to stay. You're hurt and it's my fault."

"We've already been through this. It wasn't your fault. It was the bastard with the gun."

"You put yourself at risk for me."

"You're worth it."

"I don't even think I'm worth it. How are you so sure?"

She touched his cheek. "Never say that about yourself. I knew who you were the minute I met you. You, Vince, are a very good man." She reached up and gave him a gentle kiss. He smiled and pulled her close. He finally gave her the kiss she'd been aching for since she'd met him. "Vince," she whispered.

"Pru, your shoulder..."

"Is healed enough, but you should check that for yourself." She took his hand and led him upstairs to her bedroom. She smiled as she started to unbutton her blouse. She slipped it off her shoulders and let it fall to the ground. He reached out and lightly touched her scar. She saw tears in his eyes. "Look at me."

"I am."

"No, look at me." She caught his gaze and smiled. "I am more than my scars. Just like you. You're more than your tattoos and bike leathers. You are so much more." Pru pulled him into a passionate kiss and she could feel the moment when his defenses fell away.

Vince had spent the last two nights in Pru's bed. It was wonderful and passionate and all wrong. It had to end. It would the minute the case resolved. He would get in his RV and drive until he ran out of road. Pru would go back to her life. He stroked his fresh shaved face and adjusted his bow tie. At least for tonight, he would put on a good show for her.

Pru called for him from upstairs. "Vince? Can you help me with my necklace?"

He started up stairs but stopped half way up. She was wearing a long, black gown with long sleeves. It slid across every curve. It had a low neck, with a twist of fabric at her waist. Her hair fell long and shiny, just below her shoulders. "Wow."

"Thank you," she smiled. She held up a long chain with diamonds set at intervals. "My arm won't go back far enough to clip it."

"Of course." He pushed her hair aside and clipped the chain around her neck, then placed a kiss. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you. You look very dashing. Are you ready to face the thundering hoards?"

"I want you to stay close tonight."

She smiled and ran her hand up his arm. "I'd be delighted."

Vince tried to steady his breathing as he approached the museum. He reminded himself that this wasn't about him. Tonight was about protecting Pru. She waved at the parking attendant as they parked in the employee lot. He looked around before opening the door for Pru.

"Vince, relax. The security here is tight. I'm in charge of protecting hundreds of millions of dollars of the most important art in the world. Trust me. We're safe here." She smiled at the guard as he opened the door for them. "Thank you, Rick."

"You're welcome, ma'am. I'm glad to see you back."

"Thank you." She put a code into the private elevator and they rode it to the executive floor. She opened the door to her office. "Welcome to my world."

Vince looked around and saw the similarities to her home. It was classic and beautiful, but not cold. He noticed some art by the same artist she had in her home. "Very nice. Does this guy know he's hanging in the art museum?"

"No, I bought these long before I worked here." She looked through a file of letters. "Good Lord."

"What is it?"

She shook her head. "They're letters for me. Some look like they're from children. Susan said there were a lot of them but I had no idea."

"You're a hero." He gave her a soft kiss.

"Stop," she whispered. "Now, I promised you a tour."

He took her hand in his. "Lead the way."

They took the elevator down to the main floor. There were a number of serving tables set in the main hall in front of a small stage. A few servers were setting up trays of appetizers. A short woman with brown hair glanced up from a clipboard. "Ms. Holiday, I'm so glad you're here."

"Hi, Susan. This is Vince Kane. Susan is my executive assistant and all-round godsend."

The woman blushed. "Thank you. It's nice to meet you, Mr. Kane. I've heard a lot about you."

Vince turned to Pru, who smiled and winked. "Susan, is there anything that needs my attention?"

"Not really. The caterer and staff are set."

"What about security?" asked Vince.

"We have extra staff on hand, including police officers. Everyone has to go through a metal detector, and everyone has to have a ticket."

“I’m sure you have everything under control. Before things get busy, I promised Vince a tour.” Pru squeezed his hand. “Let’s go.” She led him into a hall that was empty, save for beautiful impressionist paintings.

Vince wrapped her hand through his arm as they walked slowly around the room. He recognized some of the paintings. He’d seen them in school and in magazines but he’d never seen the real thing. The colors blended and swirled. He looked at the signatures and felt for a moment transported back one hundred and fifty years.

“Vince?” she whispered.

“They’re really something, aren’t they?”

“Yes, they are.”

“I’m sorry. I’m not very good at this arty stuff.”

“Well, you seem to be appreciating the work.”

“I can’t seem to stop staring. It’s like it’s alive.” He shook his head. “I told you I’m not good at this.”

“There is no right or wrong answer. Art makes you feel. I’d say you have an excellent perspective.”

Vince looked at her and smiled. Pru had a way of making him feel like he belonged. He wished he did. He startled by a couple walking into the room.

“Ms. Holiday, I’m sorry. We didn’t mean to disturb you”

“Vince, this is Tony Esposito. He’s studying to be a curator. I assume this is your wife. Tony, this is Vince Kane.”

Tony shook Vince’s hand. “This is my wife, Elaina. I’m sorry, we didn’t mean to disturb you. My wife is feeling a bit awkward. She thinks her gown is too much. It was for our daughter’s quinceanera. It was a dark blue with a lightly sequined top. The skirt was much fuller, like a wedding gown.

“I think you look lovely,” said Pru. Elaina looked at Tony.

“I’m sorry. She doesn’t speak much English.”

“I think you look very elegant, like a real princess,” said Vince in perfect Spanish.

“Oh, thank you, sir,” said Elaina.

Tony smiled. “We both feel out of place. Before Ms. Holiday put me in the art program, I was the service technician for the museum. My wife takes care of the house and our children.”

Vince smiled and answered in Spanish. “I know how you both feel. I’m a car mechanic. Ms. Holiday has a way of making everyone feel like they belong.”

Pru did her best to greet guests but it was exhausting. She wanted to get her speech over with and then go home. Vince stayed at her side the entire night. He could tell she was on edge.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m wearing out. I have to give a speech, then I’d like to go home.” Pru waved to Ashley Walker. “Ashley, I’m fading fast so if I’m going to make a speech it better happen now.”

Vince reached for her hand. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Yeah, I do. I owe it to the museum.”

He leaned closer. “You don’t owe anyone anything.” He smiled and kissed her cheek.

She smiled as Ashley approached the podium. “Ladies and Gentleman, I’m Ashley Walker and I’d like to thank all of you for your support of our museum and our mission. For the last ten years, five of those as director, Prudence Holiday has led us in a community outreach that has doubled membership and established an art history program.” Ashley looked at Pru and smiled. “A few weeks ago, Prudence proved to the world what we’ve always known. She is a force to be reckoned with.” She paused for the round of applause.

Pru blushed and squeezed Vince’s hand.

“In recognition of her devotion to the Philadelphia Art Museum and to the people of our city, I am pleased to announce the “Prudence Holiday Scholarship Program.”

“What?” Pru gasped.

“The executive board has established this scholarship for deserving students who have shown the skill and desire to learn and share their love of art with the world.”

Pru couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She looked around the table and saw the smiles of all the board members. Ashley’s husband Devon’s smile was the broadest. Elizabeth Lamb’s smile was more of a grimace. Pru looked at her then back at Devon,

who chuckled. This was obviously his and Ashley's idea and they forced Elizabeth to go along. By publicly announcing the program, they couldn't drop it.

"The first recipient of the Prudence Holiday Scholarship is Mr. Anthony Espinoza." Ashley indicated to Tony who stood and received a round of applause, none more enthusiastic than that of his proud wife. Ashley looked over to Pru and smiled. "Ladies and gentleman, I am very proud to introduce our director, Prudence Holiday."

Pru took a kiss for courage from Vince the walked to the podium. She tried to smile and acknowledge the standing ovation. She felt a bit like a fraud. She knew the applause was not really all for her work with acquisitions or fundraising or the rise in membership. They were applauding because she'd been shot. "Good evening, everyone. First, I'd like to thank Ashley and my executive assistant, Susan Pearson, for arranging a magnificent gala." She indicated Susan should rise from her chair. It was time she got the recognition she deserved. "I would also like to thank all of you for the good wishes, flowers and messages after my recent...incident." She looked over at Vince and smiled. "I have received the best of care in my recovery." She acknowledged the table of board members. "I would like to thank the members of the board for their leadership in establishing this scholarship." That got a smile out of Elizabeth Lamb, like the scholarship had been her idea. "Naming it for me is a very great honor, but this night is not about me. It's about continuing the work the museum has been doing for one hundred and forty-five years. It is the mission of the museum to make the art of the world accessible to the people of this city. It is your contributions tonight and support through the years that makes possible. If I may quote Henri Matisse, 'Creativity takes courage.' Thank you." Pru left the stage to thunderous applause and walked over to Vince.

"Well done, sweetheart."

"Thank you. Can you get me home now?"

"Of course."

Their escape was delayed when Martin Brooks approached.

"Pru, you look beautiful."

“Thank you, Martin.”

He leaned closer. “We need to talk. Some place quiet.”

She nodded and led him toward an empty hallway. “What’s up?”

“Sam Wilson. We found enough evidence to charge him with second degree murder. He rolled on Frank O’Hara for the promise of being incarcerated in a different state under a different name. His family will be put in witness protection. I just got the call from the FBI. They’ve moved on O’Hara’s organization. O’Hara and his lieutenants are in custody.”

Pru felt her knees weaken. Vince put his arm around her waist. “It’s really over?”

“Yes. The FBI have O’Hara in lockdown. He has more important things to worry about now than an insult to his pride.”

“Thank you, Martin.”

“I’m going to get her home,” said Vince.

“Good idea. I’ll be in touch.”

Pru pushed the button to the elevator. They stepped inside and she rested her head against Vince’s chest. I can’t wait to get home. I’ll get my bag from my office and we can go.”

Vince opened the door to her office and Pru walked in. She froze when she saw a man in her chair, holding a gun.

Vince's heart raced as he pushed Pru behind him. "Hudson," he said.

"The cop?"

"The piece of shit."

"Pretty tough words considering I'm the one holding the gun."

"How did you get in here?" asked Pru.

Hudson chuckled. "It was easy. I bought a ticket. A thousand dollars to rub elbows with a bunch of society assholes."

"How did you get past security with the gun?" asked Vince.

He pulled his badge out of his pocket and flashed it. "This still carries weight with some people."

"Why are you here?" asked Vince. "The case is over. Sam Wilson was arrested in the Bugatti murder and Frank O'Hara and his people were picked up by the FBI. It's done."

Hudson rose from Pru's chair, still holding the gun on them. "You think it's over? The only thing that's over is my career! Nobody gives a damn what happens to a low life mechanic. You got scared and ran out of town. So, what? Nobody should have cared! The only problem is you're banging a society babe who has the ear of the mayor and my boss. Now everybody cares. I was doing my job, but does that matter? No. I got called into the chief of detectives' office. I endangered a citizen." Hudson huffed in disgust. "This case should have made my career. I should have gotten a transfer to Homicide. Instead, I got pulled from the case and transferred to the evidence warehouse! All the cops I ever worked with coming through the warehouse and mocking me." He leveled the gun at Vince.

Vince tried to keep his voice even. He had to keep him talking. He moved away from Pru while keeping Hudson's attention. "What are you going to do? Kill us? It won't take them long to figure out who did this."

Hudson chuckled and let the gun drop a bit. "Upside to being stuck in the warehouse is I have access to all confiscated weapons." He held up the gun as if to

admire it. This one came in this morning. It wasn't logged into the system. No one will ever trace it back to me."

Vince kept looking at Hudson but was aware of Pru's movement toward the door. He gave her a slight nod. She bolted out the door as he lunged toward Hudson. He turned sideways at the last second. He tackled Hudson as his shot went wild. At the same moment a fire alarm went off and lights flashed. Vince smiled. "That's my clever girl." Hudson struggled against Vince's weight. He would just sit on him, pinned until help arrived. Then he shrugged. "Screw it." He hit Hudson square on the jaw and knocked him out. A few moments later, armed guards burst into Pru's office, with their guns trained on him.

"Not him!" yelled Pru as she pointed to Hudson. "It was that guy." The guards picked up the unconscious man as Pru put her arms around Vince's waist. "Are you okay?"

Vince smiled. "That's my line."

After thirty minutes of giving a statement to the police and assuring Martin Brooks she was fine, Vince was driving her home. The adrenaline rush was gone and she was crashing. She felt like she could sleep for a week. She leaned back and closed her eyes.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Vince asked.

“I’m sure. It’s just been a really long day. How are you doing?”

“If you’re okay, then I’m fine.”

She reached over and placed her hand on his leg. “Thank you,” she whispered as she fell asleep.

Vince filled up the gas tank and checked that his bike was secure in the mount. He walked up the steps of the camper and closed the door behind him.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he asked.

Pru smiled from her seat at the small table. “I can’t wait. I’ve never seen the Grand Canyon.”

“This isn’t exactly your townhouse.”

“No, it’s not.” She glanced at the queen size bed and the small ‘Get Well Soon’ teddy bear on the pillow. “It’s a very comfortable apartment on wheels.” She stood and wrapped her arms around his neck. “I can’t wait for our adventure.”

“What about the museum?”

“I took a sabbatical. After everything that happened, the board approved it. Even Elizabeth Lamb voted for it, but I think she just happy to be rid of me for a little while.” She leaned up and gave him a kiss. “So, I’m all yours for as long as you can stand me.”

“That long, huh?” he smiled. He gave her a kiss.

“There is one thing you should know before we go.”

“What’s that?”

“I love you.”

“What?” he whispered.

“You know, heart pounding, smile to think about you, miss you when we’re not together, can’t wait to get you into bed, love you.”

“I still don’t understand. I’m nothing like anyone you know.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No. You are an amazing man. You do what needs to be done, not because you have to, but because it’s the right thing to do. You put yourself at risk to protect me.” She

smiled and looked him up and down. “And the whole hot as hell thing you’ve got going on, woof.”

“Woof?” he laughed.

“I have never in my life met a man who makes me growl.” She rubbed her hands down his arms.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Pru, I’ve never met anyone like you.”

“There isn’t anyone like me,” she laughed.

“That’s why I can’t believe someone like you would feel that way about me.”

Pru’s smile faded. “If you don’t want...”

He quieted her with a kiss. “Pru, I love you. I love everything about you. I love your passion for your work. I love that the smartest and prettiest girl makes me feel like a knight in shining armor.”

“Then it’s time you realize you deserve that love.” She gave him a deep kiss. “I think you should get this horse moving, Sir Vince.”

He smiled and caressed her cheek. “Buckle up, princess. It’s going to be quite a ride.”