

Electricland

A Novel by Ginger Mayerson



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Electricland

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There is nothing more dangerous than a woman with nothing to lose.

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Chapter 1

Bureaucracy: It's Wonderful

Disciplinary action meetings for extramural anti-terrorism units (EAT-U) were held in a secure auditorium-like basement beneath a Virginia shopping mall. It was a grim room, but the middle-aged woman in the baggy tan suit had triumphed so often in rooms even grimmer than this one that it gave her a warm feeling in her thoracic cavity. The room was stuffy, but she was unfazed by it. Her face was a calm, resigned mask, as if she were merely facing another mountain of paperwork in a windowless back office. She wore the Glock 9mm in her shoulder holster as lightly as her cheap wristwatch and pearl stud earrings. She knew she could think her way out of anything, but violence, done well, was sometimes more effective. She was seated across from her abashed Section Manager and his boss, the Department Manager, whom she'd never met before. There were no introductions; they all knew as much as they needed to know about each other and why they were there. And technically, none of them existed outside of discreet payments to secure accounts under approved aliases, so introductions were pointless.

"Okay, Titania, what happened in Los Angeles?" the Department Manager asked.

"The mission went to hell," she said.

"Why?"

"After the Irvine incident, I was instructed to cut back on the kill numbers and, unwisely, I complied," she said, taking a sip of over-roasted coffee purchased from the shop above them.

"Only because wherever your squad goes turns into

a bloodbath,” her Section Manager gritted out. “People were beginning to notice.”

“It got the results you wanted,” she said smoothly. “But there was more to this than just kill numbers. There was romance involved and we were foolishly touched by it. We all were.”

The Department Manager gazed at her over his own cup of over-roasted coffee. He’d looked at Titania’s personnel file before the meeting. At least he looked at what was available to him on his security level. Based on his reading, he would never have associated the woman before him or her underlings with being foolish, romantic or capable of tender feelings for anything. “And what does that mean?” he asked when the silence went on too long for him.

“I’m sure if we’d not been sentimental and killed Detective Russek before Andrew Ryan was incarcerated or at any time up to his release, this would have all gone more smoothly,” she said. “Or at least not as messily as it did.”

“Agent Titania,” her Section Manager scolded. “This department is not in the business of killing police officers, even Los Angeles police officers, on Federal funding.”

“Oh?” Titania sipped her coffee and tried to look interested. “Since when?”

Almost every man in the Los Angeles County Men’s Central Jail downtown owed Detective Paul Russek a favor. But there were only a few in there he thought he could trust, and only one he knew he could. And only this one was a nicer guy in jail than out. The double glass between them hardly muted the sneering respect between him and Bishop.

“Fluorescent orange ain’t your color, but the shaved head kind of suits you.”

Bishop grunted a laugh and waited for Russek to go on. “Hey, I’m living. Who the fuck cares what I wear?” he asked when Russek didn’t go on. “You come

here to get thanked again for saving my life? Thanks. You can leave now.”

“So, I saved your life,” Russek said pleasantly, small lines crinkling around his pale blue eyes in a smile. Or an assessing squint; it could be hard to tell if Russek was smiling when he wasn’t laughing. “You can return the favor, right?”

“In here?”

“Yeah, actually...” Russek looked embarrassed and annoyed at the same time, but didn’t break eye contact. “There’s a new guy going to be in your cell in a few days. His name is Andrew Ryan. I want you to keep him safe, like really safe, like you keep your own ass safe.”

Bishop raised an eyebrow. “What’s he in for?”

“Terrorism.”

“Ah, like all the fish lately,” Bishop said loftily. “For how long?”

“No idea,” Russek said sharply. “Just keep an eye on him.”

“He special to you.”

“Just kee—”

“You know this place is jam packed with terrorists lately,” Bishop casually mentioned. “Ever since that shit went down in Irvine, you coppers are dumping terrorists in here like they was going out of style.” He eyed Russek, wondering how far he could push him. Looked like pretty far. “I’m in a two-man cell with four guys, copper, I can barely protect my own self.”

“I’ll do something about it as soon as I can,” Russek grated out. He ran a big hand over his cropped dirty blonde hair. “I’m not God. If I was God, I’d get him into a minimum security facility.”

“Why dontcha?”

“They’re full up with lawyers on contempt raps after Irvine,” Russek said sourly. “I could’ve told them revoking attorney-client privilege retroactively was gonna suck.”

“My lawyer don’t have these problems,” Bishop said.

“Your fucking shyster only defends thugs. He’d never stoop to defending a mere terrorist.” Russek rolled his shoulders. “You gonna help me, Bishop, or not?”

“Okay, okay. I owe ya. I’ll keep an eye on this, whatever his name is—”

“Andrew Ryan.”

“Yeah, okay.” Bishop glanced at the sheriff’s deputy standing in the doorway. “Get me a better cell and I’ll take good care of him.”

“I’ll do what I can, but take good care of him no matter what.” Russek gave him a hard cop motherfucker look.

Bishop nodded, keeping his face blank. “Hey, sure.” He stood and then turned back to Russek. “What so special about this Ryan guy? Might help me protect him to know.”

“He saved my life.” Russek walked out on those words. He stopped by jail administration to confirm Ryan would be put in with Bishop and add that he wanted them moved to their own cell right away. He was told it would happen as soon as possible; there were truckloads of terrorists coming in since the suspension of *habeas corpus* after the Irvine thing.

Russek went back to the terrorist-hunting headquarters Parker Center had become. He mentally commented for the nth time that the suspension of *habeas corpus* would have suited its namesake, the gung-ho ex-marine Chief William H. Parker, down to the ground. In the 1950s Parker had militarized the LAPD to the point they were almost as dangerous as the criminals. His successors had continued the tradition that crime was not a problem to be solved, but an enemy to be annihilated. Due process was a mere annoyance for the crusaders the LAPD put in charge over the decades. They had paid a heavy price for it occasionally, but not often enough for any real change in the cop mindset. The most recent Chief of Police had tried to undo some of this mindset, but history was

against him. Terrorism was now the enemy, and the Irvine thing had given the LAPD a green light to arrest everyone in sight and work countless hours of overtime doing it.

This wouldn't be a problem for Russek; he'd been a cop long enough to just do his job and forget about it when he went home. Except now at home there was Drew and in spite of all Russek's protests and affidavits, the State of California had decided Drew was a terrorist and must be put into custody. In a moment of pure frustration, Russek had considered making a run for Mexico, but then they might both end up in a Mexican jail awaiting extradition. No, the best thing was to make the best of it in LA, where Russek at least had some strings to pull. And he would pull all of them to save Drew, who'd saved his life and returned his love.

Another guy who'd once saved Russek's life was Warren Williams. At least that was the name he was going by in Afghanistan when Russek got hauled back onto active duty and ran into an independent contractor named Warren Williams. Tall, dark, handsome, suave, lethal: Williams had thrown Russek to the ground and covered him with his body when some lunatic in a burka opened fire on a crowded street. Williams had a sixth sense for trouble, which was why he was still alive. And Russek had admired that and valued Williams' friendship right up until he drove Russek's car into a situation that nearly killed him.

Of course Russek had been happy to see Williams on his front porch one evening almost a year after they'd parted in Kabul. "Goddamn, Warren, you haven't changed at all," he'd said, letting the mercenary into his home. "Drink?"

"Sure, and I'd be much obliged if you'd let me flop on your couch for a day or two," Williams drawled. "I'm in transit."

"Hell yes you can stay here," Russek said, getting out the good scotch. "Where're you in transit to?"

"Difficult to know, I haven't got my marching

orders yet,” Williams said, settling onto the couch he’d be sleeping on. “Iran, probably, but maybe Pakistan.”

“Your life’s very exciting.” Russek sat in the armchair next to the couch.

“Too exciting sometimes.” Williams smiled coolly. “Heard you had some excitement in Irvine lately. It took hours to get through security at LAX.”

“Oh, Jesus, we did.” Russek ran his hand over his eyes. “Forty thousand dead, hospitals, morgues, emergency services overwhelmed. I had to go down there with a squad to help keep order; I only drank Cokes and Gatorade for three days. And the DHS still doesn’t know what the poison was or how the poison got into the water supply or if there’s any left in it or if it will turn up in LA water. We had bottled water riots a few days ago.”

“I heard,” Williams said sympathetically. “You worried?”

“Not really.” Russek flashed his crooked smile. “I figure when your number’s up you gotta go. Whether it’s getting offed by some punk or poisoned tap water, that’s how it is. I drive on the freeway, too, so I’m either a lucky sumbitch or it just ain’t my time yet.”

“One can’t worry about these things.” Williams agreed. “Gets in the way of living while you can. Any idea who done it?”

“No, just a rumor that an old woman’s car broke down near the reservoir just before the event,” Russek said. “No one can remember anything about her except she was old.”

“Old or middle-aged?” Williams asked.

“What’s the difference?”

The next day, Russek didn’t have a moment’s hesitation in lending Williams his car because he had a police vehicle he could use. He’d just jokingly asked him to gas it up, which was a pretty expensive request that spring. It was only when Williams didn’t bring it back that night that he’d started to wonder what was going on. At one AM, Russek called the station to ask

them to run the LoJack location. He didn't recognize the address in the South Bay, but it was odd enough that he asked some local cops to meet him there.

It was more than odd, it was an ambush. Arriving at the deserted industrial park, Russek and the local cops were driven into the boxy glass and stucco building by gunfire. More gunfire inside; Russek dove into an office where he found a skinny young guy with long brown hair and big brown eyes working frantically on a laptop under a desk.

"Oh, my God, who are you?" the kid asked in a panicked whisper and white as a sheet.

"LAPD, who-?"

"Can you get me out of here?"

"Yeah, if I can get myself out of here," Russek hissed back.

They made their way into other offices; every corridor led to a dead end, or worse, shots out of nowhere. At one point, the boy picked up a stray gun and shot one of the shadows about to shoot Russek. "Thanks, kid," Russek said, genuinely touched.

"You're welcome, just- let's go!" The kid was very quietly having a nervous breakdown.

Russek's cop-hearing picked up the sirens before the kid did. He huddled with him behind some file cabinets and knew they'd be okay in a few minutes. "What's your name, kid?"

"It's not kid, it's Drew, Drew Ryan. Let's get-"

"Drew? What's that short for?" Russek whispered, pulling the fidgety, shaking kid into his arms, mainly to keep him quiet.

"Andrew." Drew calmed down a little once Russek had his arms around him. "This is a weird time for introductions, but, you? Who are you?"

"Paul Russek. Detective. Hear those sirens?" Russek asked, his lips very close to Drew's ear. "We're gonna be okay. What were you doing in here?"

"I'm an IT consultant-"

"A what?"

“Computers. I work on computers,” Drew said barely audibly under the gunfire around them and the heavy boots of the LAPD SWAT team storming the building. Russek got out his cell phone and called headquarters to tell them to relay his presence, location, and to not shoot him or the witness with him.

At the precinct, Russek waited until Drew made his statement, which was simply that he was supposed to meet his friend John Reid at the building to discuss a computer job, and then hid from the burglars when the shooting started. Except, as Russek learned while making his own statement, they weren’t garden variety burglars, they were heavily armed Samoan girls. At least the dead ones they found when the smoke cleared were. And what they were after in an inconspicuous office building that he later learned was a DARPA front was still a mystery.

“I know your lock-up is jammed with terrorists,” Russek explained to the precinct captain. “So I’m taking him home with me. If that’s a problem, then I’ll arrest him and he’ll be in my custody.”

“Shit, Russek, he’s a witness, not a suspect,” the captain spat at him. “Take him to Disneyland for all I care. I couldn’t get him in our lock-up with a shoehorn anyway. Go home, go away. But he stays where he can be questioned. You know the drill.”

“Yeah, I do,” Russek thought as he collected Drew and drove home in his unmarked police car. His private car had been impounded, which was annoying, but not the end of the world.

“Wh-where are we going?” Drew asked in the car.

“My place.”

“Why?”

“You wanna go to your place?” Russek asked, slowing the car down.

“No, I...I’m in a hotel, I just have a few things...”

“New in town? Okay, let’s get your stuff,” Russek said, sounding like he was in charge and this was the best possible idea. Drew didn’t argue; soon he had his

suitcase, was checked out and on his way to Russek's tiny house on a Silverlake hillside.

"You can sleep on the couch, which isn't so comfortable," Russek said when they arrived. "Or you can sleep with me. You still look a little freaked out."

"I feel very freaked out," Drew admitted, following Russek into his bedroom.

They didn't become lovers that night, but it was inevitable from the moment Russek put his arms around the shaking kid to calm him down in the shoot-out. Russek had fallen deeply in love with Drew.

Chapter 2

Mass Hysteria for Fun and Profit

“At what point did you lose control of Williams, Titania?” The Department Manager looked at his notes in his own numeric code.

“I never had control of him,” she said, looking at her perfectly manicured nails. “He was the CIA’s problem, but even they couldn’t control him. He was a loose cannon all the way around.”

“How the hell did he end up in the DARPA building?” her Section Manager asked. His voice was squeaky with suppressed rage, bordering on panic; that had always annoyed her about him.

“Williams was smart, in a crude sort of way. He picked up Viola’s trail in Afghanistan and followed her to Baku, where she was making contact with that damn Ryan child.”

“What was Ryan doing in Baku?” the Department Manager asked. He had it in his notes but he wanted some elaboration. “Other than playing computer games with your team?”

“He was running drugs on the internet,” Titania said. They stared at her. “I’m hardly an expert, but I understand that that’s how it’s done these days,” she went on when they continued to stare at her. “It’s all online logistics now,” Titania said with a sigh. Running drugs had never appealed to her. There were too many variables in each transaction for her team to get a successful revenue stream from it. They could barely cope with Hermia’s modest weapons-and-drug operation in Laos. “Point to point arrangements, heavily scrambled on all ends, so only the little people and

mules get caught, which is surprisingly seldom. The parts of Central and Southeast Asia the drugs run in are in such chaos, there's really no such thing as law enforcement anymore. Of course, getting the drugs into the U.S. is trickier if you don't have a contact in the military or a big contractor to bring them in."

"I suppose you mean like your organization?" her Section Manager practically sneered at her.

"Ah, no, we're a very small shop compared to those kinds of organizations. Not big enough at all for that kind of thing," she said, mentally adding, "And you're not big enough to manage the big extramural drug operations." Keeping the country slightly destabilized through terror was one set of skills; keeping it messed up, but functional on drugs, was another set. Titania knew well enough one should play to one's strengths and not dwell on, but be aware of, one's weaknesses.

"What was Ryan's involvement in the Los Angeles incident?" the Department Manager asked bringing the conversation back to the issue at hand.

Titania took a deep breath so she would say what needed to be said and not a word more or less. The last thing she wanted to admit was that Miranda, her internet specialist, had been stupid and arrogant, which was partly why they'd been in such a mess in Los Angeles. "Although we have enhanced access to networks through our paton, Mr. Cheney, my cyber operative likes to use gamers as cyberterrorists in what's called Electricland," she said carefully. "They think it's a game, but it's not. We only use gamers in obscure parts of the world where they won't see the effects of what they're doing. These gamers are mostly idiots, but occasionally you get a smart one, a hacker--"

"Like Ryan in Baku?" the Department Manager asked.

"Yes and no. Ryan was a gamer in Baku, which is pretty obscure. But, no, unlike Ryan because Ryan is even smarter than the usual smart hacker/gamer we like to run online," Titania said patiently. "He was smart

enough or stupid enough to hack into our network and—”

“I thought that couldn’t be done!” the Section Manager squeaked.

“So did we,” Titania said coolly. “But one learns something new every day.”

It had taken the kid a few days to calm down and feel comfortable around Russek. On their first night together nightmares had sent Drew scrambling for his inhaler. Russek could only hold him lightly until the kid could breathe easily again. Eventually the nightmares subsided, but a new nightmare began to loom over them: Drew had been reclassified from witness to terrorist. Only Russek and a few others knew this and Russek had managed to convince everyone around him that it was absurd. For the moment they were allowing Russek to keep Drew with him under house arrest (although Drew didn’t know it), but the pressure was mounting from the Feds to move the kid into any lock-up available. Russek had been able to stall, bully and maneuver the system into putting Drew in LA Men’s Jail where he’d be close and Russek could call in a few favors to keep him safe until he could get him out. If he could get him out: there was that to worry about.

They’d become lovers a few days after Russek brought him to his place. After a long day policing, Russek came in bone tired and disgusted. But Drew had smiled, the first relaxed and happy smile Russek had ever seen on him, and said, “Welcome home.” Russek’s usual manly clap on the shoulder became a caress as Drew leaned into it and became an embrace that became a long sweet kiss, seemingly of its own accord.

“Sorry,” Russek said, leaning back to put a little space between them and get a good look at Drew’s face.

Drew closed the distance and nestled in his arms, face buried in Russek’s shoulder. “I’m not.”

They moved to the couch to make out and talk a little before anything irrevocable happened. The kid

was practically a virgin; he'd only made love a couple of times, and that was with some older guy in Baku. "Baku? Where's that?" Russek asked.

"Azerbaijan," Drew said. "On the Caspian Sea," he continued when he got a blank look. "Kind of between the Middle East and Russia."

"Oh, what were you doing there?" Russek asked, nibbling on Drew's earlobe. "Don't tell me," he whispered. "IT consulting." He smiled against Drew's nod. "That's a long way from here. How'd you get there?"

"My mom was a secretary with the Embassy in Prague," Drew said, tilting his head to give Russek better access to his neck. "She brought me over when I finished college, but we didn't get along so well, so I split and wandered around until I landed a job in Baku."

"How old are you, Drew?" Russek asked, holding him closer.

"Twenty-four."

"Girlfriends?"

"Just this older lady once," Drew said. "In Baku."

"You didn't get a lot of action in Baku," Russek observed.

"I got all my action in Baku," Drew said wryly.

"Tell me about this guy."

"He was very gentle and careful, used a condom and didn't rush," Drew said, breathless at the memory. "I really liked him and...I really liked, y'know, it."

"It?" Russek asked.

"Sex with a guy. I mean, if I had to choose, that's what I'd want to do."

"Good, so you know what to expect?" Russek asked and Drew nodded. "What happened to this guy?"

"I was supposed to meet up with him at that building," Drew said softly. "But I met you instead."

"Lucky me." He took Drew by the hand and led him to bed.

The kid was shy; Russek found that endearing as he pulled the oversized t-shirt and baggy jeans off him.

His skin had an unhealthy pallor, but was smooth and warm to the touch. “You need more sun and exercise, Drew,” Russek said, turning the light off.

“I hate going outside,” Drew murmured between gasps as Russek tweaked his nipples. “Ow.”

“Ow?”

“Not so hard.” The kid pressed his thin lips to Russek’s.

“You’re fragile,” Russek whispered against Drew’s mouth, and got a sexy giggle for an answer. “But this is all right,” he added, stroking pre-come down the length of Drew’s rock hard penis. The kid moaned and arched against him, and fumbled for Russek’s half-mast cock. “No,” Russek sighed. “This is about you tonight.”

Pulling Drew astride his groin, Russek encouraged the kid to kiss him and grind their erections together. A quick study, Drew was soon voluptuously rubbing them together while his tongue explored Russek’s mouth and his fingers pinched the older man’s nipples. “Does that hurt?” Drew asked breathlessly.

“No.” Russek flipped open the lubricant.

“Would you like it to?”

“No.” Russek pulled Drew down for a kiss with one hand while the other explored his ass with slick fingers.

Drew wiggled happily against the fingertip inside him, sliding his erection against Russek’s and really getting into it when Russek worked two fingers inside. “Paul...I want...oh!” The kid squeaked with pleasure when Russek hit his sweet spot. “That...yeah, that...”

“Oh, that...” Russek teased as he rolled a condom down his cock and lubed it. He arranged Drew face down with a pillow under his hips. “Comfy?” he asked, his cock nudging at Drew’s asshole.

“Mmmm...” Drew sighed and then gasped when Russek pressed the head in.

“Ow?” Russek asked, really hoping he wouldn’t have to stop.

“A little,” Drew admitted. “Go slow, okay?”

“I will,” Russek said, kissing Drew’s sweaty shoulders. “You’re really tight.”

“I’ve...only done this a few times,” Drew said, almost imperceptibly arching his ass.

Russek sank in another centimeter. “It’s all right, baby, you’re doing great,” he whispered against Drew’s ear. “Try to push me out.”

“What?”

“Just do it,” Russek said, and he pushed farther in as the pressure around his cock eased.

“Oh...I...” Drew was breathing hard and moaning softly into the pillow.

“Let me hear you,” Russek said, reaching around to stroke Drew’s cock back to full hardness while he pushed all the way in. “Hey, we made it,” Russek panted. He got a cross between a low animal growl and a whimper as he started, very gently, to move inside Drew. Neither of them lasted very long: Drew had a hard, howling climax in Russek’s hand. Russek had a kinder, gentler orgasm from Drew’s clenching around him, which was kind of disappointing because Russek had wanted to fuck him more. Well, there was always next time, which would be, he hoped, very, very soon.

After they cleaned up, Drew fell asleep like a sweet, trusting babe in Russek’s arms. Russek stroked his mahogany hair off his forehead and had a moment of pity for the man who’d lost this wonderful kid by being stupid. And then he thanked his lucky stars he’d lived long enough to find this powerful love with this beautiful young man.

The next morning, Russek took the kid to Astro’s Restaurant for a nice breakfast.

Kate parked the car-jacked Lexus a little ways down the street from Russek’s place, but with a good view of the house. “Not bad for a love nest,” she said, her voice betraying her years in London. It was her relaxed or swanky voice; just then she was with a comrade and felt safe.

“How you know they’re doin’ it?” Helena in the passenger seat asked.

“I wired it for sound yesterday.” With black hair and the right attitude, Kate could pass her middle-aged Middle Eastern looks off as a Latina. That is, if no one looked too hard, and at her age, no one was ever looking too hard. “Russek uses a cleaning service. That bloody kid hardly noticed me as I cleaned around the little bastard. Didn’t even look away from his laptop. The audio’s been nicely steamy so far. Have a listen?” Kate held out an iPod and earbuds.

“Nah, not unless there’s something more useful in it than smut.”

“So far Miranda, Titania and Hermia haven’t heard anything of use,” Kate said, shoving the iPod back in her pocket. “But they’re getting an earful of rumpy pumpy.”

“Whatever that is,” Helena muttered, staring out the window shield.

“Sex,” Kate told her.

“Fucking Miranda!” Helena recrossed her legs and looked like she wanted to bite something or someone. “This is all her fault.”

“I blame Williams more.” Miranda had bailed Kate out more than once, so she was reluctant to go against her. “And this sodding Ryan kid. I detest smart kids.”

“Yeah, you right. Why didn’t you finish what Viola screwed up when she laid Ryan instead of killing him like she was supposed to?” Helena asked. She was pissed off that she had to be there to help clean up a mess not of her own making.

“It’s more complicated now,” Kate said with a sigh. “The little bugger had enough time to get away with more than the accounts and passwords. He grabbed some DARPA data we were using as well.”

“Sheee-yit.” Helena had lost everything to Katrina but her Ninth Ward drawl on certain words. “Can’t do nothing ‘bout the DARPA stuff. I wish Titania and Miranda would stop fucking with people who are

fucking scarier than us, it's just fucking stupid. And can't Miranda just change fucking the passwords or whatever the fuck she does on the internets?"

"I'm told that would tip off our funding sources," Kate said, in a soothing voice. She was mildly amused by Helena's rage and relieved she wasn't holding it in. Helena didn't have a rage meter; it was more like an on-off toggle. "And the DARPA stuff, well, they had the best possible toxin and plans to poison a small city. No sense reinventing the wheel, you know."

"Only if your goddamn wheel doesn't run over your goddamn self. Hey, girl, quit laughing."

"Sssorry." Kate could barely get this out between chuckles.

Helena stared into space while Kate collected herself. "How'd Williams get to DARPA before you?" she asked when her comrade was under control. "I thought this was supposed to be easy. Just get in, flip the switch and follow Miranda's instructions on getting our footprints off the DARPA network or whatever you were supposed to do?"

"Fucking Miranda left a chink for the Ryan kid to get in and Williams had a way we don't totally understand yet to wedge it open," Kate admitted. "Miranda thought she was IMing me when she was IMing the kid."

"Aw, Christ inna Cadillac."

"Indeed. I was delayed by the chaos in Irvine, and then by Miranda not being able to get past the new DARPA security—because you know they'd never admit it, but DARPA knew right away what happened—and then I had no idea the building would be more or less empty, which I think was more Williams voodoo—"

"You just say voodoo, girl?"

"No offense to voodoo or even hoodoo, luv," Kate said pacifically. "I didn't know what kind of resistance to expect, so organizing the Samoan girls held me up a bit."

"Your girl ganstas weren't much help?" Helena

asked. She preferred to work alone and looked askance at Kate's teambuilding efforts. Of course Kate's team members didn't get to live very long after the mission, but it was still too many variables, too many trails to follow, for Helena's taste.

"Oh, they're appropriately vicious and they can shoot straight enough, but they have to see it coming at them." Kate tapped on the steering wheel and stared into the middle distance. "But Williams has nearly the same training that we have," she continued. "He hunted us through the building, picked the girls off one by one. It went pear-shaped. I couldn't get a bloody thing done in there. But Russek's too-smart-for-his-own-good boy-toy stashed the data he'd stolen somewhere and could screw us all if Russek gets it."

"Why you think Russek ain't got it already?"

"We're still a going concern, aren't we?" Kate said.

Helena sighed, drew her Mauser and screwed a silencer on it. "So, here we are. Let's just kill 'em both and get it over with," she said, her voice softening in anticipation of action. "You know that's what Titania will want eventually."

"Ah, but Titania wants us to wait," Kate said, sorry to disappoint Helena, who, like herself, was at her best when killing people. "She and Miranda don't quite know what they've lost and the only way to get it is from Ryan. We might have to beat it out of the little beast."

"Oh. Well, that might be fun." Helena stared at a rectangle of light in the garden across the street from them.

"Thanks for coming to help," Kate said, also watching the garden.

"It's my pleasure to drop everything and come out to this hellhole for you, sugar."

"Sorry things are so cocked up," Kate continued, still watching at the garden. "Isabella might join us." A medium-sized dog trotted to the fence and stared at their borrowed car, perhaps smelling the decaying owner in

the trunk with its superior canine olfactory bulbs.

“It’s not a massacre without Isabella,” Helena observed. “Sit back a bit, hon,” she said when the dog began to bark. Leaning across Kate she shot the dog, which dropped without a sound. “I hate dogs. Let’s go.”