

Chapter One

She'd made it.

Shaye Mallory smiled as she juggled two bags of groceries and headed toward her ten-year-old sedan at the far end of the grocery store parking lot. She'd been back to work at Maryland's Jannis County forensics lab for a full week now.

A full week where no one had shot at her.

It felt like a good reason for a celebration, so tonight's trip to the grocery store had included a big carton of chocolate-chunk ice cream. She tried not to feel too pathetic that she'd be having that celebration all by herself on a Friday night in her living room with an old movie and spoonful after spoonful of sugar.

But she'd lived in Maryland for only two years. She'd moved out here for the computer specialist job. She worked with police officers in her role, but bullets had seemed as foreign to her as living alone, far away from her big family. When she'd left the forensics lab last year after the shooting, most of those friendships had eventually lapsed. At the job she'd taken in tech support before returning to the lab, she'd kept mostly to herself. Although she had friends, there wasn't anyone close enough to tell she wanted to celebrate going a week without being shot at or having a nervous breakdown. And celebrating with her family over video chat seemed way too pathetic, not to mention that it would get them worried about her all over again.

The truth was today was a milestone for her. A year ago, when she'd quit the job, she'd sworn she'd never return. Never walk back into the forensics lab parking lot—one that was shared with the Jannis City Police Department—where she'd watched three officers die. Where she'd hit the pavement, panicking as shots rang out, having no way to defend herself, knowing she was going to be next.

The shiver of fear that bolted up her spine now was just a memory, Shaye told herself, repositioning her bags so she could dig out her car key. She'd worked late tonight, but when she'd arrived at the store, the parking lot had been relatively full. Apparently she'd spent too long inside debating treats because now it was nearly empty. She forced herself not to spin around, not to check her surroundings, not to give in to the paranoia that had caused her more than one moment of embarrassment over the past week.

But she'd done it. She'd conquered her fear and finally called the forensics lab back, finally accepted their offers to return to her old job.

Every single time she'd walked into the parking lot where the shooting had happened, she'd felt a near-paralyzing fear. She'd frozen more than once before stepping out of her car, but

she'd done it. And each day she'd paused for slightly less time before gathering the courage to run for the lab.

But everything was getting back to normal now, Shaye reminded herself. Soon—hopefully—she'd hardly even remember feeling afraid.

If only she could say that right now. She stopped ignoring the tingle at the back of her neck and glanced around the vacant lot, dimly lit with bulbs and two cars, barely keeping hold of her groceries as she slid her key into her door. She swore as one of the bags ripped and started sliding out of her hands.

She dropped to her knees, trying to catch the bag before eggs broke everywhere, and then a boom she'd recognize anywhere rang out. A gunshot.

She panicked, and her feet slid out from underneath her, sending groceries smashing to the ground. Then another gunshot split the night air, and pain exploded in her hip.

Dropping lower to the ground, Shaye looked around the parking lot, certain she'd see that same rusted-out sedan with the spinning rims from a year ago cruising to a stop, gang members leaning out the windows with semiautomatics. Instead she saw a lone figure running across the dark parking lot toward her, a weapon in his hands.

Shaye whimpered, her blood racing through her veins so fast her whole body started to shake as blood spread on the leg of her khakis. Not again. And this time she was all alone. No Cole Walker, heroic police detective and star in too many of her fantasies, to save her.

Fear overrode her ability to think clearly as her brain went back to that horrible evening when gang members had tried to get revenge on the police station for investigating them. She'd been dawdling as she'd left the lab, hanging out closer to the station than her own building, hoping for a chance to run into Cole, when the gunfire started. Shoving the memories back, she glanced up at the key in her car door. Could she get it unlocked, get inside and start the car fast enough?

She looked back toward the shooter, who'd made it halfway to her and stopped to line up another shot through the lot's dim lighting.

Pressing her feet hard against the concrete, Shaye launched herself toward the front of her car. She heard another bullet hit—probably her car—but didn't stop to check.

Adrenaline pumped so hard she couldn't feel the bullet wound on her leg, or the nasty scrapes she knew she'd made on her hands and knees when she'd shoved herself along the concrete. She kept going, her heart thudding in her eardrums as she scurried around to the other side of her car. It wouldn't be a barrier for long, but now he'd have to get closer to hit her.

There was another car ten feet away. If she could make a run for it, dart for new cover while he was trying to move closer, maybe it would give someone inside time to call the police. Or another vehicle would pull into the lot and scare him off. She scrambled to her knees and got ready to race for the other car, but the sound of footsteps pounded toward her too quickly, and she knew she'd never make it in time.

A sob lodged in her throat as she readied herself to make a run for it anyway, one last desperate effort to survive when she knew she was going to fail. She'd lived through the shooting at the lab, actually conquered her fears enough to return to that job, and now she was going to die in a supermarket parking lot.

* * *

“SHOTS FIRED AT Roy’s Grocery.”

The call came in over his radio, and Cole Walker scowled at it, then pressed the button and replied. “Detective Walker. I’m a minute out. Responding.”

He punched the gas as Monica’s voice came back to him, “Aren’t you off duty, Detective?”

It was a rhetorical question, so he didn’t bother answering. A cop was never really off duty.

“We believe there’s a single gunman in the parking lot,” Monica advised him. “Call came in from the owner, who thinks there’s at least one customer out there, too. No other information at this time.”

“Got it,” he muttered, not bothering to key the radio. It didn’t really matter what information they had; with shots fired, they always reacted as though there could be more gunmen. Ever since the shooting at the station last year, calls about gunfire spurred extra caution.

That thought instantly made an image of Shaye Mallory form in his head. He wouldn’t have been anywhere near Roy’s Grocery, except he’d been on his way—uninvited—to her house. And the store was only a few miles down the road from her. His gaze caught on the champagne bottle with a ribbon on it that rolled off his seat and smacked the floor as he whipped his truck into the grocery store parking lot.

The store had crappy lighting, but he zoned in on the shooter immediately. The man glanced back at him, a hoodie obscuring his face, and then darted around one of two cars in the lot, firing at something—or someone—behind it before sprinting around the corner.

Cole hit the gas, scanning the parking lot for any sign of additional shooters. But he saw no one as he raced past the first car. He was ready to continue past the second after the shooter when his mind registered the make and model of the first one—he recognized it. He slammed on

the brakes, yanked his truck into Park and had his weapon out of its holster before he'd even cleared the door.

“Shaye!”

“Cole?”

Her voice was weak, but relief hit him hard, a wave that almost took him to his knees. She was alive.

He rounded the second car and found her huddled near the back tire. The flat back tire, Cole realized. The gunman's final shot must have just missed her.

But relief was short-lived because she was hit. There was a trail of blood alongside the car, as if she'd dragged herself here. He yanked his cell phone out, calling Monica directly. “Gunman ran east out of Roy's parking lot on foot. Male, white, average height and build, wearing jeans and a dark hoodie, carrying at least one pistol. Send backup. And get me an ambulance to Roy's right now.”

He barely paused as he knelt next to Shaye, who was abnormally pale, her freckles standing out more than usual against her porcelain skin, her red hair tangled around her face and her pretty brown eyes huge. “Talk to me. Are you okay?”

He didn't wait for an answer, but tucked his phone against his shoulder, holstered his weapon and found the source of all that blood. It was coming from her right leg, up near her hip. Finding where the bullet had entered, he grabbed the fabric of her khakis and ripped so he could see the wound.

“Hey,” she complained, but her voice was even weaker, and she leaned her head against the car as he prodded carefully around her wound.

It was bleeding badly, but not as badly as it would have been if the shooter had gotten a major artery. He slid his hand down into the leg of her pants around to the back of her thigh and found what he suspected. An exit wound. The bullet had gone straight through.

“How bad is it?” Shaye whispered, her eyelids dropping to half-mast.

“You're going to be fine,” he promised.

“What's happening?” Monica asked in his ear. “Backup is close. Two minutes out.”

He cursed inwardly, hoping the shooter wouldn't be long gone before officers arrived. Two minutes was too long. This guy had shot Shaye. Cole wanted him in handcuffs now.

Monica's voice sounded in his ear again. “I'm getting that ambulance now.”

“Cancel it.” Cole shifted his weight and warned Shaye, “This might hurt a little.” Then he wiped the blood on his hands onto the leg of his pants and scooped her into his arms. “Shaye Mallory was hit,” he said into his phone as Shaye’s arms went around his neck and she tucked her head against his chest, almost before he saw her wince with pain and clamp her jaw closed.

“I’m driving her to the hospital myself,” he told Monica as he hurried back to his truck, deposited her in the passenger seat and then ran around to the driver’s side. “I’ll call you when we get there. Send me updates as they come in,” he said, then hung up the phone and hopped in the truck, yanking it back into Drive.

As he sped out of the parking lot, Shaye asked, “Were you on your way to a date?”

“What?” He frowned over at her, both at the oddity of her question and the way her voice sounded like she was in a daze.

She gestured to her feet, and he looked down, realizing she was talking about the bottle of champagne on his floorboard, which was still miraculously unbroken.

“That was for you,” he replied, seeing her confusion before he yanked his attention back onto the road and drove as fast as he could through the surface streets toward the freeway.

“For me?”

“Put pressure on your wound,” he said, instead of explaining that he’d gotten it to celebrate her returning to work.

He risked a glance at her as her head dropped forward. As if she’d just realized how much blood there was, she pressed both hands down frantically against her leg.

She was coming out of her shock. He’d seen enough shooting victims to know what was coming next: panic.

He tried to stave it off as he merged onto the freeway and punched it up to ninety. “We’ll be at the hospital in three minutes,” he promised, keeping his tone calm despite the fear he felt. “You’re fine. It’s a flesh wound. I know it looks like a lot, but the bullet went through and you haven’t lost enough blood for it to be a problem.”

He’d seen enough bullet wounds to know when they were life threatening. But he’d also seen enough to know that sometimes they surprised you. He’d seen people operate on adrenaline, actually getting up and running, when their injuries said they should already be dead. And he’d seen minor wounds turn fatal.

Not for Shaye, he promised himself, speeding off the freeway. A few more too-fast turns and then he made an illegal turn into the hospital parking lot and slammed to a stop. He tossed his key at the valet and ran around the other side to open Shaye’s door.

An orderly was coming their way with a wheelchair, but Cole ignored him, reaching in to lift Shaye himself. If it was possible, she looked even more pale and terrified, reminding him of that day almost exactly a year ago and the drive-by at the station. Shaye had been caught in the middle of it all.

“Why does this keep happening?” she whispered, then promptly passed out.

Copyright © 2017 by Elizabeth Heiter

Permission to reproduce text granted by Harlequin Books S.A.