

STANDOFF

A cloud of pot smoke hit me in the face as the door opened, bringing a rush of embarrassing memories for me from my wilder days at Tulane. The greasy-haired kid who answered the door sporting a ratty Harley-Davidson shirt and three days of beard growth sized me up and smiled.

"Well, howdy, miss." He offered me a toke on his joint. "Wanna party?"

My skin crawled as he visually groped me with glazed eyes. I shook my head. "Do I look like I'm here to party?" I came dressed in a grey jacket, matching skirt, and heels, more in line for Fourth Street or the Courthouse than East End. "I'm Anne Ripley. I'm here to see Hannah."

"Oh! You're the lawyer lady! Man, I didn't know they had babes as lawyers." He slammed the poorly hung screen door in my face. "Hey, Hannah! That lawyer's here! Hannah!"

From inside, the rumbling sounds of Creed or Godsmack or some other band I couldn't identify billowed out, along with the stench of a poorly kept house. This part of East End hadn't been gentrified yet. It was still the armpit of Cincinnati, lined with ramshackle homes sliding slowly downward toward Lunken Airfield and the Ohio River. Confederate flags and ancient gas guzzlers dotted the landscape.

Hannah appeared at the door, dressed in a sweat shirt and shorts. She was crying, and dark circles ringed her eyes. Her long blonde hair hung in a stringy mess on her stooped shoulders. She took one look at me and rushed out the door, throwing her arms around me. "Oh, Anne! You found me!" She buried her head on my shoulder and sobbed.

I returned the embrace. "I'm here, Hannah. I'm here." We parted, and I took a look at her. "Have you slept at all? You look exhausted."

She shook her head, still sobbing. "I haven't slept in days. I just hid out here, hoping no one found me."

"I found you."

She smiled through her tears. "That's different. I left you that phone call last week."

I nodded. "That's right. Your mother asked me to find you. She's been worried sick and..."

With a loud crack, a lawn ornament exploded just behind Hannah. I pushed her into the house and dove in after her.

The greasy-haired kid came stumbling into the kitchen to find us lying on the floor. "Hey, someone's shooting at us and... Whoa!"

Another shot rang out, this time hitting the door.

I looked up at Greasy. "Get down, you idiot!" I hissed.

"Huh?" When a third bullet shattered glass somewhere near the front of the house, he hit the floor. "Oh."

I rolled my eyes. "Is he always this dull?"

Hannah smiled weakly. "Joey likes to party a lot."

Joey took a hit off his joint. "Fuckin' A, bubba." He held it up like he was toasting.

I crawled out of the kitchen and into one of the back rooms to look out the window. I didn't like what I saw. The house sat on the north side of Eastern Avenue, up against Columbia Parkway. The slope below the highway was a tangle of brush and trees unbroken between Linwood Avenue and Stanley, about three miles apart. Either I would have to lead Hannah and her stoner friend through the tangled mess, or...

I crawled back out into the kitchen. "Joey, do you have a gun?"

"Wha'?" For several seconds, he seemed to struggle to understand English. "Oh. Yeah. I got a shotgun. My old man, like, used to hunt and shit."

"Is it loaded?"

"I dunno." I don't think I heard a single consonant as he said that.

I sighed. "Where is it?"

He thought for a moment, then grinned. "In my bedroom. Wanna come?"

"Just get me the gun. And any ammo you might have for it."

He crawled into his bedroom. Two more shots took out windows in the living room, at the front of the house. I heard shouting and footsteps on the concrete outside. There were at least two of them, coming up the side of the house. I could hear them just outside the kitchen door.

I looked at Hannah and cocked my head. "C'mon. We've gotta hide!" She crawled after me toward the living room, just as we heard footsteps in the kitchen. I started back for the bedroom, where I assumed Joey was trying to remember what a shotgun looked like. Hannah stopped and changed direction.

"Anne! This way!" she said in a hoarse whisper. She led me to a door, gently opened it, and slid inside.

I followed her into the damp darkness, down a rickety stairway into the smell of mildew. I pulled off my heels so as not to make too much noise. It wouldn't take too long for our visitors to figure out where we had gone.

Grey light filtered in from a grimy window facing Eastern Avenue, letting me see some of the basement. Cobwebs and dust coated everything. I heard heavy footsteps above us, then voices.

"Hey, dudes! Wanna party?"

Hannah snorted, but said nothing. She had to get a laugh somehow.

"Where are they?" I heard a raspy voice growl.

In the corner, I spotted the shotgun.

"Uh... Who?"

As I grabbed the gun and checked its breech, I heard the sound of flesh hitting flesh. "Where. Are. They?"

As I found one remaining shell in the weapon, I heard Joey say, "Oh, those two chicks? I think they're looking for a shotgun, man. There's someone shooting at us."

Another shot rang out, then silence fell upon the house. The only sounds I heard were Hannah trying not to sob and my own breathing. I pumped the gun once and motioned to a moldy sofa. "Get behind it, and don't make a sound."

Hannah did as I told her, pulling the sofa out from the wall, then squeezing in behind as tightly as she could. I sat on it just as I heard the door open. Unclipping my cell phone, I dialed a number, then pushed the phone under the sofa. Faintly, I could hear someone say "Hello? Hello?" I ignored it.

Two men lumbered down the stairs. A tall man dressed in black led, his thinning hair slicked back. As he turned at the bottom of the stairs, I could see his cold, ice-blue eyes. A chill ran down my spine. Behind him, in a trench coat, his own thinning hair badly styled, came my worst nightmare these past few weeks. I leveled the shotgun at the man in black.

"That's far enough," I said. The man in the trench coat stepped up behind Blue Eyes. I scowled at him. "Dan Villier. What's a nice Congressman like you doing in a shithole like this?"

Villier smiled his sleazy smile. "I might ask you the same thing. Is an East End hovel really the place for a young hotshot attorney to be hanging out?"

I jerked the gun down slightly, gesturing to the .38 snub nose Blue Eyes held. "I'm a defense attorney. I have clients around here. What's with the hired gun? Your constituents find out you're a sexist crook?"

Villier frowned a rehearsed frown, one of the many expressions he practiced and perfected in the quest for public office. "Let's cut the bullshit, Annie. Where's Hannah Green? I saw her with you a few minutes ago."

I smiled. "So you admit you were shooting at us earlier. What makes you think the neighbors won't call the cops? It's five in the afternoon, for Christ's sake."

Villier reached into his coat and produced a fedora and a pair of sunglasses. "The perfect disguise, my dear. They saw a man in black and a guy in a hat and trench coat shooting." He glanced toward the back of the house. "And no one's going to go chasing us in all that brush back there."

"What about your car?"

Blue Eyes grinned. "Another stolen car case solved by the Cincinnati Police."

"Right you are, Lars," said Villier. "Too bad the culprits got away on foot."

I smiled. "That's going to be kind of hard if I put a hole in your chest."

Villier shrugged. "Shoot me, and Lars here will simply kill you. Defending a Congressman. Is killing me worth your life?"

"No, but if I shoot Lars, you'd be unarmed against an angry woman with a shotgun." I winked at him. "Besides, which one of you really wants to go first?"

Villier sighed, or rather huffed. "Oh, c'mon, Annie. Let's cut the bullshit. Just bring Hannah out, and I'll smuggle all of us out of here. No one has to know we were here."

"There's a whole neighborhood who knows we were here. And my car's out front. So it's in my best interests for the police to know what really happened."

Villier laughed. "Do you really think the police will ever know what happened here?"

I shrugged. "I know you'd leave me hanging out to dry, Danny boy. You came here looking to either kill Hannah or scare her. The whole neighborhood had to see two men in the street firing on the house." I studied Villier for a moment. "Why'd you come yourself, Danny? You're a United States Congressman. Aren't you taking an awful risk coming here with a hired thug, shooting up the place? And don't give me that shit about the fedora and sunglasses. I know these people aren't that educated, but most of them aren't stupid."

Villier's eyes narrowed, focusing on me like lasers. Usually when Villier looked at me, he'd be mentally stripping me. I hated him for that and found his anger refreshing. "There are some things I can't afford to leave to others."

"What's your interest in Hannah Green?" I asked. "Why's it so important that you find her? Why the gun?"

"That's really none of your business!"

I tossed my head with all the condescension I could muster. "Oh, really? I have the bigger gun." I stared back into those cold brown eyes. "Does she have some dirt on you?" I tsk-tsk'd him. "You can't trust those damned interns. Treat them like lint, and next thing you know, they tell the media what an asshole you are. She catch you banging your secretary?"

Villier threw his hands in the air. "I don't have to listen to this!"

"Sure you do," I said. "I have the shotgun. You... or rather your goon, just has a pistol."

Villier's eyes darted all about the room. "Hannah! Sweetheart! It's all right. You can come out! I won't hurt you!"

"Sweetheart?" I rose, still leveling the shotgun at Lars's chest. I stared holes into Villier's forehead. "You sonofabitch! You seduced her, didn't you?"

"Mind your own business!"

"I just told you, this is my business." I stepped forward. "What is your interest in Hannah? Did you lure her into bed with the promise of money and power?"

"Shut up!" He smacked Lars on the shoulder. "Shoot the bitch. We'll find Hannah and..."

"Fuck you, man! She's holding the twelve gauge!"

I had to grin. "I like you, Lars. You're a smart man. Danny? Why do you want Hannah? What did she do?"

Villier said nothing. The sweat on his upper lip was the first natural emotion I'd seen from him in a long time.

"Did she take the offer you made me when we worked on Eric Kranz's campaign for attorney general?" I watched him flinch, a slight smile tugging at Lars's lips. "You know, I've been very good about keeping quiet about that. I'd hate to tell people how I turned you down."

Villier's face reddened. "You fucking bitch! Do you know who you're dealing with?"

I sighed in mock frustration. Slowly, I moved the shotgun toward his chest. "I'm messing with a two-bit political hack who seems to have his dick caught in a vice."

"You fucking..." He lunged, trying to grab Lars's pistol. It went off, grazing my arm and hitting the sofa. I heard Hannah scream once.

For an infinite two seconds, we all froze in silence. I still had the shotgun, despite the stinging wound in my arm. Lars had somehow held onto the gun, his eyes darting back and forth between me and the sofa. Villier lost all resemblance to the smiling, middle-aged dad Westsiders kept reelecting to Congress. He was a snarling beast now, a pit bull with a receding hairline.

"She's behind the sofa!" he said.. "Shoot her!"

Lars thought for two seconds, fired into the sofa again, then turned on me. I put a huge hole in his chest and knocked him backward into an ancient furnace. He stared back at me with a dead man's eyes, still gripping the gun.

I could hear Hannah whimpering but had no time check on her. Villier dove for Lars's pistol. With my good arm, I swung the now-empty shotgun at his head. He bellowed as the stock connected with his temple. He rolled onto his back and brought his foot up, kicking me in the face. I felt my nose break.. So much for my career as a supermodel.

I yelped as I fell back. Villier got up and went for the pistol again. I leaped on his back, grabbing his hair and pulling his head back as hard as I could. Outside, I heard sirens. If I could just keep him away from the gun for a few more minutes...

His elbow connected with my ribs, winding me. I fell off his back and tried to catch my breath. As his hand reached for the pistol, I rammed my foot between his legs, connecting with his privates. He groaned and curled into a ball. As my breath came back, I made a dive for the gun.

I underestimated how long it would take him to recover. He and I grabbed the pistol at the same time. We rolled around on the dirty, damp floor, each trying to point the barrel at the other's gut. He was winning. I felt the nose of the .38 in my stomach.

That's when I heard the crack.

I fell away from Villier and went limp. I could hear Hannah weeping as the sound of several boots thundered down the stairs.

They took Hannah to Christ Hospital with wounds to the hip and leg. They also bandaged my arm and reset my nose there. I called Hannah's mother and explained everything after I was finished in the E/R. I didn't have much time, since the police wanted to question me. I simply told her where Hannah was and where I'd found her.

The police grilled me for about two hours at the E/R, then for another hour at District Two over in Hyde Park. I pretty much confirmed Homicide's theory, that Villier had come to kill Hannah. Christ Hospital handed them the motive in the form of an ultrasound of Hannah's baby, still in the first trimester. No one needed to guess who the father was. Along with Joey and Lars, Villier took a bullet, his coming from cop's revolver. Between my stashed cell phone and the calls coming in from neighbors, it didn't take long for the police to figure out what was happening.

The next morning, I went back to see Hannah. She was still asleep when I arrived around ten, for the first time in weeks, I guessed.

Kennedy, a reporter from the *Post*, spotted me and offered me free brunch in exchange for an exclusive. Since we'd been friendly during my days as an assistant prosecutor, I obliged him. I made no mention of Hannah's pregnancy, didn't speculate on Lars's background, and simply said that the late Congressman was upset over his intern's disappearance.

"And what about you, Annie?" Kennedy asked, staring me down the way he did when he knew he wasn't getting the whole story. "What's your interest in all this? Why were you there to see Hannah Green?"

I leaned back and carefully edited the whole sordid story down to a few sentences. "When Hannah worked for the Prosecutor's office a couple summers ago, she was assigned to me. She asked me one time what to do if her job put her in a... How shall I put this? An uncompromising position?"

Kennedy grinned as he scribbled away on his notepad. "Sounds like printable bullshit to me. Go ahead."

"I told her to always make sure she had someone to turn to if someone threatened her or tried to force her into something she didn't want to do. I'd been there myself once, not long before, actually, but I stood up for myself in a way Hannah probably couldn't."

He nodded slowly. "I see, and this situation... Did it involve the same person?"

"It might."

"And who might that be?"

I took a deep breath and looked down at his copy of the *Post*. The headline screamed in large block letters, "CONGRESSMAN KILLED IN EAST END SHOOT OUT." I looked back up at Kennedy. "Someone who should have known better. I'm sure he's learned his lesson now."