

MACNAMARA'S WOMAN

by Lisa Gardner writing as Alicia Scott

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"The Mozart of thriller writers."

—Tess Gerritson

"Gardner has become one of the best psychological thriller writers in the business."

—The Associated Press

When Tamara Allistair lost her family, she quickly learned that the only person she could rely on was herself. Now Tamara wants revenge against the man who wronged her. But going after a target with far-reaching connections is a dangerous gamble, and soon Tamara is the one being threatened.

A man with his own share of family issues, ex-marine C. J. MacNamara knows that protecting Tamara is the right thing to do. Keeping her safe is no easy task, but getting her to trust him is an entirely different challenge. As Tamara attempts to right a wrong ten years in the making, C.J. puts his own life on the line to protect the woman who is more worthy of love than anyone he's ever known.

“There are two ways of doing this—the easy way or the hard way.”
The big man appeared unimpressed. He leaned back in the old wooden chair and crossed arms that were as thick as oak beams over his chest. His eyes carried a dangerous, glassy sheen C.J. knew too well.

He should’ve never let the big man into his bar. It was obvious the guy and his companions had already had a few too many before ever stepping into the Ancient Mariner. Now C.J. got to clean up some other bartender’s mess.

“I don’t gotta do nothing,” the big man said sullenly. He bent his thick neck toward his burly buddies. “Right?”

Twiddly Dee and Twiddly Dumb both nodded.

C.J. forced himself to stand loose and keep the grin on his face. It was Wednesday night, and on a Wednesday night of all nights, he didn’t want a fight in the middle of his joint. But principles were principles, and poor Sheila was still huddled in the corner, terrified, after being pinched by Paul Bunyan here. C.J. didn’t stand for disorderly conduct in his place, and he definitely didn’t stand for any guy manhandling a woman.

As far as C.J. could tell, there was only one thing to do.

“You got two options,” he explained again. “The easy way or the hard way.”

He rolled his neck and shrugged out his shoulders. At five ten and one hundred and sixty pounds, he hardly intimidated the larger man. The regulars in the bar who knew better were quietly placing bets with the people who didn’t know so much. Behind the bar, Gus was unsheathing her knife just to be safe. If these big brutes thought C.J. was harmless, just wait until they saw what Gus could do with a bowie knife.

C.J. wasn’t nervous. He’d faced bigger opponents, tougher opponents, more numerous opponents in his life. At this point, he just wanted these drunkards out of his bar with the least amount of damage possible.

“Okay,” C.J. said at last. “The hard way it is.”

He rolled up his shirtsleeves and assumed a boxer’s stance. “Come on, big fella. I got other customers to flatter.”

Big Fella lumbered out of his chair enthusiastically. Obviously, he hadn’t walked into the Ancient Mariner for the beer.

C.J.’s pulse picked up. He hadn’t been in a brawl for months now, and there was something to be said for a good brawl. Once a marine, always a marine. *Semper fi*, baby.

The big guy charged, all force and fury. C.J. shook his head and stood his ground. At the last second, he fainted right. Big Fella went crashing headfirst into C.J.’s freshly polished bar.

C.J. winced. “Hell, that’s a hundred dollars’ damage right there.”

Big Fella reeled back and shook his head like a drunken bull. His buddies rose out of their chairs.

“Man, it’s gonna be an expensive night.”

Behind the bar, Gus snorted and said, “You shoulda bought the tranquilizer gun when you had the chance.”

“And miss these Kodak moments? Put some money down on me, Gus. I’m going to need the winnings to cover the damage.”

“Bah,” Gus muttered. “Bar can handle more than that. You, too.”

Twiddly Dee and Twiddly Dumb advanced. C.J. let them crash into the bar once apiece just to be neighborly. After a bit of heavy grunting and fist clenching, the threesome decided for a group rush, costing him two perfectly good tables and one already taped-together chair. The locals groaned, then cheered as he took a solid right hook, recovered and danced away on the balls of his feet. He knew how to move, take a blow and bounce back up like a human Weeble Wobble. What growing up poor on the streets of L.A. hadn’t taught him, the marines had jammed down his throat in eight weeks of do-or-die boot camp.

C.J. got serious. He blocked out the locals’ cheers, Gus’s scowl and Sheila’s concern. He focused on the men before him, the adrenaline throbbing in his veins, along with the small ore of anger that snaked through him on random occasions. The part of him that never forgot the hunger of L.A., or the agony of his mother dying, or his father leaving him that final time for the skies of Indonesia.

C.J. moved. Jab, jab, followed by two feints and a dozen rapid-fire punches. The three men dropped one, two, three, making loud thuds on his red tiled floor.

Thirty seconds later, C.J. stood in the middle of the floor, his breathing slightly heavy as the locals swapped cash, shook their heads at the drunken fools and returned their attention to the small TV set up in the corner. C.J. lingered just to be sure, but Paul Bunyan and his friends remained down for the count. He was half satisfied, half saddened by that. His little sister, Maggie, was right—he enjoyed fighting too much.

“All right, all right,” Gus grumbled, coming out from behind the bar. “I’ll show them to the door.”

She shuffled her bulk toward the fallen forms, not in any hurry. A Hopi Indian, she was shorter than C.J., but a great deal more imposing. Her thick black hair was liberally streaked with gray and worn in a tight ponytail at the nape of her neck. She never wore jewelry, just the hideous, twisting scars on her face that hinted of untold stories. C.J. had shared the bar with her for almost six years. He had no idea where she came from, what she’d done, or where she might be going. He figured the first time he asked, she’d simply give him her flat black stare, then pack her bags and leave.

Now she leaned over the groaning men and smiled in a way that twisted her scarred face even more grotesquely. One man opened his eyes, gave a little yelp and squeezed them shut again.

“Taking out the trash, Gus?” one of the regulars chortled.

“Somebody’s gotta.”

C.J. left the locals to recap the victory and exaggerate the details. He crossed to Sheila, who stood with her arms wrapped around her middle in a stance that reminded him even more of Maggie.

“How you doing, kid?”

She shrugged weakly. Until recently, her primary occupation had been serving as a punching bag for her alcoholic husband. Then, four weeks ago, Mary Campbell from the local church had called C.J., stated Sheila was trying to leave her abusive husband and asked if C.J. would give her a job as a cocktail waitress. He’d agreed instantly, of course. When Sheila had turned out to have no training, he spent Monday walking her through the drill himself. When she’d flinched the first time the bar got too rowdy, he’d ha-

rassed his regulars into settling down. When she'd paled at the thought of having to weave in and out of so many men, he'd re-arranged the tables so she'd have a wider aisle.

The regulars had been teasing him about it ever since. "*Yep, there goes C.J. again, rescuing another damsel, drying another tear. Think if we were blondes he'd treat us so well?*"

"Nope," C.J. had retorted. "*Because you guys would make damn ugly blondes.*"

"Don't let a big bully like that scare you," C.J. drawled lightly now. "You're tougher than he is."

Sheila finally smiled, but it still didn't reach her eyes. He gave her another moment.

"Want to take the rest of the evening off?"

"I need the money."

"It's only one night. Business isn't that great."

"I'm fine. Really."

"Sweetheart, you look like you're going to faint."

Her lips thinned. She looked uncertain; then abruptly she squared her shoulders. "I can do it. I . . . I *need* to do it."

"All right, it was just a suggestion. Prove me wrong. See if I care."

"I'll do that." She slanted him a narrow look. "You didn't have to fight him. You can't fight everyone who pinches a woman's butt."

"In my bar, yes, I can."

"I have to learn to handle men like that sooner or later."

"Fine, next time I'll hold him and you can beat him up. You are becoming more like my sister, Maggie." He said that a bit wistfully. He'd always regarded himself as his little sister's protector, her number one knight in shining armor. Maggie didn't need him anymore, though. She'd found herself a convicted murderer instead, and C.J.

had given up ever understanding women. “So you’re okay?” he quizzed Sheila again, just to be sure.

“I’m fine.”

“Okay, let’s get this show back on the road, then.”

He strode back to the center of the bar, already picking up the shattered chairs.

“Never met a stray dog or troubled woman he didn’t love,” Gus muttered from behind the bar to no one in particular. “He sure ain’t gonna die of old age.”

At one a.m., C.J. closed up shop, kicking the last four regulars out the door. It being Wednesday night, most of the locals had work the next day. Sedona existed thanks to year-round tourism, a few plush resorts to attract the really rich moths and a solid collection of excellent art galleries. Most of the Ancient Mariner’s clientele were the rugged blue-collar workers fueling the white-collar vacations. The Jeep-tour guides, the hot-air balloon guides, the helicopter pilots. The laundry boys and “customer service representatives” from the various resorts. The kind of people who worked hard looking at how the other half lived and knowing they’d never be them. They worked hard, anyway, and at the end of the day, they wanted to kick back, listen to some good old-fashioned rock ’n’ roll and enjoy a cold beer.

C.J. had bought the Ancient Mariner with the money he’d saved while in the marines, and he’d kept it a locals’ hangout. The red-tiled floor was scuffed up and boot-friendly. Navajo print rugs added warm colors to beat-up wood walls. The tables and chairs still sported the deeply carved initials of long-since-grown reprobates. It was a place for relaxing, telling stories of the New Yorkers who wore designer wool beneath the Arizona sun or the Texans who considered the Red Rocks to be mere pebbles. Guides could

brag about how many people they'd stuffed into a hot-air balloon, or how many kids had gotten sick on them that day.

C.J. would shake his head and not believe any of them.

Now he walked to the corner of the room and picked up the TV remote. A news update stated that police still had no leads on the mysterious murder of Spider Wallace, the ignominious cemetery caretaker who'd been gunned down last week in his own graveyard. In other news, Senator George Brennan, Arizona's fine senator, was rumored to be on the verge of announcing his candidacy for president. He was arriving in Sedona—his hometown—next week for a vacation. Insiders predicted he'd declare his intentions then. The old "local boy makes good" angle.

C.J. clicked off the TV. He didn't care for politics. Death and taxes were enough guaranteed suffering for any man. He placed the remote on top of the TV, stacked the rest of the chairs on the wiped-down tables and looked around. Gus had finished cleaning the bar and was now closing out the register. Sheila was sweeping the floor.

Everything was under control as it had been last night and the night before that and the night before that. In addition to running the bar, C.J. did some part-time work as a "bail enforcement officer"—bounty hunter—to keep his reflexes sharp. He hadn't had a case for a while and he could feel it now. He wasn't unhappy; he was just . . . restless. Dissatisfied.

Lonely.

"Are you going home or you gonna stare at us all night?" Gus grumbled.

"I'm going." He was still standing in his bar, though. He found himself thinking of his father, Max, and that strange year the two of them had whizzed around the globe so Max could conduct his business as "importer-exporter." He saw his mother, pale and ethe-

real, as she'd lain dying in their shabby studio apartment, still loving a man who was too busy traveling to come home.

"Hey, boss man. Get outta here."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah."

His black convertible Mustang had a five-liter engine and brand-new tires. He pulled back the top so the clear, warm night wrapped around him. Crickets chirped. The wind carried the spicy, clean scent of creosote.

He hit the back road hard. An experienced SCCA race driver, he took the first corner at seventy-five and the third at ninety. In the straightaway, he came close to triple digits, practicing the speed and control he was learning at the tracks, though his grandmother's voice kept whispering in his ear that this wasn't the place for it. He found the line of the curving road, double-clutched for the next corner and hit it at seventy-five. His tires squealed.

For the first time, headlights appeared behind him—distant, faint beams.

"Cop?" His foot slipped instantly off the gas, but then he frowned.

The lights were growing in his mirror. Belatedly, he realized that could only mean the car was gaining on him and he was still over ninety. His gaze locked on his mirror. The other car was definitely going really damn fast, probably around a hundred and five, and still hadn't put on any sirens. The S curves were about to appear.

C.J. downshifted, taking the set of three corners at fifty-five and hearing his tires squeal. His arms bulged as the car fought him. For an instant, he thought he'd taken the corners too fast and that would be it. He threw his body weight behind his biceps and got his car around the last curve.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid, C.J. What is your problem these days?”

Then he remembered the car behind him. He glanced up. He saw twin headlights dashing wildly. Then he heard the horrible high-pitched whine of burning rubber spinning off the road.

“Sweetheart, are you all right?”

The voice came from far away. She thought that was odd. She'd been through this drill before, careering off a road in an Arizona night. There weren't other voices, anyone to offer assistance. There had only been her and the sound of the crickets mourning.

“Come on, come back to me. That's it, sweetheart. Draw a nice, deep breath of air.”

She opened her eyes. The image took a while to gain substance and form. First the man was hazy; she'd expected that. Maybe he'd have wings and a halo—who knew what angels really wore? He'd be Shawn or her father. Longing welled up in her throat. Reality cut it back down.

This man wasn't Shawn. He was too filled out, with the broad shoulders of a man, not a boy. His fingers brushed her cheek, and they were callused.

Immediately, she stiffened. She was alive. She was conscious. She had better pull herself together.

“Take it easy,” the stranger murmured. “I got you.”

Arms curled around her, and hands fumbled with the seat belt still fastened at her waist. She tried to shrink back, but she couldn't seem to make her body work. She tried to speak, but no sound came out.

Abruptly, she was cradled against a hard chest and lifted into the night.

“Here we go.”

Her head lolled against his shoulder, and the world spun sicken-

ingly. Cool, composed, always professional Tamara Allistair contemplated throwing up on a man she'd never met. Oh, God.

"Honey, we need to get you to a hospital. Lie down right—"

"No." This time her throat cooperated. She repeated the word more sharply. She'd spent two years in and out of hospitals and physical therapy departments. That was enough time in drafty gowns and sterile rooms for anyone.

"Honey—"

"No."

There was a moment of silence. She used it to try to calm her stomach and focus her vision. She hated the feeling of nausea. She hated the way the world refused to snap into focus. She didn't like losing control.

"Drink this." Water dribbled over her lips. She spluttered in shock. Two fingers gently parted her lips, and the cool water slid down her throat.

After a minute, the world righted itself.

She was sitting in the seat of another car. Arms were around her. Against her cheek, she felt the soft, worn fabric of a well-broken-in T-shirt. She could hear a heartbeat. Her gaze drifted up.

Wheat-blond hair. Strong jaw with fine stubble. Incredibly blue eyes that crinkled with natural humor. Firm, full lips meant for grinning. She sat perfectly still, too confused to move. His arms were around her, holding her. That was odd enough—very few men dared to touch Tamara Allistair. Moreover, she didn't feel any pain.

There had been a time when she'd been held a lot, but it had always involved pain. First had been the surgery to insert the metal screws and a rod to anchor her shattered lower leg together. One week later, they'd pinned her pelvis into place with more metal screws and some metal plates. But even after six months of physical

therapy, her leg hadn't healed. There had been another surgery for a bone graft. Her leg had improved; her knee had given out and back into the operating room she went. These days, she carried more plastic and metal than bone. And these days, she knew how to separate her mind from her body so she could escape the pain. She even knew how to be hard.

Life didn't favor the weak.

She said hoarsely, "Let me go."

"What?"

"Let me go."

"Honey, did the crash scramble your brains? I'm trying to help you here. Damn, you're bleeding."

His arm uncurled from her shoulders, and she flopped unceremoniously back onto the bench seat.

"I tried to warn you," the man muttered.

Tamara stared at the never-ending night sky and discovered she could now see three of everything. She breathed deep and inhaled slowly, the way Ben had taught her.

Pull yourself together, Tam. Focus, focus, focus.

"Here, hold this against your forehead." A soft cloth was pressed into her hand, chilled with water. It felt cool and soothing against the lump hatching on her forehead. Her ribs felt tender, her stomach bruised. She mentally surveyed her pelvis. Cracked, broken, shattered? Seat belts wreaked such havoc on the human body, pinning it into place so the force of the crash could shove a person's thighs into their pelvis, cracking it like an egg and shattering lower limbs. Toe-box injuries, they called them. She had other words for it, but she didn't use them in polite company.

"How many fingers am I holding up?" The man's hand appeared in front of her eyes.

“You’re holding up fingers?” she said weakly.

“Oh, sweetie, we got to get you to a hospital.”

“No.” She closed her eyes and pressed the cold cloth against her forehead more tightly. “I just need a minute.”

“And I thought I was stubborn,” the man murmured. She heard him shifting from side to side, but she felt better with her eyes shut, so she remained floating, feeling her stiff shoulders relax, and slowly taking inventory. Her neck was sore. She had a headache. But she could move all her limbs, even her plastic knee.

She lowered the damp cloth and opened her eyes. The man was still standing there, his hands jabbed deeply into the front pockets of his worn jeans, his face wearing a concerned frown. She blinked her eyes twice and he came into better focus. He had a good jawline—strong, square, blunt. He probably was stubborn.

“Time to go to the hospital,” he said flatly. “Call me crazy, but I have a policy against women dying in my arms.”

“Band-Aids,” she said. “In my car . . .”

“You have a first-aid kit?”

“The trunk.”

“Huh. At least you pack a helluva lot smarter than you drive.”

He stalked toward her Lexus, leaving her alone to test out all her joints. She stretched out each morning religiously, running through the exercises Ben had taught her. Scar tissue grew stiff over time, and she had a lot of it. Now she could get everything to move well enough. Her right wrist twinged, but that was nothing new. Her left ankle—the one that had been fractured, healed badly, then grafted—refused to complete a circle, but she hadn’t been able to get it to do much for ten years now, so why should tonight be any different?

Given the speed she’d hit the corner at, the force at which her car had spun off the road, she was doing all right.

"Sweetheart, when you said you had a first-aid kit, you weren't kidding," the man declared, jogging back over. "Are you a medic or something?"

"No."

She wrapped her hands on top of the seat and prepared to heft herself up. Immediately, his hands curled around her shoulders. She froze.

"Easy. I'm just trying to help you up."

"Please!" Her voice was sharp, more brittle than she'd intended. Instantly he backed off, hands in the air.

"Hey, I really am just trying to help."

"I . . . I know." She managed to sit up, though the world spun. When it righted, she made out her car fifty feet back, and the man standing in front of her. He no longer looked so gentle or compassionate. His blue eyes had narrowed, and now that gaze was piercing.

Tamara, you are making a mess out of this.

She focused on looking at the red dirt, dimly illuminated by his car's headlights. "I'm . . . I'm . . . Could I have the Band-Aid, please?"

"It's your Band-Aid." He handed it over stiffly, then added dryly, "Gonna apply it yourself, as well?"

Her cheeks flushed with shame. "Yes."

"You're from New York, aren't you?"

She stiffened, but he simply shook his head in disgust. "Yeah, your attitude says it all. Big-city car, big-city clothes, and the gratitude of a hound dog acquiring a new flea. I visited my brother in New York once. I still can't believe people would actually *want* to live there."

She nodded weakly, fumbling with the Band-Aid as her fingers

began to tremble. He could tell she was from New York? She'd come here knowing that she needed to keep a low profile, and yet a total stranger could deduce she was from New York in a matter of minutes?

How much else could he tell? Why was he out on the roads at this time of night, anyway? And why hadn't her brakes responded when she'd pumped them for the curves?

Her hands shook harder. She couldn't get the backing off the Band-Aid.

"Yeah, you're just fine, sweetheart. No problems here." The man snatched the Band-Aid back impatiently, ripped off the backing with one deft movement and latched it onto her face. "Band-Aid won't do it in the long run. You're going to need stitches."

"I'll be fine."

"Listen, I spent twelve years in the marines and six years owning a bar. Let me tell you, you're going to need stitches."

"I'll be fine."

"I'd believe you a lot more if your forehead didn't look like you'd just had a full frontal lobotomy. Now" — he crossed his arms over his chest — "what would you like me to do?"

"Talk softer." She gingerly pressed her hand against her forehead.

"Oh." He instantly looked contrite. "I'm . . . I'm sorry. Listen, I'm muddling this a bit. Why don't we start over?" He held out his hand. "C. J. MacNamara. I own a bar, the Ancient Mariner, just a few miles back."

She took his hand, feeling warm, strong fingers curve around her palm. He had a good handshake, firm, but not so squeezing that it cut a woman's rings into her fingers, the way some men were prone to doing. He owned a local bar. It had probably just closed —

that's why he'd been on the road. She returned his handshake with more enthusiasm, relaxing a fraction.

"I'm sorry, too," she murmured. "I guess I'm more shaken up than I thought."

"You really should go to a hospital."

"No . . . I'm . . ." She didn't know what to say. She didn't like to talk about the first auto accident in the best of situations, and since she'd decided to return to Sedona, she'd realized it was dangerous to bring it up. She settled for shrugging, hoping he would take that at face value.

"Could I have some more water?" she asked. He handed the canteen to her wordlessly, his gaze still sharp and waiting. She *would* be rescued by a man who wasn't easily put off. "Uh . . . Thank you. I mean . . . really. Thank you . . . for stopping."

"Welcome to Sedona. We still help each other out here."

Her lips twisted ironically before she could catch them. Quickly, she smoothed out her expression.

"Lady, what were you doing hitting those corners so fast?"

"I wasn't trying to."

"You hit them going seventy. Only a complete idiot hits S curves going seventy."

"You didn't take them so slow yourself."

"I was doing fifty-five. There's a huge difference between fifty-five and seventy."

"True." She took a step, swayed, and he cupped her elbow. Of course, she flinched; she just couldn't help herself. C.J.'s gaze narrowed again.

"I swear I've had my shots," he said quietly.

She turned away from his scrutiny. Her car was fifty feet back, spun around in a circle of loose rock and red dirt. The good news

was that the roadside was pretty flat, so damage to her car was slight. The bad news was, she should never have gone off the road. Mr. MacNamara was right—there *was* a great deal of difference between fifty-five and seventy. Eight years ago, she'd started racing cars so she could learn about all those differences—and so she would never feel terrified or helpless behind the wheel again.

But tonight, she'd panicked. She'd seen the curves looming, pumped her brakes futilely and thought that she'd die. If she hadn't had experience on how to take sharp corners at high speeds, if she hadn't known exactly when to downshift and how to turn into a spin, her car would've hit those curves at almost a hundred, flipped and rolled.

What had happened to her brakes?

"I'm all right now," she said. "Thank you for stopping, but I'll be fine. You can go."

Without a backward glance, she walked over to her car. Her heels sunk down deep into the soft, dusty soil, worsening her limp.

"I'm not just leaving you here."

"Really, it's okay." She dug a flashlight from her trunk, then found her tool kit. "You know us New Yorkers. We like to take care of ourselves."

"Am I being brushed off by a woman with a concussion?"

"I don't have a concussion."

He didn't take her hint. Instead, C. J. MacNamara followed her to her car, invading her desperately needed space with the distinct odor of fresh soap and faint laundry detergent. He stood very close, something she just wasn't used to. She plunged into her tool kit with shaking hands.

"How exactly are you going to get home?" he persisted reason-

ably. "Civilization is a good five miles back or forty miles ahead. Either way, it's a little late to catch a bus."

"I'm going to fix my car."

"You're going to fix your car?"

"Yes." She popped the hood, putting the whole car between them. Shrugging off her silk blazer, she leaned over the hot engine and, with her flashlight, got serious.

"All right, I consider myself to be a modern man. Hell, I was raised by a woman who can make just about any piece of machinery work. But my grandmother runs a hundred-acre dairy farm. She doesn't race around back roads driving a Lexus and wearing designer suits."

Tamara didn't answer. Brakes could stop functioning for a variety of reasons. Problems with the main computer manning the lines. Air in the lines. A slow leak that drained brake fluid. Loose fittings with the master cylinder, leading to drained brake fluid. Baking soda and vinegar or hydrogen peroxide added to brake fluid.

Very few of those options were true accidents.

Get a grip, Tamara. You've been back in Sedona for only a few days. No one knows who you are. No one knows what you're after. You just have to be cautious and careful for a little while longer.

Ten days and you'll have your answers one way or another. You just have to make it through ten days. . . .

The engine was still steaming. She tried to examine the fittings with the master cylinder and nearly singed her finger.

"Here"—C.J. held out the soaked towel she'd once had on her forehead—"at least use this."

She accepted the offer wordlessly, prodding at the fittings. They seemed tight enough. She found a drop of oily brake fluid and lifted it to her nose. It smelled like an engine, no sharp overtones

of vinegar. She rolled the heavy orange-red fluid between her index finger and thumb. It was warm, thick and oily. No grit from baking soda.

Her fingers danced down the rubber brake line, checking for leaks. The bottom brake lines were metal, protecting them from being punctured by jagged potholes or debris. The top brake lines, however . . .

Two inches down, she found the irregularity. Then another. Then another. Five in all. None very big, but all taking their toll.

A faulty line?

Sabotage.

Immediately, she pushed the thought away. No, not probable. As far as anyone knew, she was just a New York PR executive who'd volunteered her expertise and time to work on Senator Brennan's political campaign. She and Patty had started planning this six months ago and they had been very careful. Their story was simple and straightforward and mixed with just enough truth to have credibility. She'd been back in Sedona for three days and hadn't so much as seen or spoken to Senator Brennan. There was no reason to believe he knew who she really was or what she was really about. No reason at all. Everything was going according to plan.

"Brake lines?" C.J. said abruptly. She startled, having forgotten that he was there, then startled again when she found him bent over right beside her, his face a mere three inches away. "Looks like you're leaking fluid," he continued matter-of-factly.

For a moment, she simply stared at him, not sure what to do or say.

He had his hands gripping the edge of her car like a man who knew a thing or two. Certainly, his hands were a working man's

hands—long, lean fingers, with a trace of Arizona dust around the nails. He wore ridges of yellow calluses and absolutely no rings. Crisscrossing white scars from a lifetime of use webbed his knuckles, while tendons sprang up on the back of his hands. He had broad palms, strong forearms. Those were capable hands. They probably knew a lot about engines, a lot about tools, and a lot about other things a woman like her shouldn't consider.

"Yes," she managed to say after a moment. "The brake lines seem to have suffered some damage."

He frowned. "Punctured?"

"There are holes."

"Kind of hard to puncture an upper brake line, don't you think?"

"Perhaps it was a faulty line. I just had some work done on the car before I drove out here."

"Yeah, maybe." His eyes squinted. "I don't think you should be driving this car any place now. I'll give you a lift to your . . .?"

"Actually, I have duct tape and brake fluid in the metal tool bin. It'll be fine."

"You travel with brake fluid?"

"It does come in handy." She tried to move away. His hand clamped around her forearm, stopping her. His hand was strong. Those fingers were callused. She was acutely aware of them against her skin—not bruising, but very, very firm.

"Of course, maybe that shouldn't surprise me . . . seeing how you are also carrying a gun."

Her heartbeat accelerated before she could catch it. Her ankle holster. When she'd bent over, she must have exposed it. Or maybe when he was carrying her. Oh, God . . .

She said, "Excuse me. I'm trying to get the brake fluid."

"And I'm trying to figure out just who the hell you are."

“I don’t remember that being any of your business.”

She jostled past him forcefully, grabbing the plastic bottle of brake fluid and the roll of duct tape. C.J. didn’t move out of her way. He leaned against the front of her car with his ankles crossed and his arms akimbo. His white T-shirt stretched across his chest, barely tucked into his worn jeans. For the first time, she noticed his boots. Scuffed up, well broken in. A workingman’s boots. Her father had once owned a pair like them. He’d loved them, said a man couldn’t be a man without wearing boots.

“Who are you? You haven’t given me your name.”

“I’m tired. It’s late. I just want to tend to my car and get home.”

“Where’s home?”

“I don’t give out that kind of information to men I don’t know.”

She ripped off a piece of duct tape savagely and wrapped it around the wounded line.

“I’ve given you my name. I pulled over to help you. How much do you need to know?”

“In this day and age, a girl can’t be too careful.” She tore another strip. He stood too close. She caught a faint hint of Old Spice. She’d once loved Old Spice. Now it made her eyes sting. She was tired; she was distraught. She was standing on the side of an Arizona highway, too close to another night when her car had gone off the road and she had listened to the people she loved die.

“Here, at least let me put in the brake fluid.”

“I don’t need your help!” She snatched back the plastic container. “Please, I just want to be left alone.”

He didn’t say anything. He didn’t move. His gaze walked over her face slowly, seeming to peer into each crevice, as if he could find every secret she’d been hiding.

She thinned her lips and met his gaze head-on. Dammit, she

didn't cow anymore; she had earned her battle stripes. She snapped, "Doesn't a man like you have virgins to deflower or something like that?"

"That's Friday night. This is Wednesday, and on Wednesdays I only rescue damsels in distress."

"Well, I'm not in distress," she announced crisply, unscrewing the brake-fluid cap and pouring the liquid in. Dammit, she really could take care of herself. But C. J. MacNamara continued to eye her coolly.

"No, you're not," he drawled slowly, "In fact, for someone who was just in a car accident, you don't seem the slightest bit shaken."

"I don't do shaken."

"You don't seem to need help."

"I don't need help." She capped the plastic bottle tightly, tossed it into the metal tool kit and threw in the duct tape and flashlight.

"You show no trace of nerves or hysteria."

"I definitely don't do hysteria."

"What do you do?"

She slammed the tool kit shut with a resounding crash. "I mind my own business."

She stalked past him, too angry to feel her headache or sore limbs. She dropped the kit into the trunk, slammed her trunk door, then climbed into her car. When she tried to fasten her seat belt, however, it hurt her stomach and neck. Damn, damn, damn.

C. J. MacNamara leaned into the driver's-side window just as she started the engine. Her heart was suddenly hammering in her chest.

"Who are you?"

"No one. Goodbye."

"What happened to your brake lines?"

“Faulty line. Damn those mechanics. Goodbye.”

She eased her car onto the road and took off into the night.

C.J. remained standing there a minute longer, watching the disappearing glow of her taillights.

He said at last, “Liar.”

He still didn’t get into his car.

The woman was right; it was none of his business. But then his eyes were on the dark spots of brake fluid still staining the ground. A nameless woman with faulty brakes and a .22 semiautomatic handgun. A beautiful woman who froze every time he touched her.

You’re sticking your nose where it isn’t wanted, C.J., a little voice warned. Probably his grandma’s.

Too late, he thought philosophically. His interest was piqued!