

REEL Sharpe

Chapters 1-2

Jenna Baker

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ISBN: 0615981739
ISBN-13: 978-0615981734

Cover Design: Lauren Borgersen Ras
Copy Editor: Emma Greenstein

1.

I had seen a lot of things in my last eight years as a reality television producer. I'd seen contestants share their first kisses and first crushes. I'd seen them break up, make up, conquer their fears and face their enemies. The list went on and on. But tonight was going to top everything. Tonight I was about to see my first dead body.

My latest assignment was a cable show called *Murder Live!*, about real life detectives investigating homicides. According to the LAPD, most murders were solved within the first forty-eight hours of discovery, so we'd film the cops as they pulled together the evidence to try to solve the case. If they could do it in forty-eight hours, we had our story, if they couldn't we'd move on to the next case. We'd interview the good guys, the bad guys and hopefully end up with an hour's worth of television to entertain the masses.

The show was scheduled to begin production in the morning, so when my producer Lenny dialed my cell phone in the middle of the night, I was more than a little agitated.

"Sharpe, hi. I'm not waking you up, am I?" Lenny asked. Sharpe was actually my last name, but it was a name that stuck, and almost no one called me Victoria anymore.

"Actually..." I began, sounding groggy.

"Doesn't matter – we have an emergency. You've got the

first murder, kid, so I need you to get over to Receda right away.”

“Wait, what?” I looked at the clock. It was just after midnight. I had only been sleeping for half an hour. “Can’t I handle this in the morning?”

“The morning? What are you going to do – recreate the murder scene? Get off your ass, Sharpe, and get out there. I already called the crew – they’re meeting you at the site.”

Lenny gave me the address, which I managed to jot down on a notepad before he hung up. I kicked my feet out of bed and sat up. My apartment was dark and relatively quiet save for the couple I could hear laughing in the hot tub in the courtyard below. I flicked on the lamp on my nightstand and breathed in.

I walked into the bathroom and turned on the light. The fluorescent lighting never did much for my pale skin. As I looked at myself in the mirror my blonde hair looked green. My eyes had lovely purple bags under them, and their blue hue was overshadowed by redness. “Looking good, Victoria,” I mumbled to myself and reached for my toothbrush.

Despite my exhaustion and sour mood, I was pretty excited about this show. When I was younger I’d actually fantasized about becoming a cop. I pictured myself with a smoking hot body and a fitted cop uniform hugging me in all the right places. I’d ride a motorcycle, of course, and when I’d remove my helmet to shake out my long blonde hair everyone would stop to watch. I would be known around the station as “one tough chick,” and a night alone with me would be considered the stuff of kings.

It was a nice dream except that I wasn’t a big fan of violence. The only fights I’d ever been in were with my sister, and those were just hair pulling and bra snapping. I couldn’t picture myself getting angry enough to actually harm someone else – even if they did deserve it.

The other flaw in the plan was that the body I had envisioned in my pre-pubescent years hadn’t quite materialized. I had the blonde hair, but it was mid-length and usually looked like a disaster.

As for my perfect figure, my breasts probably protruded about as much as my stomach did, which meant they were too small and my waist line was too big. I decided that this was not the time to dwell on my shortcomings - I needed to get dressed.

I didn't know what the temperature was outside, so I opened my bedroom window and breathed in the smog-filled air. My apartment was located right next to the 134 Freeway in North Hollywood in the San Fernando Valley. The "Valley" got its name because it was a low lying area between the surrounding canyons. The geography allowed it to act as a retention hole for all the smog and pollution coming off the freeways. As a result, my sky was perpetually yellow, and every morning I would have to listen to weather forecast to determine whether or not I could breathe that day. One of the other joys of living in the Valley was that the hot air got stuck in the "pit" so our temperature was always about twenty degrees hotter than it was everywhere else. When it was a perfect eighty degrees in Venice Beach, the Valley was baking at a sweltering one hundred. At this early hour it still felt pretty cool, so I threw on a pair of jeans and a white t-shirt. I put my hair back in a ponytail and headed out the door.

Two minutes later, I was in my 1992 Miata cruising down the 134 freeway. I had bought the car used and was later informed by my mechanic that it had alignment problems that couldn't be fixed. If I didn't grip the wheel with two hands, it would veer off the road. I learned that lesson the hard way after taking my hand off the wheel to apply mascara and ending up on a woman's lawn. Yet, despite its faults, it was a convertible and I loved it.

As the cool night air blew through my hair, I picked up the phone and dialed Mac, my camera man.

"Hey, stranger." Mac answered.

"Can you believe this?" I said into the phone, fighting to be heard over the wind. "It's one in the morning. We haven't even met the detectives we're working with and they're sending us out to shoot a crime scene?"

“You know how it is, Sharpe – we just have to document it. We can’t control when it happens.”

“Come on, Mac, don’t get smart with me. This is bullshit, right?”

“Okay, okay, it’s bullshit. Where are you?”

“Ten minutes away.” I said.

“I’ll be there in five.” Mac said.

Mac’s real name was Hank, but we called him Mac because he was a real-life MacGyver. No matter how hopeless things may have seemed, Mac was forever pulling some magic tool out of his pocket to save the day. Once, Mac and I were in Texas in a swamp in the middle of nowhere and the camera kept fogging up from the extreme heat. We were on a time crunch and losing light, but Mac saved the day when he whipped out a hairdryer and battery pack and used it to defog the lens. Then there was the time in Vegas when we were following a couple embarrassed by public affection who would only kiss underwater in the hotel pool. We needed a kiss on tape as it was an essential element of the show so Mac put together a watertight camera case made out of garbage bags and plastic drink cups. Needless to say, we got the shot. Mac was a good guy to have in your corner, and given that we were getting thrown into this headfirst, I was going to have to lean on him for help.

I slowly drove down a residential street trying to find the house number Lenny had given me. I saw an unmarked yet very obvious cop car halfway down the street and Mac’s car parked next to it. The house was a small one-story painted mint green. It had a carport with a beat-up Oldsmobile parked under it, and there was a cat rummaging through one of the trash cans. The exterior house light was on and cast a yellow hue on the already brown front lawn.

I took a deep breath and held it in. I needed to process what was really happening here. I was about to see a murder victim. Normally, I would have days of extensive interviews and conversations with the detectives that would give me a clear idea of what to expect. Instead, here I was – a deer in headlights about to

see my first corpse. I felt like I was in a dream and wished I was. At least I'd be sleeping.

I heard a loud rapping against my window and jumped – letting out my breath in the process. I smiled once I realized it was Manny, my sound operator.

“Bad boys, bad boys, whatcha gonna do?” Manny sang.

“Whatcha gonna do when they come for you?” I chimed in; trying to act like seeing my first dead body was just business as usual for me.

“Hey chica, how you been, baby?” Manny asked as he slapped me on the arm.

“Pretty good,” I told him.

Manny was someone I had worked with quite a few times in the past. He was Hispanic and relatively short, but thick with muscles from constantly carrying boom microphones and heavy equipment. His legs were covered in tattoos, and he wore his long hair in a tight braid down his back. He was really mellow, probably because he was generally high, but he never complained when I worked him long hours so we got along well.

Mac walked up behind Manny dressed in his usual garb, which consisted of a beige safari shirt tucked into a pair of breakaway pants that could convert from pants to shorts with just the pull of a zipper. On his waist, he wore his trusty fanny pack filled with tools and gadgets, and on his head he wore a fishing hat with lens cleaner solution and wipes wedged in the band. His pockets were filled with a tape measure, a light meter, a mag light, and several pens. He also had a secondary fanny pack around his waist that contained sun block and a change of clothes. Most men would have looked ridiculous in this getup, but with his rugged good looks Mac managed to pull it off.

“Packing light?” I asked as I looked him up and down.

“The detectives are over there.” Mac pointed. “They’re getting anxious.”

“Okay, I’ll go talk to them while you guys get the equipment

ready.”

I turned toward the detectives’ car and tried to psych myself up – it was time for me to flex my producer muscles. I’d been working in the business for a while now and I liked it, but deep down I knew I wasn’t all that good. I’d actually landed in TV through my mother’s connections. Evelyn Sharpe had been the host of *LA Incorporated* for eleven years. It was a nightly show that came on just before prime time and featured all the latest Hollywood buzz and gossip. She’d met every star there was, had been a correspondent on every red carpet imaginable, and was absolutely stunning. She had actually gotten me my first job while she was interviewing the stars of a hot new reality show called *Lethal Injection*. The premise was that eight contestants were injected with poison, and they had to compete in challenges in order to win the antidote. I was hired on as an assistant to one of the producers. The show never made it to air because a contestant nearly died, but at least I got my foot in the door. Eventually I became an associate producer, then a segment producer, and slowly I worked my way up.

It was going to take a little acting on my part, but I needed to convince these cops that I knew what I was doing. I walked over to the Taurus, knocked gently on the window, and smiled. Inside, the two detectives said something to each other, then opened up their doors. They were both Caucasian, and I noticed that one was significantly *larger* than the other.

Their names were Detectives Reid and Flanagan. Lenny had given me a rundown on each of them, but in my groggy state their names were all I managed to remember. Detective Reid was tall and fit with brown hair and angry creased eyebrows. Detective Flanagan was probably two hundred and fifty pounds, and if the name Flanagan hadn’t tipped me off to the fact that he was Irish, his pale skin and strawberry blond hair certainly did. He was dressed in a wrinkled button-down shirt that came untucked as he stood up. Before he greeted me, he pushed his shirt down into his pants and adjusted his package at the same time.

“Victoria Sharpe.” I said, reluctantly holding out my hand.

Flanagan shook it while Reid glared at me. “We’ve been waiting an hour for you to show up,” he said.

“I’m sorry.” I said, a little flustered. “We came as soon as we got the call.”

“I don’t want to hear excuses – let’s go inside,” Reid ordered.

“I’d like you to know that I am very excited to be working with you both,” I said, still trying to make nice.

“Just shut up and let us run this, okay?” Reid said.

Whoa. I knew it was late but this guy was in a really bad mood. I would allow him a little leeway but not too much. He needed to know who was boss around here. “Sure, detective, we can go inside but not before you give me some background on what we’re going to see in there,” I warned.

“Gunshot victim. The neighbor heard the sounds, called us. She looked in the window and saw him on the floor – we already checked him – he’s dead. Now let’s go.”

Mac and Manny came up behind me carrying their equipment, and we headed towards the house. I was starting to become convinced that this *was* a dream. I was not used to, nor did I appreciate, having participants railroad me. This was my set, my shots, my show. I needed to get some control here.

At the front door I stopped and turned to Detective Reid. “We’ll go in first.”

“Like hell,” he answered back.

“You’ve already been inside – there’s no danger and I need my shot. We’ll go in and secure an angle on the front door. When I give the okay I want you two to walk in and discover the body.”

Reid started laughing. He looked at Manny. “Is she for real?” Manny shrugged. “Honey, we call the shots around here, okay? Not you,” Reid barked.

This guy was starting to annoy me. I understood he was a big macho cop and the male ego was involved, but the fact of the matter was that *my* ass was on the line to get the shot. I only had one chance

to get this right, and I would be damned if he was gonna ruin it.

“Look, it’s late. I don’t want to sit here and argue – let’s just get this over with.” I turned to my crew. “Come on, guys – let’s go.”

I turned to the front door and twisted the knob.

“Stop!” Flanagan yelled. “There could be fingerprints on that knob, lady!”

I quickly pulled my hand off the knob. Everyone was staring at me. “Sorry,” I said meekly. I pointed to Reid and Flanagan. “You two stay back and when I call you, come in. Try to look surprised – like you’re discovering the body.”

I pulled my sleeve over my hand and turned the knob. I stepped inside. Instantly I felt my feet give out, and before I knew what was happening, I was sliding across the floor. I looked down and was horrified - I was sliding in human blood! I felt my breath catch as I sailed across the room. I slammed against the opposite wall hard and fell face down on the floor. I lifted my head up to see the victim lying next to me. The back of his head was six inches from my face. I took in a deep breath and started choking on it. “Huuuhhh” was the only sound I could get out.

I scurried to get to my feet but kept slipping and flailing in the blood. “Somebody help me, please!” I finally got to my feet and sprinted towards the door and right into Detective Reid. I threw my arms around him, shaking. “He’s after me! He’s after me!” Obviously I had seen too many horror films, because I was certain the dead man was going to turn to me and sprout fangs.

Detective Reid pushed me off him and held my shoulders. “Get control of yourself!” he commanded. “You realize you just desecrated a crime scene, right?”

“I am covered head to toe in someone else’s blood! Do you think I give a shit!?” I said, panic-stricken.

“Why didn’t you tell us there was blood in here, man?” Manny asked Reid. He was a mellow guy, and his tone didn’t carry to same impact as mine. Suddenly, Manny slipped and fell straight on his back into a pile of the red goo.

“¡Dios mio!” Manny called out, this time with more forcefulness.

Mac was still holding his camera, but with all that was going on he didn't know where to shoot. He was jerking the camera around in quick movements between me, Manny and the dead guy.

“Son of a bitch!” Manny cursed as he struggled to get to his feet.

I turned to Mac. “Shut off the camera, would you?”

Detective Reid still had his hands on my shoulders, and I think they were the only thing holding me up. He glanced calmly at the three of us, then turned to Flanagan.

“I'd give the guys a C – the chick gets a D minus.”

“I'd give her a D plus. I mean she didn't puke, right?” Flanagan said, smiling.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked.

Flanagan suddenly burst out laughing. Reid smiled, and before he could help himself, he started laughing out loud too.

“How can you be laughing? There's a dead man in the corner!” I said, pointing to the victim. Suddenly the dead guy's eye snapped open, and he smiled.

“Jesus! He's alive – he's alive!” Manny announced.

“Holy cow!” I ran out the door with Manny following me. I was half way across the yard when I heard the din of laughter. I looked back to see Detective Flanagan doubled over, gasping for breath as he roared with laughter. Reid had his hand over his mouth, trying to choke back his chuckles. Mac was standing with the guys. He had put the camera down – finally getting the joke.

I turned back to them, furious. The dead guy was now standing next to Reid, also laughing. “You guys think this is funny?” I demanded.

“Consider this your hazing period.” Flanagan mocked.

I was mad. They humiliated us, and now they were laughing about it. Not only that, I was wearing a new pair of jeans that I was going to have to throw in the trash. I felt my face getting red and

hot. Reid walked up behind me and turned me around.

“Don’t get all bent out of shape. We wanted to show you how things operate around here. We never thought you’d burst in there like that – that was just a bonus.”

“You ruined my new jeans, you know.”

Reid looked down at the blood stains on his shirt. “I think we’re even.”

Flanagan walked over to me. “Look, we just wanted to scare you a bit, let you know whose boss. I know you’re used to calling the shots, but at a crime scene we’re in charge. You can’t just barge in there, honey, and you sure as hell can’t tamper with evidence like that.”

“You’re a jerk. You both are.” I told them. “Come on guys, let’s go.”

Manny turned to Flanagan. “Not cool man! Not cool!”

I charged towards my car with Mac and Manny following behind. I got inside and didn’t look back. I would deal with this in the morning.

2.

It was only seven thirty in the morning and the temperature in the Valley had already reached ninety degrees. I skulked down to the parking garage beneath my building, exhausted and angry. My car didn't have AC, so I rolled down the convertible top and cruised at a cool seven miles per hour for the next ninety minutes. The 405 was more of a parking lot than a freeway, and the sweat dripping in my eyes and down my back wasn't helping my mood.

The production office was on the west side on LA, south of Venice Beach and north of Playa del Rey. Culver City was a bit of a landmark due to the fact that it was home to a large number of celebrity drug-related arrests including those of several A-list actors. The office was a loft-style building with cement floors and high ceilings. Near the entrance, there was a large metal staircase that led to the kitchen as well as the executive offices. The edit bays were lined up in a row on the ground floor on the right, and on the left were the producer cubicles. My cube was the second one in. I knew this because a production assistant had placed a piece of masking tape on the side of my desk with "Victoria Sharpe" written on it.

I dropped my bags and headed upstairs to Lenny's office. His door was closed, but I pushed it open and barged right in. I knew he was behind last night's prank and I planned to confront him.

Lenny was sitting at his desk looking much like a weasel.

“Sure, Sharpe, come on in,” he said, looking up.

“You set me up.”

Lenny cracked a smile. “If I could have been a fly on that wall. The dead guy was a buddy of mine – he said you were covered in that goop. And Manny...”

“You are a despicable human being!” I said, cutting him off. “They think I’m an idiot now – you realize that right? They’re never gonna take me to another crime scene again!”

“Sure they will. Now you’re one of the guys. That’s how they operate.”

“I could have had a heart attack!”

Lenny laughed. Manny walked in behind me – obviously hearing the commotion. “Not cool boss,” he said nonchalantly.

“Oh come on, guys, it was funny!” Lenny countered.

“I’m still waiting for an apology,” I said.

Manny shook his head and repeated, “Not cool.”

“Not cool, not cool. That’s all you ever say, Manny!” I shouted. “You know what? You’re both idiots!” I turned on my heel and stormed out of the room.

At the bottom of the steps, Mac walked up to me and put a hand on my shoulder. “Cool off, Sharpe, it was just a joke.”

“Yeah, and I’m sure you weren’t scared at all, right Mac? Not Mister Perfect!”

“Let me get you a coffee. We’re all tired and caffeine will help.” Mac headed up the stairs to the kitchen.

“Oh really?” I called after him. “I think my energy level is actually pretty high right now!”

Twenty minutes later, I was standing outside in front of our rented SUV while Mac and Manny loaded it with equipment.

“Guys, I know last night was a little upsetting and we’re on very little sleep,” I began, “but I think we should just try to forget

about it and move on.”

Mac laughed as he threw a pile of extension cords into the trunk. “You’re telling us to move on? We weren’t the ones in Lenny’s office trying to get fired.”

“I wasn’t trying to get fired; I just wanted him to know where to stick it.”

“Well now he does.” Manny said. “I guess I do too.”

“Look this is weird now, okay? I mean the cops think we’re morons – especially me. Plus they’re right. I barged in there and could have destroyed key evidence. Lenny’s an asshole, but that doesn’t change the fact that I have a lot of work to do now to make things right.” I knew the argument with Lenny was already water under the bridge; it was the cops I was worried about.

Mac and Manny checked their inventory while I read a brief bio on each of the detectives. Bradley Reid had worked in homicide for the past four years, while Flanagan only had two years in homicide. They were new partners and specialized in drug- and prostitution-related homicides. The bios contained a photo of each officer and neither looked too happy. There was no information on whether they were married, what their favorite pastimes were or what kind of upbringing they had. I would have to find out that stuff myself.

As I thumbed through the page and a half of literature, I felt someone standing behind me. I turned to see Missy, one of the other three producers. She was rod thin and had a stick-up-her ass attitude. We’d worked together before and though we usually acted cordial, we hated each other’s guts.

“Missy, so nice to see you,” I lied.

“Rough night, Victoria? I heard about your little mishap.” She had a snotty sound to her voice and bobbed her head as she spoke.

“I’m sure you would have reacted the same way,” I said.

“I doubt it. I’ve spent the last week doing research on dead bodies at the county morgue.”

“I’m sure you fit right in with all those skeletons,” I retorted.
“Really Missy, you should eat something.”

“You’ll be eating crow when I deliver the premiere episode.”

“Did Lenny promise you the premiere?” I asked.

“No, but I have no doubt that my story will be the most compelling – no matter what I end up with.” She smirked.

“That sounds like a challenge.”

“May the best woman win.” Missy flipped her stringy hair over her shoulder, turned on her heel, and scampered off.

I turned to Mac, my teeth gritted. “Ughh!”

“Shake it off Sharpe. Don’t let her get to you,” he said, patting my shoulder.

Mac had proven to be a good friend to me over the years. We had always kept things platonic, except once. In production, when you’re working on a show, it consumes your life. You work day and night with the same people in the same world and everything else fades into the background. You don’t return phone calls, your family barely knows you’re alive; you’re just existing in a bubble. Crew members are notorious for hooking up because when you’re with someone 24/7 you start to think there’s a connection there. Mac and I had always flirted, and one drunken night we crossed that line. Nothing ever came of it and we didn’t mention it again, but sometimes I wondered if he ever thought about it.

Mac was one of those perfect looking guys. He was tall and lean with light brown hair. His skin was always tanned from shooting outside, and he had some of the whitest teeth around. He had one of those movie-star chests too – the kind that the leading lady would lay on when they were having “pillow talk.” He was thirty-five and still single, but that didn’t surprise me. Perfect could be boring, and when you combined that with the fact that he tended to be a know-it-all, it made perfect sense. Still, when he smiled it put me at ease.

“Come on, let’s go,” Mac said and jumped in the front seat of our eight-passenger SUV. Manny opened the side door and sat in the middle row. I sat up front next to Mac.

Inside, the SUV had gray leather seats and the air conditioning felt wonderful. I loved AC and I didn't get to enjoy it nearly enough.

The SUV was equipped with a GPS, but Mac insisted on looking up the address of the police station the old-fashioned way – by map. He pulled out his guide and looked up the address. In a few minutes we were on our way.

As we drove, Mac pulled out a pocket-sized container of mace from his pocket and handed it to me.

“What's this for?” I asked, sliding it into my pocket.

“For protection – just in case. I don't want anything to happen to you.”

I looked down at my meager jeans and t-shirt and suddenly felt naked without a gun strapped to my hip and a band of bullets draped over my shoulder.

“Isn't mace illegal?” I asked.

“Everybody has it, Sharpe, and you never know what kind of situation you could find yourself in.”

“Thanks, MacGyver.”

“Yeah, you might get kidnapped and held for ransom by some crazed killer,” Manny chimed in from the back. “Or worse yet, maybe you have to go undercover in some gang where getting beat up is part of the initiation.”

I turned around and glared at Manny.

“So whaddaya think we're gonna get?” Mac asked us. “Gunshot victim, strangling maybe?”

“I'm banking on a drowning,” Manny answered. “One of those cases where the body is in the river but the lungs are dry.”

“Oh yeah, or maybe the lungs have fresh water in them but they were found in the ocean,” Mac said.

“Yeah, that'd be cool,” Manny said.

“Stop trying to act so tough,” I said to both of them. “Don't act like you weren't scared last night.”

“I wasn't,” Mac said.

I leaned in and looked at Mac. “Let me guess. That wasn’t your first dead body, right?”

“There was one other,” Mac said. “I was hiking and a guy got charged by a bear. His leg went right through this massive tree branch. He lived a little while, but not long.”

“Oh God, come on!” I said, slapping Mac’s shoulder. “You’re making me sick.”

Of course Mac would have seen a dead body. Why would I think otherwise? That was something that annoyed me about him – he had done it all and seen it all. If I saw a man impaled on a tree, I would have the willies for the rest of my life, but not Mac; he would just bank it in his vault of stories and play it when the time was right.

“Why are you always so sensitive?” Mac asked me.

“I’m not, I’m just tired of you acting like Mister Cool all the time. If you were sliding in someone else’s blood you’d be scared too.”

“I think you need to meditate,” Mac said.

I threw up my hands. “Yeah Mac, that’ll help.”

“Knock it off, guys.” Manny said. “You’re making my head hurt. I’m taking a break.” Manny jumped over the back seat and into the third row. I heard the window crack, and Mac and I both knew he was smoking up.

“How come he never offers us any?” Mac asked.

“Because we’re squares,” I said. “Well you’re a square – I would probably embarrass myself on that stuff.”

“Yeah, you definitely would.” Mac laughed.

Mac weaved the SUV in and out of side roads. I would have taken the 405 and sat in traffic for two hours, but Mac seemed to know a shortcut. The roads were changing quickly as we moved from the West Side to the Valley. The houses were mostly beaten-up apartment complexes built in the 70s coated with stucco and slate roofs. The landscape was virtually nonexistent, as everything was brown and dead. The billboards went from English to almost exclusively Spanish in a matter of a few blocks. I had never learned

Spanish, but Manny was fluent.

The closer we got to the station, the more twisted my nerves became. Mac placed his hand reassuringly on my leg. “It’s gonna be fine.”

“I know,” I said quickly.

“Have you thought about how you’re going to approach them?” he asked.

“No. All I can think about is payback for last night.”

“How you gonna do it?” Mac asked.

“The edit,” I answered. In my experience, if a contestant crossed me during a shoot, they would live to regret it. I’d done some of my best work making people look like fools. I could take the words “I hate” from one interview and combine them with “Justin” from another interview and voila – I had myself a villain. I could take the statement, “I would never have sex with a stranger” and edit out the *never* to create “I would have sex with a stranger.” Just that easily I could create a slut. If you’ve ever wondered why contestants aren’t on camera for the majority of their sound bites – that’s why. It was called a Franken-bite, and it was one of the most useful tricks in our trade.

Another tool in my arsenal was the ability to convince my participants to make fools of themselves. I had worked on a dating show a few years back, and the female contestant was a major prima donna. She would hold up production for hours because she was doing her hair or couldn’t figure out what to wear. I decided that I needed to teach her a lesson, and luckily I had an easy solution. The man on the show she was paired with was not interested in her, but she really liked him. I told her that the guy had a huge crush on her but was too shy to act on it. I said that his fantasy was a woman wearing a Wonder Woman costume. I think it goes without saying that when I handed her the costume, she threw it on and promptly humiliated herself. The beauty of it all was that she didn’t just embarrass herself in front of the guy; she embarrassed herself in front of all of America. I considered that to be one of my finest television

moments. I was already thinking of creative ways to humiliate Detectives Reid and Flanagan when it came time to edit.

We pulled into the police station and parked our SUV in the lot. The station was mostly gray and metal with some windows in the front that were tinted so you couldn't see inside. There were several no-smoking signs in front and a bunch of people standing around smoking in front of them.

"Why don't you guys grab the equipment and I'll head inside," I said.

"Good luck," Mac said cheerfully.

At the front desk, there was a cop standing behind an elevated counter top. The idea was to make me feel inferior by having to look up at him, but that wasn't necessary. I was intimidated even before I walked in the door.

"I'm here to see Bradley Reid and Dustin Flanagan. I'm with the show *Murder, Live!*" I proclaimed.

The cop was big and burly and chuckled when I mentioned the show. "Oh yeah, you're the chick from last night. I heard you put on quite a show. Tell me, honey, did you get the shot?"

I smirked. "Just tell me where they are."

The cop picked up his phone and dialed a number. "Hey, big shot, your TV crew is here." He laughed at whatever the cop on the other line said and then hung up. "Go on back. Their desks are on the right – two back."

I pushed through some double doors into a messy, busy workroom. Black desks were pushed together, back-to-back in groups of two. There was a coffee machine in a hollowed-out alcove containing two filthy urns filled with brown sludge that I guessed was coffee. The lights were fluorescent, and along the side wall were three interview rooms where I assumed the cops would take potential suspects to question them. The floor was black and white tiled

linoleum, and it appeared that the cleaning crew had been given the year off.

I walked inside and felt all the eyes in the room focus on me. There were probably eight men or so moving around the room and every one of them seemed to stop. I moved past the first set of desks and over to the second. Reid and Flanagan were both seated. Flanagan was dressed in a pair of khaki pants and a t-shirt, and his ass was spilling over the side of the chair. Reid was wearing a white undershirt and gray slacks and he had a dress shirt draped over the back of his chair. They didn't look up as I approached.

"Detectives, nice to see you again," I said.

A cop came up behind Reid. "Ooh Detective, can I have your autograph?"

Reid looked annoyed. "Shut up, asshole."

The cop turned to me. "Everyone around here is real excited about being movie stars."

"Uh-huh," I said, watching the cop walk away.

"In case you forgot," I said to Reid, "My name is Victoria Sharpe – but you can call me Sharpe if you want."

"Great," Reid said unenthusiastically. He turned to his computer screen and went back to whatever he was working on.

"I go by Foxy," Flanagan said.

"How'd you get that name?"

"Because I'm so damn good looking. You can see that I'm the good looking one here, right?"

"Oh yeah, right away. I have an eye for these things," I joked back, feeling better that at least one of them was talking to me.

Reid had not looked up from his computer, and I was getting the distinct impression that he didn't want me here. Typically, the people I worked with were thrilled to be on television for their fifteen minutes of fame. They were putty in my hands and so eager to please – but not this guy, he wasn't having it.

"Detective Reid, I'm sensing you're not happy about being on the show."

“Give the lady a dollar,” Reid said, still not looking up.

“Considering what you put me through last night, I’d say we’re both pretty unhappy to be here. Let’s just try to get through it.”

Reid grunted, still not looking up at me. “So I was thinking we would start the day with some on-camera interviews,” I continued. “This way we can get to know you, maybe pick up some shots of the station, that sort of thing. How does that sound, guys?”

“Like shit,” Reid said.

I felt a twinge of anger inside me. “You had another idea?”

“Yeah, I thought I would actually do my job instead of this pansy TV bullshit.” He stood up from his desk and walked off.

I felt my blood boil and looked over at Flanagan. “Friendly guy.”

“He’s pissed because the captain made him do this. He’s one of the best cops we’ve got, and they want to give the department a good image.”

“Where is your captain?” I asked. “I’d love to meet him.”

“Her,” Flanagan corrected. “Back that way.” He pointed and I headed to her office, ready to lay into her. They’d had their fun with me, now it was time to work.

Captain Harris was basically what you’d expect. She was a little overweight with dark brown hair pulled back into a tight ponytail. Her face didn’t have a scrap of makeup on it and she looked worn and tired. I looked in her eyes and tried to imagine everything they’d seen.

I sat across from her at her desk as she finished up a call. I regarded the gold wedding band on her meaty finger and wondered if she was the boss at home too. Captain Harris hung up the phone and held a hand out to me. “Captain Joan Harris.”

“Victoria Sharpe,” I said, shaking her hand.

“You getting settled in okay?” she asked. Her voice was gruff and masculine. “We didn’t know if you would need a work space, but there’s a spare desk out in the bullpen.”

“Thanks, that would be great. My crew is bringing in the equipment now, so I’ll let them know to leave everything by that desk. I hope you don’t mind if we rig some of our cameras in the interview rooms. We would of course get the permission of the, uh...interviewees...before taping.” I decided that saying “criminals” might be a mistake because of that innocent until proven guilty thing.

“That’s fine. Lenny is an old friend, and he explained how everything would work.”

“He is?” I asked. “Captain Harris, are you aware of the prank the team pulled on me last night?”

She leaned in and looked at me, straight faced. “Everyone is, honey.”

“And you approve?”

“No, I don’t. I think they took it a little too far.”

Okay, that was more like it. I had my lead-in, so I decided to go for it. “I wanted to talk to you about Detective Reid. He doesn’t seem to be on board with this project.”

Captain Harris nodded. “Yeah, he’s not thrilled about this, but he’s a good cop, and that’s what we need for this kind of thing.”

“Right,” I continued. “I was wondering if maybe you could talk to him about getting with the program. I didn’t want to say anything, but he’s been pretty combative.”

Harris laughed. “Do I look like his mother? It was hard enough convincing him to do the show – the rest is up to you, honey.”

“Yes, but as his captain...”

“This is not part of his job requirement, sweetie pie. This is a favor to me, and if you want a good show, you are just going to have to work with what you’ve got. We’re cops, princess, not actors.”

I was a little stunned. Here I thought I was going to get Detective Reid spoken to and instead I’d been handed my ass. These

cops didn't mess around. I decided to drop it and stood up.

"Yes, understood. I will make it work." I said. "Thank you, Captain Harris – it was nice meeting you."

"Sure thing," she said in a chipper tone. "If you need anything, you just let me know."

An hour later I was sitting face to face with Flanagan, preparing to conduct his on-camera interview. While Mac and Manny were setting up, I had gone next door to pick up a dozen donuts and a box of coffee. Flanagan had already eaten three of them, and he was in good spirits.

Flanagan was in an interview chair and I was sitting next to the camera, my head positioned next to the lens so that the detective would appear to be talking to camera rather than to me. Mac had lit the scene beautifully. Flanagan was in the foreground with the interrogation room behind him. He was placed twelve feet away from the wall so that the background would go into soft focus. Mac had positioned a grouping of three items behind him on a table for ambience – some case files, a pair of handcuffs and a flashlight. In television interviews we always used the rule of three – the perfect number of objects to keep a shot interesting, but not overcrowded. The lighting was harsh, giving the scene an old movie vibe, and Flanagan, a.k.a. Foxy, was actually looking pretty damn tough. I instructed him to take the questions I asked him and rephrase them into his answer.

"When I ask '*How did you get here today?*' you say '*I got here today by x*' – get it?" I explained.

Flanagan nodded, and I asked Mac to roll the camera. Mac glanced at Manny, who was sitting on a wooden box called an apple crate, and Manny gave him the thumbs-up, indicating that sound was ready.

"So, Detective Flanagan, how long have you been a cop?" I

asked.

“Call me Foxy, okay?” he said.

“Okay,” I answered.

“Ten years,” Foxy said.

“Remember to incorporate my question into your answer, Detective...I mean, Foxy.”

“Oh, right,” he said. “I’ve been a cop for ten years and a detective for two.”

“Great,” I said. “What made you want to become a detective?”

“The women.” Foxy smiled. I shook my head at him. “Oh, right,” he corrected. “I decided to become a detective for the women.” He grinned, proud of himself.

We went back and forth for a while, and I found out that Foxy had a wife and two kids. He was married right out of the police academy to the girl next door – literally. They had known each other their whole lives and had dated since they were in junior high. His wife was named Sherry, and she loved cherry pie and sherry wine. Foxy was a cop for the same reason lots of people were cops – because his dad was a cop and his dad’s dad was a cop. He didn’t love the physical aspects of the job, so he pursued detective work because it was more his speed. He liked talking to people, finding out their stories, and putting together the pieces to solve cases. He also said his wife slept better at night knowing he wasn’t out patrolling the streets and risking getting shot in the process. Sure, there was still danger in detective work, but far less.

“Tell me about your partner,” I said.

“Bradley Reid,” Foxy said dramatically. “The dude’s got one of those Hollywood names like his parents thought he’d be a movie star. I got some pretty good mileage out of that one.”

“Okay, Dustin,” I joked.

“Hey, don’t speak that name and don’t put it on the screen when you show me either. My parents were crazy too. You can put “Foxy Flanagan” on the screen – now that’s entertainment!”

I laughed. “So you like working with Detective Reid, then?”

“He’s okay. He’s quiet, but that’s his deal. It’s better like that anyway – no one to interrupt me when I’m talking.”

I was learning that Foxy was a joker and a prankster too, and I was pretty sure he was last night’s puppet master.

By the end of the interview, I decided that Foxy was a good guy. He would be an easy character to create for the show: an honest man trying to keep the streets clean for his wife and kids. Easy as cherry pie.

Mac and Manny prepared the next setup, and I went to find Detective Reid to try to convince him to talk to me on camera. I found him at his desk with his head buried in a case file.

“Anything good?” I asked, smiling.

Reid glared up at me, then pulled out a crime scene photo of a man who had his throat slit and tossed it in front of me. “Yeah, real cool stuff,” he said bitterly.

My face turned white at the sight of the picture. Foxy quickly scooped it up and handed it back to Reid. “What’s the matter with you? That’s a real person you’re throwing around.”

Reid shook his head and placed the picture back in the file.

“Mac is prepping the next setup. Would you be free for an interview in like thirty minutes?” I asked him.

Reid ignored me and kept reading.

“Detective Reid? Did you hear me?”

He looked up, anger in his eyes. “Yeah, I heard you, honey. I just don’t care what you have to say. Like I said earlier, I am doing real work here, and your presence is starting to irritate me.”

I was about to speak when Foxy held up a hand. “Can you excuse us, Victoria?” he asked.

I took a deep breath and nodded. “Sure.” I walked away and watched the two of them talk. This was embarrassing. This was my set and this jerk-off was running all over me. I was going to lose the respect of everyone if I didn’t get things turned my way. I watched Foxy as he presumably tried to reason with Reid while Reid just got

madder and madder. Finally, Reid pointed a finger to Foxy and said something, then walked out of the room and out the front door.

Foxy looked at me and shrugged. I knew I had to take control here. I put on a stern face and marched outside.

Out front, I scanned the parking lot and saw Reid sitting on the hood of a charcoal grey Mustang. His choice of car didn't surprise me; the only thing that did surprise me was that it wasn't bright red.

"Detective Reid," I called out. He looked at me, then turned away and lit a cigarette. I approached him, hot and bothered. "Look, I get that you're this tough guy and everything, but we've got to find a way to work together on this."

Reid stared at me. I could tell he was seething inside, but I pressed on. I had to do it now while I still had the courage. Besides, we were alone out here so if he punched me or embarrassed me in some way no one would see it. "I am not here to screw up your work; I'm just here to document how you do it. You have a job to do and so do I."

"Ha, some job." Reid laughed blowing out some cigarette smoke.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I guess my career isn't good enough for you, right? No one can be as great as the almighty Detective Bradley Reid."

"Glad we've come to an understanding."

"Why don't you get over yourself? If you're such an amazing detective why don't you put your money where your mouth is and show me? I don't know you from Adam, buddy, and if you want me to earn your respect, you're going to have to earn mine too."

Reid stared at me for a moment then started clapping slowly and obnoxiously. "Wow, great speech." He let out another puff of smoke in my general direction. It sent me over the edge.

"What an asshole you are!" I blurted out. "You're like one of those bullies in high school that always has to act like Mister Cool. Well nobody is impressed, you know – I mean, grow up, for God's

sake!”

Reid stopped clapping. “And name calling is mature, right?”

“Okay so maybe I shouldn’t have called you that – but guess what? If it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, it’s probably a duck!”

Reid cracked a smile. “Okay, so I’m a duck and what animal are you? Rhymes with...hitch.”

“Don’t get smart with me.” I said. “I am determined, that’s what I am.” I paused and took a breath. “Look, we just have to do some initial interviews to get some background on you and the department, but after that I will try my best to stay out of your way. Can you handle that...*Brad?*”

“Don’t call me that, *Vicky.*”

“Fine I’ll call you Reid and you call me Sharpe.”

Reid sized me up. “You’re pretty proud of yourself, huh? You think you made some real headway with me don’t you?”

“You’re speaking to me and that’s a start.”