

Hunter's Moon

October 11, 1995

"Hey, Will! Will! Would you look at that?"

Will Lyman responded to his partner's urgent whisper by opening his eyes a slit and glancing up at the monitor installed in the ceiling of the van. He was slightly groggy, and it took him a second to remember where he was: parked outside a barn at Keeneland Race Course in Lexington, Kentucky, charged with bringing to justice a gang of the pettiest crooks it had ever been his displeasure to chase. He, who had pursued big-time names from Michael Milken to O. J. Simpson and worked on big-time cases from the Hillside Strangler to Whitewater, had been assigned to get the goods on a gang of has-been horsemen who had taken to supplementing their income by substituting fleeter-footed "ringers" for the broken-down Thoroughbreds they were scheduled to race.

How the mighty are fallen!

It was just before 4:00 a.m. and dark as the inside of a grave in the van. The gray glow of the monitor's screen provided the only illumination. The picture was grainy, old black-and-white TV quality, but the image it conveyed was unmistakable: a slender young woman in skin-tight jeans had entered the previously empty tack room in the barn they had had under surveillance since dark. Back to the camera, she was in the act of bending over the baic a large burlap feed bag stuffed with five thousand dollars in cash.

When Wyland Farm manager Don Simpson took it home with him, they had him. Case closed.

Only this girl was not, by any stretch of the imagination, Don Simpson.

"Who the hell is she?" Wide-awake now, Will shot off the dilapidated couch that filled one side of the lawn service van that was their cover to stand staring in disbelief at the monitor. "Do we have a file on her? Lawrence never mentioned a girl. He said Simpson would pick up the money himself."

"Nice ass," Murphy said, staring at the screen. The comment was detached. Murphy, fifty-two-year-old father of five, had been more or less happily married for thirty-some years. When it came to female flesh, he was looking, not buying.

"We got anything on her? Do you know who she is?" Irritated that Murphy had forced him to notice the small, firm, unmistakably feminine butt that was thrust almost in his face as the girl bent at the waist, backside toward the camera, Will spoke with an edge

to his voice.

"Nope. Never seen her before in my life."

"Well, don't go into a panic over it." Will spared a second to glare at his partner. Murphy never hurried, never worried, never got into a state about anything. The trait was about to drive Will insane.

"Okay, okay." With a grin, Murphy swiveled sideways in his chair, turned on the computer that rested on the narrow work station built into the wall opposite the couch, and started punching computer keys. "Caucasian, female, between, oh, twenty and twenty-five years old, five feet seven, wouldn't you say, and maybe a hundred fifteen, hundred twenty pounds.... What color's her hair?"

"How the hell should I know? The damn picture's in black and white." With an effort, Will controlled his irritation and took a closer look. "Dark. Not blond."

"Brown," Murphy decided, typing it in.

"She's opening the bag!"

The clicking of the computer keys ceased as Murphy swung around to watch too. The girl on the monitor now crouched in front of the sack, which rested on the speckled linoleum floor in the corner directly opposite the hidden camera. Her hands were busy untying the frayed piece of hemp that was wrapped tightly around the sack's twisted neck. Her back was still to the camera, but at least her butt was down. A thick curtain of shoulder blade-length hair kept Will from getting a look at her face. Though her butt was certainly memorable enough for him to be able to pick it out of a lineup if he ever had to.

"Can you get me something on her, please?" Perilously controlled annoyance at both himself for noticing and Murphy for existing tightened his lips.

Murphy turned back to the computer.

"She's found the money." Will hadn't really meant to say it aloud, because he didn't want Murphy distracted. But the circumstances were so damned unexpected that his mind was not operating with its usual efficiency. He needed an ID, pronto. To decide what to do, he had to know who she was. Did the girl who sank back on her heels to stare at the bundles of cash she had uncovered work for the target of their investigation, or did she not?

The clicking stopped as Murphy, as expected, glanced around at the monitor. Will shot him a look that should have singed his eyeballs. Murphy hunched a shoulder guiltily, and started typing again. The girl reached into the sack to finger first one then another rubber band-bound bundle of twenties.

"Nothing . . . nothing . . . nothing," Murphy grunted as the screen blinked a couple of times, then shone a maddeningly blank fluorescent green. "No woman fitting her description in the files. Unless I've done something wrong."

That cheerful admission made Will want to tear out his hair. For a quick-talking, quick-thinking, quick-acting type A personality like himself, being teamed with a laid-back kind of guy like Murphy was a penance. Which was probably just what Dave Hallum had in mind when he paired the two of them up. Will's boss was still mad over the loss of his cabin

cruiser. Hell, Will couldn't help it if the crooks he'd been chasing had thought the damned thing belonged to him, and decided to blow it up.

Hallum always had been one to hold a grudge.

Clearly this assignment, complete with Murphy, signaled payback time.

"She's taking the money!" Will watched as the unidentified girl, after retying the sack and casting a quick glance around that afforded him the merest glimpse of her profile, stood up with their bait in her arms. Then she turned, finally facing the camera, and walked straight toward them. Her face, Will discovered to his disgust, was as memorable as her butt: fineboned and beautiful. He blinked in pure self-defense, and in that brief time she--and the Bureau's money-- were out of camera range, and presumably out the door.

Murphy, leaning back in his chair, wolf-whistled appreciatively. "Whoa! Fox-y lady!"

Ignoring him, Will pressed a button beneath the monitor, and waited for the second camera panning the barn itself to pick up the action. All he got was a screenful of snow.

"Doesn't look like it's working," Murphy observed as Will frantically twirled dials and pressed buttons.

No kidding. Will gritted his teeth, abandoned the monitor, and with a dagger-glance at his partner snatched up the phone.