

## Chapter 1

When she shot my front seat, I thought about getting a different job. But it was the passenger side and empty, so I didn't update my resume. And I was surrounded by guys in blue uniforms with guns pointing at my cab. I was inside.

A small-town taxi is a vehicle with built-in entertainment. I should know. My name is Honey Walker. I drive for Cool Rides Cab Company in Northampton, Massachusetts.

Attitude goes with driving a taxi. In this town there are women, men and others who can stop traffic with their attitude and, sometimes, their appearance. We have gender combinations that turn downtown drivers into rubbernecking idiots. Me, I'm the girl who makes the phrase "they all look alike" a reality. When I was a kid and a tomboy, I wanted to look tough. My best friend and I played a lot of cops and robbers so I thought a scar running down my cheek would lend reality to my role as a bad guy. I ended up with a scab that itched like hell for a week. As a teenager I considered a tattoo but the pain factor won out. I remain free of "distinguishing marks." A nose job for me would be to add a few inches and a bump. I personify the term WASP. Blond hair, blue eyes, 5 feet 6 inches tall, yada, yada, yada. It lets me be anonymous when I want to be. Which can be convenient ... or not. Right now, it didn't make much difference.

People use taxis for lots of reasons. We get regular calls from the cops telling us not to pick up a guy on whatever street. Contact central immediately if the escapee calls for a ride. This morning's fare hadn't been a prisoner, but she definitely fell into the "shouldn't have" category.

She'd called for a ride to the courthouse. I figured her for a lawyer. Or a thief. She had that arrogant, self-assured walk. Might mean a big tip. She was in front of a hair salon. I should have noticed the salon was next to a bait, tackle and gun shop. She was thin and her face was kind of horsey, but her hair looked freshly styled, with that very in short back, long in front cut. So I just assumed. Hey, hindsight is everything.

She got in. Definitely lawyer. Power clothing, briefcase, nice shoes<sup>3/4</sup>really nice shoes--red leather spikes with gold trim. Flashy, but you need to be noticed in a courtroom. I always thought if Marcia Clark had owned a better wardrobe, O.J. would have been in

the slammer a lot sooner.

“So where’d you get the shoes?” I asked, figuring she’d want to share sources. She must be a shoe girl. Look at what she was wearing.

“Just drive,” she snapped.

“Yeah, okay,” I grumbled. What kind of woman wears shoes like that and won’t talk about them?

We pulled up to the courthouse. “Wait for me,” she ordered.

“There’s a 10-dollar wait fee.”

“Fine.” She stalked off up the sidewalk, her heels drumming like Charlie Watts playing Honky Tonk Women.

I pulled into the no-parking zone, down-buttoned the windows to let in a breeze and turned off the engine. I adjusted the band in my excessively curly hair. With the air conditioner off, it was about 90 in the sun. If the police noticed me before she came out, I could smile and hope my melting mascara hadn’t made me look like a terrorist raccoon. Then I’d move to a legal spot.

Ten minutes later she flew out the side exit five feet from where I’d parked. “Drive,” she screamed and slammed into the backseat.

Rule one of taxi driving: Never drive when someone is yelling at you. Then I caught the black metal shape of a gun in my peripheral vision. I felt something small, round and cold against my neck. I had never had a gun actually touch me.

I yanked the steering wheel around and mashed my foot to the floor. The taxi leaped forward. Right into the police car in front of me. The impact threw my passenger back against the seat. The gun went flying, landed with a thump, and shot the front passenger seat.

“Shit!” I threw it into reverse, twisting the wheel the other direction. I hadn’t noticed the car behind me. A blue wave of cops flooded out of the courthouse and surrounded the taxi. They had guns, big guns. And they were all pointed at me.

“Oops,” I whispered and slid down the seat.

All four doors to my car opened at the same time and cop hands grabbed anything they could get. That would be me, my fare, and her gun. Which they handled with a lot more care than they handled us. We were cuffed, stuffed and driven over to the police station in the injured cop car. My fare maintained a stony silence while I stammered and stuttered about my innocence.

In 30 seconds, we pulled up to the police station. Northampton is not a big town. But there were probably rules about how to safely transport dangerous prisoners. Like one of us might try to escape with at least a million cops surrounding us. So there I was in handcuffs. I was pretty sure I had a lawyer sitting next to me, but she was as mute as a dead fish. They hauled us out and dragged us inside.

Northampton is a city with a funky outlook and matching location. Right off the interstate, it’s a prime setting for everything from gourmet eating and till-you-drop shopping to drug running and money laundering. As it’s the county seat, there’s a courthouse, which is convenient for the drug runners and money launderers. Since the police force, the local legal establishment and the whole legal system at least partly depend on the existence of the dirty money the criminal activities generate, it all forms a nice circular economic interdependence with the courthouse at its center.

The front half of this historic building is made up of huge gray stone blocks and dates back to the 1800s. The rear end new addition looks like an 18-wheeler hauled in a prefab, postmodern trailer park. One local critic called it an architectural debauchery.

The population is a mix of sane and crazy, rich and homeless, ultra-conservative and flaming liberal, and lots of other, more mysterious lifestyles. Our mayor of the moment is liberal. Our mayor for the previous 8 years was liberal, gay and a woman. We are surrounded by institutions of higher learning. We also have one of the oldest agricultural county fairs in the U.S.; once a year the fairgrounds fill up with farmers and 4-H kids hauling cows, horses, ducks and chickens. They have a demolition derby that wipes out about 50 cars.

I don't know if the mayor has ever been to the county fair. I've been there enough to make myself sick on deep-fried everything. One of our city councilors looks like King Kong and dresses like Marilyn Monroe. Northampton wears the sophisticated glamour of a big city, but the functional underwear of its agricultural, blue-collar origins sometimes rides up its butt crack and shows over the top of the tailored Armani slacks. It's a tolerant dish with a side order of perversity. But cops are cops everywhere, and none of them like to see anyone except them using guns.

Half an hour after a bullet drilled my passenger seat, I was in interrogation thinking that even with its odd construction, the courthouse seemed dignified compared with the cop house which has been called one of the worst-looking organizational disasters in the city's history. Outside, it's a flat-topped, utilitarian brick building. Inside, it's a rat maze. Trying to find a way out would be time-consuming and pointless. The cops know where they are, and they know where you are. They are busy putting up a new building to house the boys in blue, but the old one is still in use and still feels like a rat maze.

I was somewhere deep in the maze. The guy questioning me was so overweight and genial it was hard to feel intimidated.

"Aiding and abetting!" he said. "And destroying city property. And attempted departure from the scene."

"Hey, I had a gun in my face. I saved you guys a high-speed chase down Main Street. How was I supposed to know what my fare was up to?"

More realistically, I'd had a gun in my back and no way to get out of the parking space without a tank.

This guy was a sergeant. A gun in the courthouse should merit someone higher up. They were probably deciding who got the short straw and had to sort out my part in the fiasco.

After 10 minutes of scowling and pacing, my interviewer was replaced by Lieutenant Jon Stevens. I know Jon. I call him Jon Jon because he's so boyishly cute. Movie-star good looks, tight buns and a fabulous smile. He wasn't smiling now. But it was hard for me to keep my heart rate from picking up a little when he came in.

"You still drive for Cool Rides, huh?" He stood over me. I wasn't intimidated by his scowl. I did have to suppress the urge to reach out and touch him, since my face was just below belt level.

"Was that a question? Or are you introducing me?" I snapped.

His bright blue eyes stared at me for so long that I looked down to make sure my shirt was buttoned and I didn't have any blood dripping down my front.

"What?" I jutted my chin forward defiantly.

"Did you know the woman?"

"Lady Red Shoes?"

"No," he said. "The woman in pink lace underwear. Who did you think I meant?"

The image of pink lace underwear and Lieutenant Jon Jon was pretty appealing. A straight woman's wet dream.

“She was a fare,” I told him. “And, speaking of fares, I didn’t get paid. And I didn’t get my wait charge. And the boss is going to be so pissed when he sees the dent in the car. And the other cars are going to file insurance claims.” I was beginning to wail.

“Jesus Christ, spare me. We got a guy in the hospital getting a bullet out of his butt and his crazy-lady lawyer-wife who put it there is in holding. I don’t give a rat’s ass about your cash flow.” He turned away but was still standing with his ass at eye level. I stifled the urge to stroke it. He looked down at his feet. My gaze followed, but there was nothing there except his size 10s. He looked at the ceiling. I looked at the ceiling. Nothing there either.

He stalked over to the door, knocked once and said to the sergeant, “Cut her loose.”

I dragged through the warren of the cop house. I didn’t want to face my boss. I did want to know the story on the lady lawyer. I wanted to collect my fare and, mostly, I wanted to know where she got those shoes.

My curiosity sometimes gets me into trouble. So I figured if I dealt with my boss first, I could come back to the holding cells later and visit the shoes. I called in and talked fast. I wanted to explain the situation before he started yelling.

“How bad?” I could feel his seething over the cell phone. Still, I decided it was better to tell him about the dent rather than show up pretending I hadn’t noticed it. And that I hadn’t spent the last hour running fares.

“We just got a scratch. And the cop car isn’t too horrible. The civilian car is kind of dented.”

“If the cab can be driven, get your ass back here.” The boss didn’t ask whether I was hurt, or even alive.

I flipped the phone closed and started the car. It was late in the morning and I’d probably missed a half a day’s worth of pickups, as well as my morning caffeine and

sugar fix. I sighed and headed back to the office.

The whole crew was standing out front when I drove up. The Cool Rides Company is sort of like that TV show from the '70s with Judd Hirsch and Danny DeVito. Except the cars are more like The Italian Job. We don't have Mini Coopers, but the Scion XB has personality. Think a chopped British taxicab. Or a Mini on steroids. There were five of them lined up in front of the office window. All in perfect clean condition, each one a different color. They had interesting graphics running down their sides and around their backs and cute names printed on the fenders. My personal favorite was the flame job with yellow taxi checkerboard inside the flames. Each one had lettering that said "Cool Rides, the Best Ride Ever" across the doors. They were all freshly washed, waxed, and vacuumed. And now there was mine. The dented fenders would have fit in fine with any other cab company. At Cool Rides, it looked like it had been through a junkyard slalom. I didn't mention the bullet hole in the seat. The cops had confiscated the gun and the bullet hole hardly showed.

The boss avoided looking directly at the car. I knew he wanted to kick my ass around the parking lot. But Willie has the personality of a golden retriever trying to pass as a rottweiler. His thick, curly white hair falls in uncontrolled splendor, and his gray eyes are kind. He's not the hard-ass he thinks he should be.

Andrew, one of the other drivers, stepped forward as I pulled to a stop.

"Wow! Hey, boss, do ya think the car is embarrassed? It kinda hurts to look at it." He fidgeted and danced around the car. "Maybe we should hide it around back." He shuffled up the other side and almost stopped in front of me. He couldn't actually stand still, but he gave it his best effort, drumming a loose finger on his leg, tapping a free toe, bobbing his head to music I could never hear. Being around Andrew was like being around a small explosive device. He jittered away, bouncing like an overheated electron, polishing a nonexistent spot on one of the cars with his shirttail.

Mona, the dispatcher, gave me a look that could have leveled Muhammad's mountain. I still can't get used to her soft sultry voice coming out of a 5-foot-2-inch body as wide as a linebacker's. She resembles the Rottweiler her boss wants to be and protects him like one. Sometimes we call her Moanin' Lisa or just Moanin'. Her dark eyes told me not to mess with the Boss. He was in a pile of hurt. I wanted to say "hey, me too," but I kept my mouth shut.

“So what she do?” Andrew wanted to know. The word from the courthouse had gotten back to the office before I did.

“She shot her husband. In the court room ... and in the buttocks.” I glanced at Willie to see if I was getting sympathy. “And caused general mayhem.” I paused. “While I was waiting for her.” Not even a flicker of compassion from Willie.

“Wow, how’d she get a gun past the checkpoint?” Andrew was leaning over rubbing the dent in the front fender while his feet beat a little pattern on the ground.

“She’s a lawyer. They don’t always search them.” I’m a good a judge of clothing, and her suit had lawyer written all over it. Too bad I wasn’t as good a judge of human character. My front seat might not have a bullet hole in it.

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Since I didn’t get any sympathy at Cool Rides, I decided to see how hard it would be to see Lady Red Shoes. Maybe if I collected the fare and wait fee, Willie would forgive my unavoidable accident. And what the hell was this woman doing shooting someone in the butt, in the courthouse, in broad daylight?

Andrew, also our resident body man, had taken my car into the garage to assess the damage, so I walked to the police station only to find that my favorite red shoes had been released on bail. Her husband refused to press charges, and that lowered the violation—and thus the bail—significantly. The cops were left with illegal discharge of a firearm. She had a permit for it. Being a lawyer, I’m sure she knew how to get out of jail faster than a Monopoly card. I might have to find my own pair of red spikes and then wear them into the police station just to see how Jon Jon would react. Maybe with some pink lace undies.

As I was walking up Main Street, my cell phone buzzed. The only cell phone I carry is the one Cool Rides issues to all its drivers. So I knew this was work-related, hopefully a

fare. That meant the boss was willing to let me drive again.

I got to the garage and Mona handed me a slip with name, address and phone number.

“Another ride to the courthouse. Take the same cab. The boss said it's drivable, so it might as well be you that drives it. He figures to limit the damage to one vehicle.” Mona gave me a look that said “you're stupid” all over it.

“Hey, none of it was my fault. You can even ask Lieutenant Jon Jon. He's the one who cut me loose.”

“You got a private audience with Lieutenant Jon Jon?” Mona's expression