A SPY FOR A SPY
A Mystery Jigsaw Thriller with a Secret Puzzle Image
Story by Karan Larson Richardson
List of Characters

MARSHALL THAXTON – code name Blue Chip, is an elite agent in the U.S. Government Intelligence & Espionage Service. Also known as Agent Orange, Marshall proves in more ways than one, that he is a lethal man. Having recently completed an assignment, one which secures his retirement, he decides to spend some time in Nassau.

SHANNA FOLEY – code name Willow, is on a two week vacation in Nassau when she is interrupted by U.S. Government Intelligence & Espionage Service with an immediate assignment... elimination.

HAWK – Shanna’s superior officer in the U.S. Government Intelligence & Espionage Service. When he issues an assignment he expects it to be completed. No one refuses an assignment – not for love or money.
His victim's neck snapped quick and clean. Marshall Thaxton, code name Blue Chip, was a professional. He made no mistakes. That was why he'd survived fifteen years in the U.S. Government Intelligence & Espionage Service or, US GIES "us guys," as the agents called themselves. They were the elite of the elite, the most confidential of the confidential, in U.S. Intelligence. Blue Chip was an exceptional agent, but this was his last assignment.

Shoving the traitor's limp body roughly onto the passenger seat of the dark sedan, Marshall ducked his auburn head and slipped his long, lean body into the driver's seat, taking refuge in the darkness that enshrouded him. He looked with distaste at the corpse beside him. Not because of the killing that had been necessary. But because of the man who had minutes ago accepted ten million American dollars from a Third World agent, blood money for classified blueprints of a newly designed U.S. defense and detection mechanism. The traitor wore a U.S. Naval officer's uniform. On his chest were assorted ribbons and medals, telling the story of a career military man, a one time hero who had nevertheless betrayed his country.

Marshall stopped the sedan on the shoulder of a deserted road. He looked down over a steep drop-off. His alert gray eyes scanned the area carefully. With strong, unsympathetic hands, he grasped the traitor's body and positioned him under the steering wheel. From the backseat he removed an oxblood attaché case and dropped it to the ground. After all suspicious evidence was removed, it was a simple matter to release the emergency brake and give the car a helpful shove toward the cliff.

Always efficient, Marshall waited while the vehicle bounced and rolled down the embankment. His adrenaline surged strongly, as it always did until his assignments were completed. The thud of grinding metal was deafening to his sensitized hearing. The sparks of metal against rock sent showers of flickering light into the dark night. Marshall nodded his head with quick satisfaction when the final impact came. He wasn't disappointed with the explosion which followed. Assignment completed... only this time there was a dividend.

"Move over Turner, I'm joining the ranks of the retirees," he thought to himself.

Tomorrow he would call Red Hook and arrange a convenient "accident" for himself. Smiling, he thought of his final contact, Red Hook. Marshall knew he would be glad a new operation would soon be underway; the younger man was becoming an impatient ally in their retirement plan. He badly wanted out.

Marshall picked up the attaché case, his retirement fund, and crossed the narrow two-lane road. It was a three-mile jog through the woods to his car.

"You're a real bastard, you know it, Hawk?" Shanna Foley, code name Willow, vented her frustration and anger through the telephone with little effect on her listener.

"Quit complaining Willow. It doesn't become you. It's time to stop playing around down there and go back to work."

"This is my vacation, damn it! I work on your time; I play on mine."

"Well, then, punch your time card and pay attention. You're on assignment."

"I was supposed to have two weeks Hawk. Two full weeks," Shanna said with considerable emphasis. "I'm not on duty until Monday."

"Think again, my dear. US GIES financed this trip, right down to your luxury hotel accommodations. Now it's time to pay the piper."
How Shanna hated his detached, reasonable tone. “It was a bonus,” she argued, knowing intuitively she’d been had . . . again!

“It was a bribe and you know it, Willow. Now you’ve had your fun in the sun, so put away your suntan lotion. Uncle needs you.”

Shanna sighed heavily. She knew when she was outranked. “So . . . ? What’s the assignment?”

“Elimination.” He said the word coolly and distinctly, as if the taking of a human life were an unexceptional occurrence.

“Elimination?” Unlike Hawk, Shanna lingered over the word. God, she hated this part of her job. Tossing the long length of her blond hair away from her face, she closed her eyes and waited.

“Yes. The will be easy to locate. One might say he will be a willing hit.” There was an underlying note of satisfaction in his voice that sent caution signals flashing through Shanna’s brain.

“I’m sure,” she murmured sarcastically. “So . . . ? Where and when?” She asked resignedly. At twenty-eight, she had been a member of US GIES for nearly six years. She believed in the job and treated it as she would have any other profession. The difference was, the stakes were higher; consequently, so were the sacrifices.

“There. And we leave the when to your discretion. Anytime within the next three days, I should think.”

Shanna couldn’t keep from wondering if he was using the royal “we,” he said it with such absolute authority. “Here . . . ? Do you mean in Nassau?”

“Indeed. Convenient, isn’t it?”

“Very,” she replied, her stomach twisting nervously.

“You will find that someone has placed a sufficient portion of plastic explosives, with both remote and timed detonators, in a shopping bag inside your clothes closet.”

“Thoughtful,” she murmured, sardonically.

“We thought you would appreciate our consideration.” His voice was mild and businesslike.

Her fingers clenched the receiver until her knuckles turned white. She set her jaw firmly. “All right, Hawk. Let’s stop waltzing around the subject. Who’s the hit?”

There was a brief hesitation, the first she had ever heard in his cold, calculating voice. “Blue Chip.”

Shanna sucked in her breath. “You’re kidding! You want me to take out Agent Orange?”

Her brain was spinning nonstop. Blue Chip was the best, the absolute, very best. He was also the most dangerous; that’s why the other agents had dubbed him “Agent Orange.” “I’m an amateur compared to him. What makes you think I could get that close?”

“Because, my dear Willow, he already trusts you.”

“Trusts me . . . ? That’s crazy. I don’t even know him.”

“Of course you do.” There was the merest hint of a smile in his voice.

“I don’t understand . . . ?” But she did. God help her, she did.

There was only one person in Nassau whom she knew with any degree of intimacy. Fool! She had shared none of her own background with him, so she had asked no questions about his. And he had accepted her hesitancy to confide as natural. Because to him it was natural! Blue Chip!

“His name is Marshall Thaxton. I believe you’ve been spending quite a lot of time with him this past week.”

“Why?” It was such a cry of despair that even she wasn’t sure what she was asking. Why
did they want him dead? Why had they selected her to be the eliminator? Why would they deliberately set her up for such personal pain? Dear Lord, why?

But Hawk, being Hawk, assumed the question was of an impersonal nature. “Because he has breached security.”

“B-breached security . . .?” She stumbled over the indictment.

“How . . . ?”

“Come now, Willow. You realize you’re on a need-to-know basis. Blue Chip is no longer reliable. Therefore, he must be eliminated.”

The knot in Shanna’s stomach clenched and twisted. Her anguished blue eyes reflected her inner torment. For a minute she thought that she might be physically ill. Beads of perspiration dotted her forehead and upper lip.

With great effort, she swallowed her nausea and gave voice to her anger. “Screw your need-to-know, Hawk! Why is he being eliminated? What did he do?”

The line held total silence for a heartbeat. “Are you refusing the assignment?”

The underlying threat was unmistakable. No one refused an assignment. “I . . . No . . . No, of course not . . . .”

“Then I take it we can count on your full cooperation? You were hand-picked for this assignment because of your excellent record and attention to detail.” He made it sound as though she should be thanking him for this golden opportunity.

“I’ll take care of it,” she whispered mechanically.

“Good.” He sounded immensely satisfied.

“It should be completed within three days.” Dread froze her heart. Must she kill Marsh? “Do you have further instructions?”

“Once you finish there, report to Station Sixteen for reassignment.”

Operating by rote, she asked, “Overseas?”

“Yes. I think perhaps a warmer climate would suit you better. Tell me, how’s your Arabic?”

“Passable,” she murmured indifferently. If she lived through the next three days, which was highly unlikely, considering Blue Chip’s reputation, they could do with her what they pleased. Her heart would be ripped from her chest anyway.

“Good.” Abruptly, the line went dead.

Shanna dropped the telephone receiver back in the cradle and stared at it sightlessly. Taking a deep, stabilizing breath, she covered her face with her hands.

In a daze, she rocked herself back and forth on the side of the bed like a small child seeking comfort. But there was none. A vision of Marsh formed in her mind. His handsome face swam before her, strong, sure, solid . . .

Deep, shattering gulps of air filled her lungs as she battled for control of her emotions. “No, not Marsh! Oh, please, not Marsh!” Finally, she wiped the silent trail of tears from her cheeks and stood.

Walking tranqulike to the dresser, she silently removed her .45 Colt from a drawer and slipped it into her spacious handbag. Her nimble fingers retrieved an identification card from the hidden pocket of a pair of black, French-cut briefs.

For the first time in her life, she looked at the 2x3 card with loathing. A younger, solemn-faced Shanna stared back at her from the ID – a woman with the hope and pride she no longer felt.
#F357-S44,” she murmured, reading her name and service number with deadly, abstract calm, and
 glanced, almost hesitantly, at her reflection in the mirror. Her head made a slow, negative movement
as she closed her eyes against the woman in the mirror. The woman she had left behind for the past
week. The woman she must now become. One who could cold-bloodedly kill the man she loved.
Resolutely, she stiffened her spine. Her strong chin lifted slightly, challenging the woman in
the mirror. Duty accepted, she padded barefoot to the clothes closet.

The slender fingers that shifted her dresses were as icy as those that clutched her heart. Shanna
had little trouble locating the shopping bag. The contents were what she had expected. Automati-
cally, she stored them safely away.

Shanna was nervous as she put the final stroke of mascara to her long lashes. She stood and
whirled once, allowing the legs of her fuchsia silk jumpsuit to float around her in soft, full folds.

Marshall’s knock on her door was bold, strong, and insistent, like the man himself.
Her heart thumped heavily in her chest. She couldn’t wait to see him, even knowing how this
night must end. She loved him. She loved Marshall Thaxton, traitor to his country. The idea of his
traitor was hard to get used to. She loved him too much to believe him capable of such baseness.

The dead weight where her heart had once been, kept beating the same refrain. There had to be
something else, some other explanation . . .

His fist rapped again, more persistently this time. “Shanna – Hey, gorgeous, let me in.”
She forced a tense smile on her face and opened the door. “Gorgeous, huh?”

His eyes caressed her gently . . . lovingly. “Would I lie?” His smile was warm and sincere,
making a mockery of her forced one.

Tonight, knowing what she must do, she felt tongue-tied and unsure of herself. It showed. She
knew it did. She felt as if she were walking in the surf with cement waders to protect against sharks
– death, either way.

If she didn’t complete her assignment, someone else would. There would always be someone
else, for him and for her. That was the way the system worked. Each agent knew and understood the
far-reaching effects of failure to comply with orders.

When she finally found her voice, she did her best to sound lighthearted and teasing. “Lie . . . ?”
She tilted her head and pretended to consider. “No. . . Stretch the truth? Probably.”

Marsh reached out a muscular arm and cupped her cheek in his hand. His touch was gentle for
such a strong man. His quicksilver eyes stared deeply, intently, into hers. “You all right, love?”

“I. . . Yes. Yes, of course.” She turned away on the pretext of reaching for her shawl and
shoulder bag. Her cautious brain told her to beware of deceiving him. Blue Chip was an alert and
shrewd operative – he would not be easily fooled. Knowing this, she could hardly meet his steady
gaze.

The heavy carpet muffled his footsteps as he closed the distance between them. His warm arms
enfolded her in a secure yet tender embrace. Gently, he positioned her so that her head rested against
the strong beat of his heart. “Lighten up, love. Our time isn’t over yet. We still have two days of
vacation left.”

Shanna closed her eyes and accepted his warmth and comfort because she needed it so badly.
Not for the first time, she asked herself if the job – its value to the country – could possibly be worth
what it was costing her in pain and personal sacrifice. She saw little irony in the fact that she must end the life of the only man she had ever loved, and was accepting his strength in order to do so.

Then she felt it. That discreet, unmistakable bulge of cold steel under his left arm. Why was he armed? She knew definitely he hadn’t been during the past week. Why now? Did he know? God help her if he did. . . .

Forcing herself back into a cautious mode of relaxation, she inhaled the musky scent of his after shave, allowing it to assault her senses. With concentrated effort, she shoved doubt and duty away, giving herself over to the magic of the night . . . their last.

“Mmm . . . you smell good. You feel good too. I . . . Umm . . . I think I may have stayed in the sun too long this afternoon. Will you think it terribly cliché if I have a headache?”

He turned her in his arms and looked down into her suddenly guarded eyes. “Only if it means we have to cancel our date.”

“No, of course not. It’s just a little headache,” she assured him, praying the tears wouldn’t come.

There was no point in delaying the inevitable. Her course was set. It had been charted long ago, on the day she had taken her oath of allegiance to US GIES. No, she would not allow herself the luxury of a headache tonight.

His moist lips kissed a small trail across her smooth forehead, and then ended by punctuating the end of her upturned nose.

“Are you sure, love?” The concern in his voice tore at the guilt in her heart, while the gun under his jacket added a touch of terror for the competent agent she knew him to be.

“Absolutely.” Forcing a smile, she hid her fear and uncertainty, while her relentless brain chanted that there was no way out . . . no way out . . . no way out . . .

“Good. Then let’s get going. I left the dinghy unattended at the dock. Unless you want to swim out to the sloop, we’d better make tracks.”

Her eyes scanned the canvas bag dropped carelessly at her hotel door. Funny, she hadn’t noticed it before. Why would he take such care to insure its unobtrusiveness?

Years of training had taught her there was always more to every situation than met the eye. Caution and indecision crowded her tormented brain while she discreetly waited for an opening to ask him about the duffel bag.

Mentally, she tried to inflame her instinct of self-preservation. Marsh was no fool, and she couldn’t afford to let love make one of her either.

The bottom line was still the same. Nothing had changed, other than perhaps the identity of the victim, if he knew. . . . No matter what the outcome of the evening, this would be their last night together.

She knew with certainty that only one of them could survive. Tonight’s memories, the good and the bad, would have to last one of them a lifetime.

Her soft laughter was as false as her smile had been. “What? Backstroke all the way to the yacht? You’ve got to be kidding. If you’ll remember, I’m the lady who rolls in the sun and watches you expend physical energy.”

Linking her arm through his, she flashed what she hoped was a winning smile and urged him toward the door. “Come on. I’ll supervise, you row.”

The explosives hung heavily on her shoulder as they walked out the door.
Returning her smile, he squeezed her hand as it lay warmly against his biceps. Nonchalantly, he picked up his small duffel bag on the way out. The sound of it bumping against his leg reminded her of its presence and taunted her with its unknown contents.

Curiosity was eating her alive. “What have you got in there?” She nodded casually toward the bag in his right hand. “Dirty laundry?” she teased, giving him an opportunity to tell the truth.

“Naw,” he grinned. “Clean.”

Shanna couldn’t help but wonder uneasily if he had always been so evasive. Or had she been too lovestruck to really see him clearly? Had Marsh ever really let down his defenses with her the way she had with him? After all, he was the most proficient agent US GIES had. And now he had breached security. He certainly had reason to expect reprisal. . . .

The forty-foot sloop was sleek and well fitted. Marshall had leased it from a Nassau boat agent for a month of sailing. Shanna liked it a great deal. They had spent many wonderful hours sailing, diving, and lazing in the sun.

The Sailfish could sleep six adequately or two comfortably. Tonight, Shanna’s concern was the comfort of two.

After Marsh stowed away his gear, Shanna fidgeted and paced as he brought up the anchor. Her rational mind told her she must get a look inside Marsh’s canvas bag. It also told her she’d better unload the equipment in her own bag while he was busy at the helm. It would be too late after they had gained the open sea.

“I . . . um . . . do you mind if I go below?” she murmured, giving what she hoped would pass for an embarrassed shrug.

His lazy smile flashed from the cockpit. “Be my guest. You know where the head is.”

Was there a spark of distrust in his eyes, or was it only her imagination? Her scalp prickled with warning as she walked away.

Lifting the heavy shoulder bag, she backed down the ladder and into the galley. It didn’t take her long to locate a vulnerable area and set her charge of explosives.

When her work was completed, she looked at the device that would end Marsh’s life and shuddered. It was now 9:00 P.M. In six hours, the Sailfish would be slivers of burning timber on the water.

Turning blindly from her forced task, she bit her bottom lip viciously. The deed was done, and could not be undone. Closing her mind to the pain, she walked back toward the galley in search of Marsh’s mysterious duffel bag.

The bag was easy to locate. He had simply opened the closet door and dropped it on the floor.

“Not very professional . . . .” Her stomach lurched. “Unless . . . ?”

If she were dead, it wouldn’t make much difference whether or not she knew the contents. A very sobering thought – one that drove her quickly into action.

Her fingers trembled slightly as she picked up the bag and set it gingerly on the bunk. “Hell,” she muttered to herself, “it isn’t a snake! Open it, Shanna.”

The grating of the zipper seemed to vibrate off the walls of the small, compact room.

Once the bag was open, her professional side took over. Expertly, she removed each item carefully and systematically, so she could replace it in exactly its original position.

“Clothes?” she mumbled, riffling further. “Ah, jockey shorts. Very sexy . . . . I always did love a man in black nylon.” An unexpected, tense smile curved her lips.
At the bottom of the bag lay a folded sheet of paper. Lifting it by one corner, she slowly unfolded it. “What . . . ? But all of these people are dead . . . ?” Her face paled as she silently read the list of US GIES agents: Johnson, Robert W. #J172-R23 – 2/15/91; Martin, Franklin S. #M225-F42 – 8/10/90; Quincy, Seth R. #Q131-S15 – 1/03/92; Roland, Brian C. #R099-B10 – 6/6/91; Ryan, James J. #R184-J81 – 10/01/90; Smithers, John R. #S205-J71 – 3/05/92; Turner, L. Wayne #V300-L65 – 4/09/92. Some of these men had been her friends, all were good agents – experts in their field and a great loss to the agency.

Tears blinded her eyes as she read the final name on the list. “Foley, Shanna K. #F357-S44 – 6/30/92; Today . . . ? That’s today’s date!” What did it mean? Was Hawk using Marsh to eliminate her instead of the other way around? And if so, why? She was no traitor . . .

Carefully repacking the bag, she placed it back inside the closet. A cold chill raced up her spine when she thought of the list. What did it mean? Why did Marsh have it? Could he have been involved in the deaths of so many excellent agents? Was he nothing more than a paid assassin for US GIES? And why was her name already on the list of the dead?

“There has to be more,” she murmured, quietly searching through drawers and under bunks. So far, she had only bits and pieces. She had no way of knowing if Marsh had even bothered to read the list. If he knew she was an operative, he had certainly hidden it well.

“Pay dirt.” Smiling, she lifted the latch of an obscure wall compartment near one bunk. “Well, well, well, what have we here?”

Taking care not to bump the attaché case against the sides of the narrow compartment, she lifted it out. Placing it on the floor, she quickly snatched a slender nail file from her purse and jimmed the lock. Praying silently, she pressed the identical latches and watched the lid pop open.

“My God! Where could he have got hold of so much money?”

“Hey, Shanna? Are you lost down there?”

She jumped guiltily as her fingers floated lightly over the stacked bills.

“Hey, honey!” he shouted. She could hear his footsteps crossing the deck. “Hey . . . ?” He stuck his head through the galley door. “Need any help?”

“No . . . No. Be there in a jiffy,” she called, slamming the lid back on the attaché case and sliding it hurriedly under the bed. With wings on her feet, she scurried from the sleeping quarters and into the galley. Her heart was pounding like a trip-hammer.

Quickly, she checked her watch. She had been gone twelve minutes. Not long in a person’s lifetime – or deathtime.

A sardonic smile curved her lips when her eyes rested on two chilling bottles of wine. Her blood surged with the strangest mixture of love, distrust, and plain, old-fashioned fear. Her chances of survival were appearing bleaker with every tick of the timed detonator she had so recently armed. Perhaps wine would help take the sting out of death . . . for them both.

The boat rocked in a steady, rhythmic roll as the engine chugged, moving them from Nassau Bay harbor out to open sea.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, she cleared her mind of what was done and of what was yet to come. Deftly, she filled two glasses with wine, placed them on a tray and negotiated her way back up the ladder and onto the deck.

The refreshing night breeze wafted through her long hair, allowing it to flow freely behind her. The fuchsia silk molded her body, accentuating every curve. From the cockpit, Marsh watched her
approach. His eyes were quiet and speculative.

“A truly thoughtful host would have reminded me not to wear high heels for dinner on the high seas,” she teased, walking carefully toward him. “But I brought you a glass of wine anyway.”

“Ah, thank you, fair lady.” He smiled warmly, his strong, sure fingers curling around the stem of the wineglass.

He watched her carefully, noting the nervous tremor in her voice. Not an easy lady to read, his sweet Shanna. But then, a woman with no mystery held little intrigue. He liked his women with spice and courage. She had both.

“Come and share the cockpit with me.” He moved a fraction, providing her a cozy nook in which to sit.

“In a minute.” Placing her glass into a secure holder, she removed her shoes, tossed them negligently aside, and turned back toward the galley. “I’m going back for the bottle. No telling when you’ll decide to drop anchor.” Besides, she needed the fortification... badly!

He watched the gentle sway of her hips as she walked away. She was gorgeous, generous, and loving. All of the things he had thought were important in a woman. All save one. Was she trustworthy?

“Hors d’oeuvres in the fridge,” he called after her, anxious to get the evening under way and impatient to have her near.

“Got ’em,” she called as she trudged back up the ladder. Testing her sea legs, she wobbled toward him, a bottle of wine under her arm and a plate of seafood appetizers in her hand.

They sailed several miles away from the shore on the smooth Atlantic Ocean. When Marsh cut the engine, the bottle of wine was history and the appetizers were close behind it. The boat drifted peacefully on the tranquil sea. They were completely alone. A perfect situation in which to love... a perfect situation in which to die.

He picked up the wine bottle and tilted it into his glass. Nothing. “This one’s a dead soldier.”

Heaving himself from his seat, he walked, surefooted, to the galley. “Back in a minute.”

“A dead soldier...” She shuddered. The symbolism was too near the truth to be appreciated.

Which soldier would die? Would he? Would she? Would they both?

When Marsh returned some minutes later, Shanna was silent and preoccupied. He dropped onto the seat next to her and drew her onto his lap. She smelted of sea air and roses. Her body was warm and yielding.

He looked into her face and thought that she had never been more beautiful. Her eyes glowed from the moonlight, and her smile was warm and inviting. He was surprised to feel her tremble in his arms. Her lips were sweet, responsive and hungry when they met his. He had never known such love, such passion, such complete surrender...

Later, as they lay on the small, single bed below deck, he stroked down her damp skin with fingers that still trembled with desire. “You know I love you, Shanna?”

She smiled up at him from beneath long, lush lashes. “Good, because I love you too.” That was God’s truth between them, if nothing else was.

“Do you believe I would never do anything to hurt you?” he asked, while his lips skimmed lightly over her neck, her shoulder and her upper arm.

“Yes, I believe you would never intentionally hurt me.”

A small sensual tremor rocked her body. He smiled with satisfaction. “That’s not what I asked you.”
“Of course it is,” she murmured softly. But she knew it wasn’t. She also knew that if the tables were turned, he would have no option but to eliminate her. She understood the rules well. One or both must die. There was no other way.

“No, love, it isn’t. I would never hurt you.” He kissed his way back up over her naked flesh until he reached her glistening lips. “Don’t even think about it, Shanna, because I could never do it. I love you.”

Her head was spinning from love…his love. But she understood that he was saying something very important. “Do what?” she asked cautiously while her lips reached out to capture his. It was nearly 2:00 A.M. They had only an hour left, and Shanna was determined to make it last her through eternity.

“Eliminate you.”

“What…?” she gasped, startled. Her brain was sobering fast. “What are you talking about?”

“You. Us. US GIES. I know, Shanna. I’ve known all along.”

Shanna pushed herself from his arms and reached for the sheet, wrapping it quickly around her. “You know everything?” If he had known all along, then it was all a lie. This wonderful love she’d thought they shared was nothing but a lie. . .

He reached out his hand to her, but she shied away, successfully wedging herself into the corner of the cabin. The names on the list of agents rolled in slow motion through her mind. Her own name stood out prominently.

“Darling, don’t be afraid of me,” he coaxed in a voice as smooth and dark as black satin – seducing her to believe, to trust.

She tried to smile, but her lips wouldn’t cooperate. Her thoughts raced. Was he the mark or the assassin? “Not be afraid of Agent Orange? Are you kidding?”

He winced and said quietly, “Shanna, it’s a nickname.”

When he saw the fright in her eyes, his anger sparked. “I do my job, damn it! It’s the same job you do – only I do it better! So don’t look at me with those doe eyes, as if I were about to devour you. I love you. It would be a hell of a lot simpler if I didn’t.”

A tight, grim smile creased her mouth, and she nodded her head. “Yes, I can see this is going to be a little inconvenient for you.”

His temper shattered and he grabbed for her, shaking her roughly as his strong fingers bit into the tender flesh of her upper arms.

“Damn it! Haven’t you heard a word I’ve said? I love you!”

When her head quit reeling, she looked directly into his flashing eyes. Nervously, she moistened her lips with her tongue, achingly aware that her lips still held traces of their last, beautiful kiss.

“How could you? How could you love me, knowing…” She stopped to swallow the lump of fear in her throat. “Knowing what my assignment was?” Or was she his assignment?

He released her slowly. His conscience pricked painfully at him for the blue marks already forming on her soft white skin. He had known when he became involved with her that this wasn’t going to be easy. Silently, he damned Hawk and his cold efficiency.

“Hell, honey, I knew they would send someone. It’s their way. US GIES has no retirement plan. Haven’t you learned that by now?”
“But ... but ... I didn’t even know until yesterday ...” Her thoughts were beginning to gel and anger quickly overrode fear. “Why, you heartless beast! Okay, they set me up — to them I’m expendable. But you, how could you! You let me fall in love with you, knowing all the while that one of us would die!”

“Nothing is ever black or white, Shanna. Surely you’re enough of a professional to realize that? I didn’t know who they would send; I just knew they would send someone.”

“Oh, right! That’s good, Marsh. And if the someone just happened to be a woman, who just happened to fall in love with you and didn’t suspect a thing, well, so much the better!”

“Be fair, Shanna. You know that isn’t the way it was — the way it is.” He pursed his lips and shook his head. “You’d think that two seasoned pros like us would have known better. But we both fell neatly into Hawk’s trap. The question is, what are we going to do about it?”

“I’d say that depends solely on you, Blue Chip. You obviously have me at a disadvantage.” What an understatement! Naked and weaponless was about as much of a disadvantage as an agent could get.

“No, love. It’s up to you.” His eyes were warm yet watchful. “Could you trust me, Shanna?”

She bit her lower lip. It was a pretty tall order, considering what she knew — and what she didn’t know. “That depends,” she stalled.

“On what?”

“On a lot of things, Marsh.” Her steady gaze held his. She was programmed to put duty first, and so, predictably, her first question was professional. “Why do they want you dead? What did you do? Hawk said you had broken security. What did he mean?”

Her eyes burned into his, searching for the truth. Because she loved him, she wanted to trust him, but she wasn’t sure she still knew how. “Are you really a traitor?”

“He told you that I was a traitor?” His nostrils flared. Anger sent bright shafts of light into his quicksilver eyes.

Her head made a silent, negative shake as she replayed their telephone conversation in her head. “No, not exactly. He just said ...” She stopped, trying to recall Hawk’s precise words. “He said you had ‘breached security’ and were ‘no longer reliable.’”

Marsh let out a long, exasperated breath. “That can mean anything, Shanna. It sure as hell doesn’t mean I’m a traitor to my country.”

But was he a one-man hit team — US GIES’ lethal solution to wavering operatives? Tears welled in her eyes. She was scared and confused, not knowing what to believe and beginning to doubt her own judgment.

She didn’t want to die. But she knew within reason that tonight she would. Unless ... As a last resort, she used an unfair weapon to keep him off-guard. On a choked sob, she flung herself into his arms. She was on her own now. These were tactics she hadn’t been taught in the classroom, or in the field, for that matter. She was using the tactics of a desperate woman—a woman desperate to live.

“I knew it. I just knew you couldn’t have done anything like that,” she murmured. Snuggling into his naked chest, she prayed the words were true, even as she recalled the damning evidence to the contrary. Why was her heart so sure he could be trusted when everything she had learned in the past few hours pointed in the opposite direction?
“Honey, it makes no difference,” he said softly as he smoothed his hand down the silken strands of her hair. Breathing in her sweet scent, he wondered if she were as open and honest as the perfume she wore. Certainly she was no fool to be manipulated by promises of love – on that he would stake his life . . . and probably was.

“Yes, it does. To me it makes a great deal of difference.” She sniffed softly and clung tightly. Surely he wouldn’t take the life of a clinging, love-blinded woman? Not yet anyway . . .

“But not to them, Shanna.”

“I know.” Her eyes were moist and vulnerable when they looked up into his. At this moment, he held her life in his hands. At three o’clock, neither of them would have a life. “But . . .”

His hand rested lightly on the creamy skin of her neck. His thumb rubbed gently back and forth over her windpipe. Her breath caught in her throat. Waiting . . .

“Will you trust me?” he asked, though her tenseness had already given him his answer.

“Will you trust me?” she returned his question.

“What do you want to know?” he asked guardedly.

Pulling away from his touch, she moistened her lips and looked into his eyes. “The truth.”

“I’m no traitor. That’s the truth.”

“Then what are you, Marsh?” Again he was being evasive.

“An operative, just like you.”

“Not exactly,” she contradicted, easing away from him as her trust faded.

“Is there a point to this, Shanna?” he asked, eyes watchful.

“You bet there is Marsh. And the point is, if you trusted me, you wouldn’t tell me lies.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” His patience was wearing thin, and his time was running out. This last assignment must be completed within the next fifteen minutes – or not at all.

Tears stung her eyes. Anger burned her soul for the game he was playing with her. Cat and mouse. Lies and deceit.

Wrapping the sheet sarong-style around her, she slid quickly from his grasp, leaving him holding only the tail-end of her covering. “You wouldn’t know the truth if you fell over it, Marsh!” she shouted angrily as she reached under the bunk for the attaché case. Pulling it out quickly, a file spilled onto the floor.

A momentary look of surprise flashed through his eyes before he arched a challenging brow at her. “Been browsing, Shanna?” Little doubt she had found the list too.

“Why couldn’t you just have been honest with me?” she demanded. “I might not have understood, but I would have loved you anyway!” Furiously, she lifted the oxblood case and threw it at him. It slammed ineffectually against the wall and slid to the bunk with a heavy thud.

Shanna stared transfixed at the documents that had spilled out of the file. Then her eyes focused on two guns that must have been in the compartment as well.

Two pairs of hands reached for one of the guns. Shanna’s got there first.

Looking down the barrel of any weapon would make any man decidedly uncomfortable. But when that weapon was his own, and a nervous woman was holding it, the situation was doubly distasteful.

“You killed them all, didn’t you, Marsh?”

“Killed who? Shanna, honey, what the hell are you talking about?” She had to give him credit, he did look genuinely confused.
“We’ve lost seven good operatives in the last three years. You killed them,” she accused, the gun steady in her hand.

“That’s crazy. Why would I kill them?”

“For the money,” she replied, nodding at the briefcase.

“Shanna, there is nearly ten million dollars in that case. Who do you know that’s worth that kind of blood money?”

Her eyes fixed on his, searching for the truth. “Ten million,” she murmured, dumbfounded. My God, had he robbed Fort Knox? What was he? A thief? A murderer? Both?

“Please, just move that gun a tad to the left, you’re making me damned nervous,” he said reasonably. “And then take a minute to look around you. Hell, I know you’re a good operative, or Hawk wouldn’t have selected you for this assignment.”

She didn’t move the gun, but she did begin to sift through the evidence.

Cautiously, she reached down and picked up an official-looking document. “Ah, married. I should have known. You really are a despicable person, aren’t you, Marsh?”

When her fingers began to tremble, the gun became an unsteady threat with a deadly bead on his heart. Her eyes held the blank look of one prepared to kill.

“Please, Shanna, use your brain for what it was trained to do. Examine facts, re-examine facts, and then draw a conclusion based on evidence, not emotion.”

ASSEMBLE THE PUZZLE AND EXAMINE THE EVIDENCE.
CAN YOU SEE WHAT SHANNA FOUND?
The Solution

State what the premise of your story is and what is happening in your world. What are your characters thinking and feeling? What are the stakes? What is at risk? What are the obstacles?

Who is your main character? What is their goal? What are their strengths and weaknesses? What is their background?

What is the setting? What is the time period? What is the location? What is the climate?

What is the conflict? What is the main problem your character is trying to solve?

What is the solution? How does your character overcome the conflict? What is the outcome?

How does the story end? What is the resolution? What is the moral of the story?