

FEARLESS PERSUASION
(A Taggart Security Team Adventure)

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Acknowledgments: Thanks, Diz, for the valuable advice. You are a fountain of information.

Her life is about to get a lot more interesting...

Helen Buchanan started her new job at Taggart Security Team by dumping coffee on the most arrogant, most exciting man she'd ever met. And that's just the beginning.

Risk is his middle name...

Ex-Army Ranger Gareth Seaton thought he'd climbed every mountain, until he crossed swords with a woman who stirred his blood and a primal male instinct to protect.

They must choose life or death...

Trapped with a madman intent on revenge, they'll draw on a fearless trust built between strangers, or die trying.

“Helen Buchanan is an uptight, in need of a good kiss type of woman,” Gareth Seaton said to Kyle Hawthorne as they traversed the hallway toward Taggart Security Team.

Kyle's eyebrows shot up. “I wouldn't tell her. Women have a way of hating that sort of thing. I should know. I'm married to one.”

Gareth flinched as he realized he'd opened his mouth and said exactly what he thought. Again. Telling it like it is often worked well in his thirteen years as an Army Ranger, but in his new career as a bodyguard, he needed to hold his tongue more often.

“Your wife is sweet,” Gareth said by way of an olive branch.

Kyle laughed.

Gareth glanced at the tall man next to him. “She's not sweet?”

“Oh, she is, but when you know her better you'll see she's got a lot of fire as well. I have a feeling Mrs. Taggart hired Helen because she has the same type of assurance and competence Tammy has.”

“Yeah, but the way she looks at me is disconcerting. Like she thinks I'm a lower form of primate. You ought to see the way her little nose tilts up in the air.”

Kyle laughed. “What exactly did you do to make her think you're a chump?”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“Uh-huh.”

Kyle’s disbelief made Gareth think back to when he’d first met Helen. Helen started work as an administrative assistant and computer specialist last Monday, the same day he walked into the agency. Mrs. Taggart had taken him around to meet everyone and when they stepped into Helen’s office he wasn’t prepared for his mind or his body’s reaction to the sight of her. When Helen had looked up at him from her desk, she’d about knocked him out of his shoes. All he’d seen was an upswept mass of shiny dark chocolate hair, striking green eyes and a pretty oval face that looked younger than her thirty something years. When he’d gawked at her, staggered by her beauty, her smile had faded. She’d never given him that radiant smile again.

“My wife is going to worry like hell when I tell her what happened today,” Kyle said. “And I think Helen could be convinced she needs your protection.”

Gareth’s mouth opened, but for once he couldn’t think of a thing to say.

Kyle took care of the problem for him. “Besides that, you heard what Mrs. Taggart said. It’s an order.”

Gareth didn’t like the way this whole case progressed. “You’ve guarded your wife before, but I don’t know if Jeannette and Helen are going to like it.”

Jeannette, Gareth understood, had been taken under the wings of Kyle and Tammy back when the teen was a streetwalker. Now Jeannette had a legitimate receptionist position at the agency and developed a crush on each new bodyguard employed with the company.

“Jeannette won’t mind hanging with us until this is all over,” Kyle said. “Helen...well, you might have to charm her.”

“Charm her?” The concept seemed alien. He hadn’t tried to charm a woman in some time.

“Yeah, you know. Smile, make small talk.” When Gareth simply grunted, Kyle laughed. “I think you’ve spent too much time working with men.”

Gareth shook his head. “There are women in the army.”

Kyle’s irreverent grin said it all. He slapped Gareth on the shoulder. “But, were any of them like Helen?”

“No.”

Gareth’s feelings turned chaotic, caught between wanting to keep Helen safe and being wary of what she’d say and do. Hell, a woman had never made him feel this out of control.

Gareth cursed. "So what's the game plan?"

"Tell them when we get them alone."

"Get them alone."

"Is there an echo in here?"

Gareth rubbed a hand over the five o'clock shadow on his chin. "Oh, boy. This outta be fun. *Not.*"

Kyle laughed. "Is the big bad Ranger afraid?"

Gareth stopped in front of the double doors of Taggart Security Team. "Can you say scared shitless?"

* * * * *

Helen Buchanan wandered toward the front desk, a mug of steaming hot coffee in hand. Right now the only thing keeping her from falling into a coma was the mild taste of breakfast blend and the excitement of her first week at Taggart Security Team.

Thank God for Friday. Five o'clock approached, but a few more hours stretched in front of her. When she arrived home, she could enjoy her evening by having a glass of wine, a bubble bath, and reading a new romantic suspense novel she'd purchased yesterday.

First things first. She must get through the rest of the day without running into the new security specialist and bodyguard, Gareth Seaton. If she accomplished this feat, insane happiness would reign. Never mind from the first moment she saw him on Monday, her mind and libido seemed hell-bent on thinking about him day and night. Forcing her wayward thoughts away from the unsettling man, she returned her attention to the front desk.

Tammy Carter-Hawthorne clacked away on a new computer at the front desk and tried to show the young receptionist, Jeannette O'Connell, how to use it.

Tammy smiled, but her grin held a hint of despair around the edges. "Ah, just the person I need. Helen, can you tell me how Jeanette could lock up this system without touching the keys?"

Jeannette waggled her fingers. "It's a special talent I have. Magnetic personality?"

Wise cracking and otherwise a hoot, Jeanette's spunk impressed Helen. "Move over ladies and let me have a look."

After Helen started working at the computer, Jeannette asked out of the blue, "Helen, what do you think of Gareth Seaton?"

Helen's fingers stopped, hovering over the keys as her attention turned to Jeannette. "He's a Neanderthal. Don't tell him I said that, or I'll have your hide."

Jeannette laughed. "Whoa."

Helen saw Tammy's amused but skeptical expression and sighed. She shifted in the chair, her body weary from a long day. "I shouldn't have said that. It's just that he's so...so primitive."

"Maybe," Tammy said as she reached for her coffee mug and took a sip, "and maybe not. Even if he is, you can handle him. We don't have to like everyone we work with."

Helen tried to type, then stopped again, her brain short-circuited by the mere thought of the man. "He's certainly sure of himself for someone who only started working with the team last week."

Tammy pushed a hand through her short, fiery red hair as she considered her next statement. Tammy winked. "Methinks she doth protest too much."

"Ha!" Helen couldn't think of a good retort, and her face went hot with embarrassment. "He's got an ego the size of Australia."

"How do you know that?" Tammy asked. "Have you said two words to him in the last week?"

"Well, no."

Tammy gave Helen a triumphant smile. "I rest my case."

Helen laughed gently and didn't even try to resurrect a comeback. When she finished tapping away on the sequence that fixed the computer problem, she gave the chair back to Jeannette. Helen started to walk around the counter when the front door opened and two men walked through.

Kyle Hawthorne, a handsome bodyguard with dark hair and a ready smile, stepped into the room first. This time his trademark smile didn't appear. "Hello, ladies."

A chorus of hellos went up from the women, but Helen noted as soon as the second man strode into the room, Jeannette and Tammy went quiet. Helen could understand why. No one felt quite at ease yet with the mysterious, often silent new security specialist.

Jeannette, in her late teens, stared at Gareth with a hero worship the girl used to reserve for Kyle. Helen wanted to brain the younger woman for gawking, but she also understood the fixation. How could she berate Jeannette when she couldn't seem to control her own burgeoning interest?

Gareth Seaton bristled with a constant hum of masculine intensity. Helen reacted to it from the first moment Mrs. Taggert introduced him on Monday. He'd walked into her office and her breath had seized up. It didn't matter Gareth Seaton was a good pal of security specialist Shane Corelli, or that his background check showed his impeccable, iron-clad reputation. The man inspired a low-grade wariness she didn't feel around the other men on staff. For an entire day she'd analyzed why he drove her nuts. Taggert Security Team specialized in well-honed bodyguards with enough testosterone to fill an arena. Only Gareth made her feel weak in the knees and caused her heart to pound.

Gareth came to a stop nearby Helen, and every muscle in her body seemed to tighten. His powerful body and gait spoke of discipline, a man trained in combat and sheer confidence he could handle any situation. A burgundy polo shirt fit over his broad, muscled shoulders and showed his powerful arms. The shoulder holster with weapon demanded respect. Navy blue slacks fit him with loving attention, as if tailor made for him. His dark auburn hair, cut close to his head military style, looked thick with the slightest hint of wave. Burnished warm skin tones attested to time in the sun but not too much. His face appeared more rugged than handsome, more hard-edged than good-looking.

No, when it came down to it, she knew what ruffled her feathers.

The way he looked at her.

Everything she'd felt from the first moment she saw him came rushing back. Uncertainty. A weird skittishness. A melting sensation deep in her stomach which warmed her all the way through.

His coffee brown eyes, shot with a golden hue, always assessed her with heated attention. He seemed to observe her with equal parts curiosity and disdain. Right now he just looked angry.

Damn.

"How did the assignment go?" Tammy left the counter and stepped close to her husband Kyle. "You guys look beat."

"Not so good," Kyle said.

"What happened?" Tammy's brow furrowed, her tone surprised and worried.

Kyle slipped his arm around his wife. "We tried calling the emergency line, but it's out of order. We contacted Mrs. Taggert on the way to the hospital. She probably didn't call you

because she knew you'd be worried. We were on the way to the client's doctor appointment when a car careened in front of us."

Jeannette's eyes widened. "Wow, are you guys all right?"

"I averted a wreck with the first car that came screaming out of the alley," Gareth said, his voice deep and husky. "Then an SUV ran a red light and plowed almost head on right into us."

Tammy touched her husband's face, a gentle and concerned caress. "My God, you could have been seriously injured."

Kyle pressed a kiss to Tammy's forehead. "We're fine. Mrs. Taggart contacted Shane and Simon and they'll take over guarding the client for the night."

"Let me guess," Tammy said. "She actually told you to take tomorrow off, but you both refused."

Kyle's stern expression lightened. "You could say that."

One of the best bosses in the world, the owner of Taggart Security Team controlled her company with a steady hand. At the same time, she also cared for her employees and treated them well.

Tammy looked chagrined, as if she wanted to nag him, but wouldn't do it in front of other people. "We should get you home."

A couple of bodyguards not on assignment appeared at the front desk and peppered Kyle and Gareth with questions. Not long after, Kyle asked Tammy and Jeannette to accompany him to his office for a few moments.

Helen started to put her mug down on the high receptionist counter and bumped the edge. As the cup tilted toward Gareth, the liquid splashed onto the front of his shirt. Helen managed to right the mug before more coffee sloshed out.

Helen's heart about stopped. "Oh, God! I'm sorry." She snatched the tissue box and dabbed at his soiled polo. "Did I burn you?"

"No." His eyes blazed down at her, then he slipped the tissue from her hands and wiped the coffee off the counter instead. He walked toward the back rooms. "I'll get cleaned up."

Helen's face burned with mortification. For a moment all confidence went south. *Now the man will think even less of me than he already does.* Her thoughts disconcerted her. Why should she care if he liked her?

Embarrassed by her clumsy display, Helen followed Gareth, intent on apologizing again. When she reached the employee lounge and pushed through the door, he stood with his back to her and yanked his polo shirt out of his waistband. As he drew the shirt over his head, his strong, muscular back came into view followed by powerful arms.

Her breath caught in her throat. Gareth turned around, and if she thought his back looked magnificent, she hadn't seen anything yet. He stood with the polo shirt clutched in one hand and his glorious torso demanding attention.

Her gaze clashed with his before darting to his carved arms and hard pectorals. A line of russet hair fanned over his chest, then trailed down over his rippling stomach muscles.

That's it. Maybe I'll never breathe again.

Faced with his trademark of raw, electrifying maleness, she swallowed hard. She tried to remember if she'd ever known a man this intriguing or exciting and couldn't think of one.

As she walked toward him, she held out her hand. "Let me clean the shirt. After all, it was my fault."

He handed her the shirt, and she dampened a cloth towel and worked at blotting away coffee. She caught his warm musk scent, and a delicious shiver worked through her body. *The man even smells wonderful.* She tried to ignore the fact Seaton oozed a hardcore sexuality few women would be able to resist.

"Don't take it so hard. It was an accident. Things happen," he said.

Husky and sensual, his voice made something primal stir deep inside her. She dared to glance up at him, stationed by her left side like a sentinel. At five seven she didn't run into too many men who towered over her, but Gareth did. He must stand about six two.

"Do you have another shirt?" she asked. "I'm afraid only some of it is coming out. It'll need to go in the wash."

"I'll put this back on. It'll dry."

In the meantime he'd stood half naked and tantalized her. She needed to get away from him before she said or did another stupid thing. *Make conversation. That's what I need to reclaim perspective.*

"So how was your first week on the job?" she asked. "Other than today, of course."

He made a masculine grunt of derision. "Today was really pretty good since our client survived."

“A very good thing. I’m glad you’re all right.”

“Takes a lot more than that to bring me down.” Self-confident, his tone implied few things could hurt him. Mischievousness lit his eyes. “Kyle’s tough and I’m stubborn. It made for an indestructible combination.”

Raw pain rose inside her. How many times had she heard her brother say such things before he went off to war? A lump formed in her throat and she took a deep breath.

She wasn’t surprised by his arrogance, but it irked her anyway. “Men without fear. It’s a bad combination. You can’t control everything, you know. Even if you were an Army Ranger.”

He planted his big hands on his hips, and it served to show his biceps to advantage, of course. One of his cinnamon brown eyebrows lifted. “What do you know about the Rangers?”

“My older brother was one.”

His eyes narrowed. “Was?”

A deep ache moved through her, as it always did, when she thought of Jeremy. “He’s dead.”

For a moment he looked soul-deep shocked, as if she’d told him someone he cared about dearly had passed away. He inhaled slow and deep, then let it out gently. Taking the shirt from her, he walked toward a group of chairs and tables. She tried to remember the last time she’d seen a man walk as if he owned the world. Gareth looped the damp shirt over the back of a chair.

“I’m sorry about your brother.” His mouth held a hint of self-deprecation, a look of self-consciousness she never would have expected. “Forgive me for asking, but how did he die?”

She leaned against the counter. “He was killed in combat during the Gulf War in ninety-one.”

Gareth’s eyes held concern and warmth. “What was his name?”

“Jeremy. Jeremy Buchanan.”

Again his gaze took her in, lacking the glare she’d seen so many times this week. “I wish I could have met him. I’m sure it would have been an honor.”

Something in her heart opened wide, filling with unexpected gratitude. “Thank you. We were never close.” She swallowed hard, her eyes moistening a little with pain and remembrance. “We were as kids, but not later. Our lives just seemed to get in the way and we didn’t see each other much after we grew up.”

“That’s too bad.” He shrugged. “But I know how it is. All my siblings are much younger than me. I have two half-brothers from my Dad’s second marriage. Billy is ten and Nick is thirteen.”

“Wow. That is an age difference.” Curiosity kept her asking questions. “Do you have much contact with them?”

“Thirteen years in the military kept me traveling so I haven’t seen them as often as I’d like. But now that I’m settled in Denver I’ll have more time.” His brow furrowed a bit. “Dad lives here with his wife and Billy and Nick.”

“And your mother?”

“She lives in Kentucky with my stepfather.”

She smiled and relaxed a little more. Maybe this guy wasn’t so bad after all. “Why did you get out of the military?”

Chagrin marked his face, a subtle shifting of his eyebrows and his mouth that he quickly hid. “I was on a mission and got shot. My right knee has never been quite the same. It’s good enough for bodyguard work, but not for government work, apparently.”

“A medical discharge, then?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

She thought of Gareth being in danger and it hurt inside like a new wound. Struggling to push back the unusual upwelling of emotion, she put both hands on the rim of the sink and gripped it, waiting for control to return.

Gareth’s footsteps echoed over the floor as he moved closer. One of his big hands landed on her shoulder. “You all right?”

Before she could say anything, Jeannette walked into the room. She stopped when she saw Gareth’s naked torso, her eyes wide as dinner plates. “Um...I’ll uh...” She cleared her throat. “We’re leaving now. We’ll lock the front door.”

“Thanks,” Helen said.

Gareth crossed his arms. “Later, Jeannette.”

Jeannette’s gaze riveted on Gareth. “Yeah. Um...the repairmen are fixing the emergency line. But they said the regular phone lines might go down for a bit while they’re working. I put the answering machine on in case. See you tomorrow.”

After Jeanette departed, Helen smiled. “That’s about the most disconcerted I’ve seen her. I think she likes you.”

Gareth smiled, and for a stunned moment her heart about seized up. Crisp, fresh, and touched with sensual promise, his expression made Helen’s entire body tingle. He might look rough and tough most of the time, but when he displayed that charismatic grin, watch out world.

“What about you?” His voice went deeper, hot and husky with interest. “Do you like me?”

Startled by his unexpected question, she wiped her palms on the front of her tweed skirt. She tried to remember if she’d ever been this nervous before. “Of course. I mean, we hardly know each other.”

He placed his hands on his hips again, and this time the movement drew her attention to his taut waistline. “That’s interesting. I could have sworn by the looks you’ve been giving me all week that you can’t stand me. I thought maybe the coffee accident was a ‘take that’ gesture.”

Surprised by his candor, she swallowed hard. “Are you kidding? I’d never do anything like that on purpose.”

“Good. But it doesn’t explain all the glares you’ve given me. Be honest with me. What did I do wrong?”

Nope. No, she never expected this. “You didn’t do anything.”

He leaned in a little closer. Gareth not only looked fabulous, he smelled warm and delicious beyond belief. “If I don’t know what I did to make you angry, I can’t make it right, can I?”

She leaned one hip against the counter for support. *Just do it. Tell him.* Even though she felt like she might fall off the edge of a cliff, she bit the bullet. “I got these vibes off you.”

One of his eyebrows tweaked up. His quirky, almost comical expression said he didn’t believe her. “I give off vibes?”

“Yes. The way you looked at me was very disturbing.”

He frowned. “You’re not afraid of me, I hope.”

“Not exactly.”

“Which is it? You’re either afraid of me or you aren’t.”

Exasperated, she put her hands out. “You wouldn’t hurt me.”

He crossed his arms. “Damned right I wouldn’t. I don’t mind kicking major ass with perps on the job and in combat, but I take total exception to the brutalizing of women and children.”

She saw truth in the clear conviction in his gaze. And oh, those eyes. Rimmed with the thickest, darkest lashes she'd ever seen, his gaze penetrated straight to her soul.

"You frowned at me the entire week like you thought I was either dull, in your way, or something else reprehensible," she said.

Again he stepped closer, as near as could be without touching her. Half-trapped, half-tempted, she couldn't decide whether to run or stay.

Clear attraction flashed in his eyes. "Gloves off then. I'm sorry I gave you the wrong impression."

"You mean all those military clipped responses weren't blatant dislike?"

"Hell, no." He took a deep breath. "Look, I guess I was trying too hard to pretend I wasn't fascinated with you."

Helen's heart rammed into overdrive. "Really?"

She hated the breathless tone in her voice.

"Really." Gareth's attention slipped down to her mouth and lingered. "Tell me there isn't something going on between us, and I'll back away right now and never bring it up again."

Helen couldn't believe it. The most intriguing, honest, sexy man she'd met had given her an opening. If she wanted a chance to see what might happen, she needed to take action. "There *is* something going on."

His gaze held the slumberous, fiery quality of a man who wanted more. Enthralled, she almost held her breath as he moved in.

"Let's see what it is," he whispered near her lips.

Drunk on the tension vibrating between them, she reached out. Her hands landed on firm, hot chest muscles. The moment stretched.

Snapped.

Gareth's mouth met hers, a tantalizing sampling of exquisite gentleness. He caressed, tasted, explored with a tenderness she never would have expected from a brawny guy like this.

Responding, she sank into mindless pleasure. As his arms slipped around her and tugged her close, the heat and hardness of his body took her breath away. The kiss caught fire, moving from exploratory to pure sensual explosion. Their meeting of lips detonated into meltdown as his tongue met hers.

Intimacy moved swift and sure through her veins and ignited deep longings she would never expected from short acquaintance. Everything inside Helen, every emotion she'd held back, seemed centered on tasting him, showing him his effect on her. Her hands went into his thick hair and she loved the silky sensation. Everything about him felt right, from the solidness of his body under her fingers, to the no nonsense way he kissed. With any other man the leap from tender to ravenous would have seemed too much, too soon. Instead she felt desired and cherished, as if they'd known each other forever instead of a mere week.

Gareth drew back a bit, his chest heaving on a deep breath. His eyes held the heated, heavy-lidded gaze of a man eager to continue.

"God, I'm sorry." His gaze flicked to the closed lounge door. "I shouldn't have done that. Especially not in light of what I should be telling you right now."

Helen's nerves prickled. His arms still held her against him, and she decided to enjoy the embrace somewhat longer despite her apprehension. "What are you suppose to be telling me?"

"There was more to the car crash today. We've received death threats from Albert Latois, the man trying to kill our client."

Helen's blood ran icy cold. Although she didn't know exact details about the case Gareth had been working on, she'd heard of Albert Latois. Latois worked with and for some seriously nasty criminals within the Denver area.

With trembling fingers she ran a hand through her hair. "That means you're still in danger?"

Slowly he released her. "The calls said it wasn't just our client who would be killed, but any employee of the bodyguard agency. Kyle will guard Tammy and Jeannette until further notice. Mrs. Taggart is putting everyone with the agency on special alert."

Suspicion reared inside her. "That's the real reason Simon Riker and Shane Corelli were put on the client's case, isn't it? Latois may have threatened the agency as a whole, but he's targeting you and Kyle in particular for throwing a monkey wrench into the works today."

"You got it. The two guys who tried the hit and run today are probably henchmen for Latois. The cops are grilling them right now."

Stunned by the new development, she remained silent.

Finally he said, "And I'm glad we've decided you don't hate me, because I'm your personal bodyguard from now on until the case is over."

Everything Helen thought she knew when she got up this morning went to hell in a hand basket. “What?”

He looked chagrined and maybe wary. “The police think they have evidence that will lead to Latois’s arrest within a few days. Until that time, though, I’ll be with you day and night.”

Panic leapt straight into her system. She couldn’t stay this close to him twenty-four hours day. Not with a full-throttle attraction jumping between them.

“No,” she said before she could think.

His mouth tightened into a military hard frown. “No is not an option.”

Flustered by the implications, she moved away from the counter and started to pace the lounge. “Give me one good reason, other than getting dead, why I should agree to this?”

He stalled her pacing with a gentle grip on her shoulders. His eyes held seriousness mixed with gentleness. Her heart did a mad flip.

“Because I don’t want anything to happen to you.” He took a deep breath. “Look, I’m putting it all on the line here. I care about you. I don’t want you hurt.”

Gratified by his concern, and uneasy about everything that might happen, she said, “Thank you and I appreciate your honesty. This is so crazy. I never imagined working for a security company might mean being a target for danger.”

Again he released her. “Danger lives all around us. There’s no telling if and when it will find us.”

His philosophical attitude made sense, even if it didn’t ease her fear. Tension thrummed in the room, and now the sexual aspect between them was complicated by a multitude of possibilities. “Maybe we should couch this,” she waved her hand in dismissal, “this thing we’ve have between us until Latois is in custody.”

The dire light in his Gareth’s eyes eased into warm and intimate. He cupped her face with one hand, the heat of his fingers tantalizing her with memories of their kiss. “On second thought, I’m not sorry I kissed you. Now you know how it is.”

Do I ever. Her body still tingled from his embrace. “You surprised me, Gareth. I never would have imagined you were attracted to me.”

He leaned in and gave her a gentle kiss. “Attracted is an understatement.”

His kiss was almost chaste, but the sensation of his lips on hers could never be innocent. Her toes practically curled whenever he touched her.

A noise, like clanging metal, came from somewhere in the offices.

Gareth's body went on full alert. "What was that?"

She started to speak, but he placed his index finger over her lips. They waited, listening for what, she couldn't say. The noise came again, a definitive sound of a door clicking shut and then being opened.

He brought his lips close to ear. "Whoever is in the office is getting closer."

Trepidation came over her, and she tensed. "It could be one of the other bodyguards."

"Maybe. Stay here while I check it out."

Before he could move away, she snagged his upper arm. "Wait. Isn't this a little dramatic? I mean, it could be anyone."

"I'd agree, but I've got a bad feeling about this."

"I'm going with you."

"No, you're not." He grabbed his damp shirt and pulled it over his head.

He reached for the shoulder holster he'd removed before taking off his shirt earlier.

Helen realized she couldn't quibble about his protective attitude. She wasn't a combat veteran with martial arts skills. She'd never picked up a weapon in her life. Overall, she would be woefully unprepared if someone planned on harming her. Suddenly she wished she'd taken simple self-defense training.

Way too late to think about it. Way too late.

The doorknob began to turn.

With a lightning speed, Gareth grabbed his weapon out of the holster and stepped into an alert stance in front of her. "Who is it?"

She could hear her heart thumping in her ears. Tensing, she waited for someone to answer.

No one did.

The doorknob stopped moving.

Gareth took cautious steps toward the door. A tremendous noise split the air and Gareth dived toward her. He knocked her off her feet and she fell on her face; he covered her body with his. Pain radiated up and down along her ribcage as she tried to suck in a breath. She craned her neck to the side and saw a bullet hole in the door.

The door banged open, slamming against the wall. A man in a black ski mask leapt through the doorway, handgun at the ready. Gareth took aim and returned fire. The guy grunted as the bullet took him down. As the man clutched his right shoulder, he cried out in pain.

Gareth sprang to his feet and started toward the man. "Move and you're dead!"

Gareth's voice, harsh and hard, assured her he meant every word. The gunman would have to be a fool to believe otherwise.

Helen caught a movement, a mere flicker as the attacker reached for his weapon on the floor at his side.

Apparently the gunman was too stupid to live.

Gareth pulled the trigger again. Blood turned the man's dark shirt black as another bullet hit his arm. With a thud, the man fell back and went still.

Helen's heart stuttered, reaction quivering through her body. She froze as everything within her refused to move an inch.

Gareth kept his weapon trained on the man while he bent down and examined him. "Call 9-1-1. This bastard is losing a lot of blood."

Swallowing hard around a shaky breath, Helen hesitated as she stepped around the prone man half blocking the doorway. Without a word, she ran into the lobby.

She picked up the phone at the front desk, almost certain she wouldn't be able to speak when she did reach a 9-1-1 operator. Her hand shook as she reached for the phone and picked up the receiver.

No dial tone.

My cell phone. She rounded the corner of the counter and rushed toward her office. Once inside, she located her cell phone in her handbag and dialed 9-1-1. An operator came on almost immediately and she relayed the situation to the woman. Once the operator assured her police and emergency medical services would be there quickly, a little of the anxiety seeped from Helen's muscles and fright ebbed.

It's over. She stared at the ink blotter on her desk and tried not to quake deep inside. Wishing didn't make it so. Her body had other ideas. Nausea made her palms sweat, and her heart seemed to beat too fast.

Helen heard a noise at the doorway and flinched. As she looked up the first thing she saw was a nasty gun barrel pointed right at her.

* * * * *

Gareth finished binding the shooter's wounds with towels to reduce bleeding. One part of him didn't give a rat's ass whether the son-of-a-bitch lived or died.

An image of Helen dead on the floor flashed through Gareth's mind with a sickening jolt. Instantly he wiped the grim image from his head, realizing his mind reacted to the trauma by giving him a bleak replay of what ifs.

Who are you kidding, bud? Helen already means a lot to you. If anything had happened to her...

No, he wouldn't go there for now. But he'd make damn sure later this evening she'd know every intimate detail of his feelings for her. If he never learned anything else in battle, he discovered life came too precious to pretend what he felt for her had no merit. Maybe he hadn't known her long, but whatever hummed between them was powerful. To hell with being rational and calm and cool about his emotions.

A few moments later it dawned on him Helen should have returned by now. Worry overwhelmed practicality. Maybe she didn't want to come near the man lying on the floor. Unease nagged at the back of Gareth's mind like a bad dream. He looked down at the unconscious man and scooped up the criminal's weapon.

Then he heard voices, small whisperings barely audible from somewhere in the offices. A litany of curses ran through his mind. Stuffing the thug's handgun into his back waistband, he moved with caution by office doorways and checked each one. Voices grew louder. He looked around one corner and assessed the danger. A man, dressed in dark clothing and ski mask like the other perp, stood in the doorway of Helen's office with a gun pointed at her. Gareth heard Helen's voice, her words stern in an attempt to sound calm.

"Your friend is down. You're alone in this," Helen said. "Why don't you give it up? I've got 9-1-1 on the line."

Cautious relief ran through Gareth. *Good for you, baby.*

"Doesn't matter." Guttural laughter left the hit man's throat. "I'll kill you and the bodyguard and move onto the rest of the people in this company. One by one, you're goin' down."

Anger piped straight into Gareth's body like an intravenous drug. *Over my dead body, creep.*

"Who hired you?" Helen asked.

“Albert Latois. You people messed with him and he doesn’t like interference. For that, you’re all gonna pay.”

“Why would you want to hurt innocent people? I have nothing to do with your problems.”

“I’ve been paid to make it my problem.”

Everything inside Gareth rebelled. If he didn’t act now, his visualization of Helen lying wounded on the floor might come true. Or worse.

“The police will be here within seconds. You have nowhere to hide,” she said, her voice controlled.

“Right, bitch.”

Gareth understood the chance he was taking if Helen accidentally gave away his presence. Now or never. She didn’t have too many choices left in her repertoire. The pig could decide to hurt or kill her within seconds.

Gareth edged around the corner at an angle where she could see him. Helen’s gaze flickered toward Gareth, but immediately she looked back at the thug.

More than once in his life, Gareth had seen military action. More than once he’d been forced to kill to save his buddies. Now, as then, he had no alternative. He *wouldn’t* allow her to be harmed.

He took aim at the man and fired.

* * * * *

Two shots rang out in succession. Helen dove for the floor behind her desk. A deep moan and the sound of a body falling came next.

For a split second terror rocketed through her. What if Gareth—

“Helen?” Gareth’s voice, deeply worried, rose above the thundering of her heart. “Helen?”

She couldn’t seem to stop trembling, her heart racing so fast she could barely catch a breath. Her lips parted and nothing came out.

Gareth came around the desk in a rush, his eyes wide with concern. Blood streaked his shirt and his hands.

Shaky, she stood up. “Oh, God. Are you hurt?”

“No. It’s the first shooter’s blood.”

Relief made her sag against the desk. “I think your polo shirt is doomed once and for all.”

He murmured another curse and moved those final inches toward her. She launched into his arms, holding him tight.

She buried her face in his shoulder. "I thought I was dead."

She shivered and his arms brought her closer. He pressed kisses to her forehead. "Are you all right?"

When she pulled back slightly to look into his eyes, she saw tenderness vying for supremacy over battle lust. "I am now."

In the distance Helen heard sirens.

* * * * *

Helen stared out her apartment window into the sparkling lights of the Denver skyline. Close to midnight, the evening wore down as it cruised toward a new day. Saturday would dawn fresh, a fresh slate with dozens of possibilities before her. Some exciting, some tricky.

She snuggled deeper into her jersey knit tunic and lounge pants, grateful to be out of her suit and pantyhose. More thankful to be alive and celebrating after one of the most terrifying nights of her life.

After the police arrived at Taggart Security Team, Helen and Gareth learned Latois had been arrested, along with the rest of his circle of criminals. Down at the station, Helen and Gareth had endured questioning, but the police soon cleared them to leave. Calls had flown between Gareth and Mrs. Taggart and then from Kyle and Tammy who were naturally upset when they learned what happened.

Gareth had insisted on taking her home. Unspoken understanding hummed between them. They had unfinished business, and more than that, they didn't want to be away from each other.

Excitement, anxiety, fatigue...all these feelings and more fluttered inside her like butterfly, threatening to overwhelm her respite. Whatever happened in the next few hours, the drama unfolding tonight taught her one thing. She would grab and hold onto what she wanted from now on. A life-threatening situation showed her she couldn't afford to tarry when it came to expressing her feelings. She hadn't told her brother how much she cared and she regretted it to this day. The same thing wouldn't happen with Gareth.

Rustling behind her made her jump a little. She gasped softly and turned.

Primitive female appreciation stirred deep in her psyche and in her belly as Gareth strolled into the living room, his hair glistening with drops of water from a shower. His gaze centered on her with laser intensity, his look hungry and admiring.

Her breath caught in her throat. Finally she understood what those passionate looks he'd thrown her way for the past week actually meant. Her heart started a new beat, one belonging to him from this point forward.

Dressed in a white T-shirt that molded his muscles to perfection, and jeans that paid loving attention to the rest of his body, Gareth Seaton looked like a god. Her mouth went dry.

"Feeling better?" she asked.

"Almost human. And I'm starving. Think it's too late to order pizza?"

Her stomach growled with impeccable timing. She laughed. "Mancuso's is open all night."

With a crooked, wicked grin, he kept walking toward her. She stepped back and bumped into the couch near the phone table.

"Good," he growled softly. "I want meat. Lots of it."

She giggled, and the girlish sound made her blush. She picked up the phone and had to dial twice she was so distracted. After she ordered a large pizza with pepperoni, Italian sausage, mushrooms and olives, she turned back to him with a smile.

"Thirty minutes," she said.

"That gives me enough time." When she didn't say anything he paused a few inches a way and tilted her chin up with his index finger so he could look into her eyes. "I need to tell you a few things. Very important things."

Trepidation quieted a little of the pleasure she'd been feeling. Then his thumb brushed over her lips and he kissed her forehead and her mind forgot to be troubled.

That's it. I'm a goner.

"I don't know what's going to happen from one day to the next. Not in reality." He slipped his arms around her and pulled her against him. "When we were fighting for our lives tonight I realized I have to tell people I care about what I feel for them. What we have between us is new, but I know one thing."

She almost stopped breathing when he paused, happiness at his words making her dizzy. She twined her arms around his neck. "You don't want to waste time pretending."

Gareth leaned in closer, until his breath tickled her lips. “You read my mind. I think I’m falling in love with you. Some would say it’s too soon for that. But I want to explore what we’ve got.”

Joy did a dance inside her and she pressed a sweet kiss to his lips. “Ditto to everything you just said. When the guy had the gun on me, do you know what stayed uppermost in my mind when I thought I might die?”

“What?”

“That I wouldn’t regret my life, except for one thing.”

She left him hanging until he slid his fingers into her hair and started peppering her face with kisses. “Tell me.”

“I wouldn’t get to be with you.”

With a pure male groan, Gareth took her mouth and showed her how much he agreed. And as seconds lengthened into minutes, Helen knew she’d found a man she could easily fall for minute by minute, day by day, until he held her entire heart.

When the pizza man arrived forty minutes later, they almost didn’t hear the bell.

THE END

For another Taggart Security Team adventure, be sure to pick up a free copy of PERILOUS ATTRACTION (Shane Corelli’s story) at Denise’s website www.deniseagnew.com under “Freebies.” You’ll find the two full-length novel Taggart Security Team adventures that started it all, DANGEROUS INTENTIONS (Scott Danger and Kylie Chapman’s story) and TREACHEROUS WISHES (Kyle Hawthorne and Tammy Carter’s story) available at Ellora’s Cave www.ellorasave.com. Stop by Denise’s website for a full list of her books, excerpts, contests, a sign up for her chat loop and a sign up for her monthly newsletter.