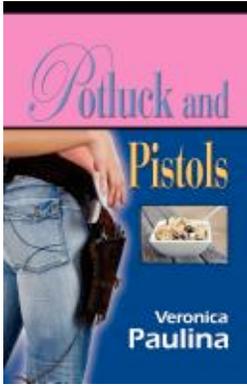


Potluck and

Pistols



Veronica  
Paulina



*Eat and shoot with the Pistol Belles! Sparks fly when Mona Milton gets together with the girls every Wednesday evening at the Skyline Sportmen's Club. Mona and the Pistol Belles meet up to eat and shoot, bringing their potluck dishes, their handguns-and their differences-along with them. An intriguing story for both experienced shooters and for women who have never held a gun in their hands.*

# Potluck and Pistols

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# **Potluck and Pistols**

**Veronica Paulina**

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## Chapter 1

“Ceasefire! Unload. Cylinders open.”

We stop shooting. It’s time to check our targets.

“Magazines out, guns on the bench,” Jim shouts into the hollowness of the indoor range. As range officer, he makes all the calls.

I push the magazine release button on my semi-automatic Ruger, pull back the slide and place a yellow plastic flag in the barrel.

“Stand back from the bench,” Jim calls down the line of shooters.

Madison and Caroline step back behind the safety line. Caroline’s .44 Magnum is open on the bench in front of them, a yellow plastic flag propped in one of the empty chambers. Jean flips open the cylinder of her Smith & Wesson revolver and lays it open on the bench.

“I need help!” calls Christine. “I don’t know if there’s a cartridge in the barrel.”

Pete walks over to her, carefully takes the Beretta Neos out of her hands and releases the magazine. He pulls back the slide and peers into the barrel. A cartridge is in place ready to fire. He slowly turns the gun over and removes it.

“Everyone clear?” asks Jim.

Caroline, Madison, Jean and I call out that we’re clear. Christine looks anxiously at Pete.

“We’re clear,” calls Pete.

“You may go down range and check your targets,” Jim says, switching on the light to indicate the range is cold and we can now move around. As soon as the light starts to swirl, the heavy metal door leading from the clubhouse bursts open.

“Hi guys!” calls Shelby. “I’ve been waiting outside for you to take a break. I’ve been here fifteen minutes already.”

“We only started shooting ten minutes ago,” says Caroline, brushing past Shelby as she heads down range to retrieve her target.

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“Good evening, Caroline, how are you?” asks Shelby, looking Caroline up and down, her eyes resting on a thick black belt studded with turquoise stones. “That’s a beautiful belt.”

“Arizona. Ten years ago,” Caroline says brusquely.

“Come and take position five next to me, Shelby,” I say, watching as Shelby’s eyes flicker back and forth along the bench. I notice she is traveling light this evening, carrying only one small gun case and the big lavender bag in which she keeps her ammo and shooting gear. Shelby usually comes to the range completely overloaded, bringing two or three handguns, a couple of bricks of ammunition and her standard potluck contribution of a Caesar salad. As usual, Shelby’s clothing is unsuitable for a sport which involves playing with gunpowder. Tonight she is sporting a white padded jacket, pink Capri pants and her signature pale blue Stetson. Since the hat’s first outing to the range last year, it has been permanently flecked with black marks.

“My Stetson’s got everything but bullet holes in it,” she often proudly remarks.

Shelby is not known for following instructions and, instead of accepting my suggestion that she take the vacant spot next to me, she stands and watches as Caroline and Madison, their heads close together, study the holes in their targets. She then looks across at Jean and Christine and sighs. Jean is on the far left of the range, a position she took after checking that Caroline was to the far right.

“I’m staying as far away as possible from that Magnum,” she’d mumbled as she unpacked her old revolver, opened up the cylinder, placed it on an old dishtowel, put a yellow flag in the chamber, and lined up five .22 cartridges.

“I don’t want to lose what little hearing I have left,” she’d continued, looking pointedly at Caroline.

“Let me shoot next to you,” Christine had said, rushing to take the place next to Jean. “That puts a gap between us and them.” This is not the spirit I have strived so hard to engender among the Pistol Belles. But as Christine is chronically nervous around Caroline and Madison—even without the powerful Magnum—I hadn’t suggested she move closer to them.

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“Come and take number five, Shelby,” I say again, anxious for her to get settled. She is always late, a weekly irritant to the punctual Belles.

“She’s got a rich husband, a housekeeper and scads of babysitters,” Jean had said when I’d first tried to excuse Shelby’s tardiness on the basis of her obligations at home. “It’s more than I had. It’s more than any of my kids had, and more than my grandkids will have.”

“I save my sympathy for single moms,” said Christine, nodding her head with an authority earned from personal experience. “That’s what’s hard.”

“We all have choices,” Madison had said levelly. “Shelby has had many advantages and presumably she has made for herself the life she wants.”

“Any woman who gets herself knocked-up four times before she’s thirty-years old is just asking for it,” said Caroline. “If I have any sympathy at all it’s for those kids being born to such an airhead.”

These sentiments have not changed in the two years Shelby has been with the Belles.

“I guess number five will work,” Shelby says, heading towards me. “It’s good to be next to you, Mona. At least you help me. Not like, you know—”

“Good,” I say quickly. “We’re all here to become better shooters.”

“I brought my new gun!” she says suddenly, tossing her bag and gun case on the bench. “It’s my new baby!”

I look down at the small gray gun case.

“It really is a baby!” she squeals, pushing her face up close to mine and prodding the front of my sheepskin vest with a French-tipped nail. It seems she always has time for a manicure.

The case has Glock written across it. I know exactly what’s inside.

“It’s a Baby Glock!” she yells before I can demonstrate the breadth of my firearms knowledge and, with a flourish, she opens the case.

Several pairs of eyes turn towards us from both sides of the range.

“A Glock 26,” says Pete, coming up behind us. “A semi-automatic sub-compact designed for concealed carry. A great choice for personal protection but with a three and a half inch barrel, I doubt you’ll hit the target from this distance.”

“I know that,” she says, wiggling her nose and poking Pete’s solid chest with the same polished nail. “I brought it to break it in. You can’t just buy a gun and hope you’ll be able to handle it when you need it.”

“No, you can’t Shelby, I’m glad you know that,” he says, taking the small gun out of its case and turning it over in his hands. “This is a good gun, a 9mm you can hide practically anywhere on your person. And the magazine holds ten rounds which is double the amount of most sub-compacts.”

Let’s hope Shelby never has to pull a gun out of her pocket and use all ten rounds.

Christine, Jean, Madison and Caroline have gathered around Shelby to look at the Baby Glock. No matter how a shooter may feel about a gun’s owner, no-one misses the chance to look over a new weapon. The Baby Glock is discussed, its features noted and Shelby’s face beams with the same smile I’ve seen when she shows off her children. Now, as if flush from the warmth of her fellow Belles, she wriggles out of her thick white jacket and reveals a flimsy, low-necked blouse.

“Shelby, your shirt is too low for the range,” I say.

“It was so warm this afternoon,” she says, keeping her eyes fixed on her gun as it is passed around the group. “Izzy and Tony are off school this week and we had a blast playing outside today.”

Isabella and Anthony are the oldest of Shelby’s children.

“That’s great,” I say. “But we have to be covered up so we don’t get burned by flying shells. I thought we all knew that.”

Madison stares at me. A junior at an Ivy League university about an hour’s drive from the range, Madison Fernandez is an All-American member of the university rifle team. The daughter of a police officer, she joined Junior Rifle when she was barely out of elementary school and, as a marksman with skills far beyond most of the Pistol Belles, Madison tolerates our group for two reasons. The

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first reason is that she joined our group in order to write her senior thesis about women and firearms. The second, which she alludes to but does not openly admit, is that Wednesday evenings with the Pistol Belles and our mixed shooting abilities are a welcome diversion from the pressures of life as a competitive collegiate shooter.

“Shelby,” I say, with an apologetic nod to Madison. “You know what constitutes suitable clothing for the range. Please cover up.”

Shelby puts her arms back into the sleeves of her jacket and, with an exaggerated gesture, fastens it up to her neck and then turns and looks me in the eye. Shelby may say she welcomes my help, but she never shirks from challenging my enforcement of range rules.

I hold her stare and, after a couple of seconds, she turns away. Once again, I question my ability to tolerate her presence in our group. Shelby’s shooting skills have improved little since she joined the Pistol Belles and she clearly feels no obligation to try to fit in with the other women. Her mood changes several times during each session, ranging from tough to sugary, the latter more of a match for her girly appearance. It had taken Jean, however, no more than a first glance to see through Shelby’s flashy appearance.

“She’s built like a breeder,” she’d said when Shelby had announced early last year that she was again pregnant. “Wide hips and hefty thighs are made for childbirth.”

Baby Paolo was born in the summer and with black hair, thick legs and big hands, is a perfect copy of his father, Carmine. Shelby’s hair is a mass of blonde curls which fall beneath her shoulders, flicking up in a variety of directions and creating a wild, sexy effect.

“It’s a pity she’s so dumb,” Pete said one evening soon after Shelby had joined the Pistol Belles and he’d patiently shown her how to load and fire her husband’s semi-automatic handgun. Carmine had deposited his wife at the range that evening and then rushed off to a business meeting.

“And it’s even more of a pity she’s close to twenty years younger than you,” I’d told Pete. Pete Dexter likes to pretend he’s a lady’s man but since his long-ago divorce he’s rarely been seen with a girlfriend. Along with Jim Mackenzie, Pete is an invaluable presence on Wednesday evenings.

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“The Glock is pretty similar to Carmine’s Walther PK380,” I say to Shelby, bringing the discussion away from her clothing and back to the gun.

“Really?” she asks, as if she isn’t familiar with a gun belonging to her husband. “The Baby Glock seems so much better for me.”

Baby Glock, Lavender Lady, Pink Lady, LadySmith. Firearms manufacturers seem to believe that for women to be interested in purchasing multiple handguns, they must create models with feminine colors and names.

We return to our positions and wait for Jim to declare that the range is hot. I notice that in spite of Shelby’s flaunting of her new gun and her predictably boisterous arrival, her face is pale and she is quieter than usual. I watch as she lays her new gun on a bright pink towel and takes out a box of ammo. She places two magazines on the bench and pulls back the Glock’s slide. She puts on ear protectors and a pair of yellow sports glasses. Shelby usually darts up and down the line looking at our guns and asking dozens of questions, although rarely waiting to hear the answers. But tonight her excitement about the Baby Glock seems to have already evaporated and she is standing still, staring silently in front of her.

“Range is hot!” calls Jim. “You may fire whenever you are ready.”

I load five cartridges into one of the Ruger’s magazines. Five is the standard number of cartridges used by many shooters, a tradition born when the revolver of the Old West was a six shooter. The top chamber was left empty so that if the gun accidentally went off, there would be no cartridge to fire. I figure a practice that began when a gun was a man’s or woman’s constant companion is a good one for me to follow. I put the magazine into the grip and push up hard to lodge it in place. I pull back the slide and the first cartridge moves into the barrel. I wrap both hands around the grip, resting my right thumb on top of the left. I stand up straight, my left leg slightly behind my right and squarely face the target. My head is up and my arms extended, and in one smooth move I bring the pistol up to eye level and line up the sights so the front is centered in the rear. I put my finger on the trigger, hold my breath and begin to squeeze.

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The gun fires. One.

I line up my sights again, straighten my arms, squeeze on the trigger. Two.

I squeeze on the trigger. Three.

I squeeze. Four, five.

The slide locks back in the open position. I press the release button and the magazine drops out. I pick up my binoculars and look down range. The bullet holes are grouped in a neat circle just to the left of the bullseye. I load five more cartridges into the magazine and slowly fire, taking care to aim slightly to the right of the center. After the fifth shot, the slide locks open and I release the magazine, put down my gun and look at my target through the binoculars. I am happy to see that the second group of bullet holes is placed neatly around the bullseye.

I put my gun down and turn to Shelby. Though I've been concentrating on shooting, I've noticed she hasn't fired a single shot. Instead, she is pointing the Baby Glock down range, slowly waving it up and down and staring blankly at the distant target.

"Are you going to fire that thing, Shelby?" Pete asks, striding over to her. I'm happy to leave it to Pete to get her started.

I load more cartridges into the Ruger's magazine, place it in the grip and push hard on the bottom. I line up the sights and squeeze gently on the trigger. One. I squeeze. Two, three, four. I adjust the position of my feet and squeeze. Five.

I release the magazine, put the gun down and place the yellow safety flag in the barrel. I again turn to Shelby. Pete is now helping Christine who, as usual, has emptied a box of cartridges onto the bench and is holding a magazine awkwardly in her right hand while fumbling with the pile of cartridges with her left. Pete makes his usual suggestion that she should switch hands and use her left hand to pull down the lever of the clip and her dominant right hand to push in the cartridges. Christine routinely ignores his advice and comes to the range each week as if it is the first time she has loaded her gun.

"Come on, Shelby," I say, turning my attention back to her. "Don't wave your new gun around like it's a toy. Are you loaded?"

"I'm loaded," she says.

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“Hold your gun up, Shelby,” Pete says, heading back to us. “Put your arms up and reach forward.”

She lifts up her arms and wraps her hands around the grip.

“Put your right thumb on top of your left,” I say. “Make sure your hand is out of the way of the slide.”

She doesn’t move her hands, but keeps staring down range.

“Be ready for the recoil,” says Pete. “Sub-compacts pack a big punch.”

“Are the sights adjustable?” I ask.

“I don’t think so,” says Pete.

“You guys are making me nervous,” says Shelby, her eyes darting from me to Pete.

“We’re here to help,” I say.

The words are barely out of my mouth when Shelby suddenly lifts the gun up above her head and slams it down hard on the bench. Miraculously, though the gun is cocked it doesn’t fire.

“Leave me alone!” she cries. “Why don’t you just leave me alone?”

I grab hold of her arm and pull her back behind the safety line. Pete picks up the gun, removes the magazine, looks inside the barrel and flips out a cartridge. Jim hurries over to Shelby. She tries to wrestle out of my grasp but I maintain my grip on her.

“Shelby,” Jim says, sternly. “You must never smash a loaded gun, or an unloaded gun for that matter, onto the bench. Or the floor, or anywhere else.”

Shelby stands still, her eyes looking down at the ground.

“You could have caused the gun to fire,” Jim continues. “It could have discharged.”

“That was a dangerous move, Shelby,” says Pete.

Tears are pouring down from beneath Shelby’s sports glasses. Tonight’s behavior is far beyond her usual impatient response to our instructions.

“Shelby, is something wrong?” I ask.

She buries her head in her hands and her shoulders begin to shake.

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“I didn’t bring my Caesar salad,” she sobs, as if that could be the reason for such distress. “I made it but then I forgot to bring it, and I was even later than usual.”

Jim and Pete stand and watch. Shelby’s attention-getting antics don’t usually result in tears. One of us will have to order her to leave. Her mishandling of the gun constitutes reckless behavior and requires ejection from the range and a temporary suspension from the club.

“It’s Daddy,” she mumbles, her voice muffled by the wad of pink tissues she has pulled from her pocket.

“Your father,” I say. Everyone knows John Williams.

She nods and tears fall from her cheeks onto her jacket. I take her hands gently in mine.

“My father is sick,” she cries, her voice echoing around the range. Fortunately, her words are barely intelligible over the rapid firing of guns and the other Pistol Belles are so engrossed in shooting they haven’t noticed the drama being played out on our side of the range.

“My Daddy is going to die!”

## Chapter Three

“Jean called,” says Carl as I push open the front door and step into the living room. Carl is lying on the couch, a book in his hands and a glass of his favorite Merlot on the coffee table beside him. Music plays softly in the background and the television screen flashes soundlessly. Our small house has an open floor plan and the living room, dining room and kitchen flow into each other. With one swift scan I can take in the full scope of my husband’s evening at home.

“Jean called?” I ask, surprised. “I left Skyline only fifteen minutes ago. I’ve been with her all evening.”

I walk into the kitchen and study the clean, empty surfaces. There are no signs that our young neighbor, Michaela, has been here. The phone call from Jean was probably Carl’s only disturbance.

“She said she couldn’t say anything to you at the club as Caroline was there and she was going to wait around to talk to you when the others had left, but Matthew was coming for her and she didn’t want him to come in and start drooling all over Madison, so she decided she would leave and then call you when she got home.”

I stare at Carl as he looks up at me from his prone position.

“Caroline? Matthew? Madison? Carl, honey, I’m sorry but I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

My husband is a professor of literature at our local state university and can find order in the most complex stories. But tonight he is deliberately relaying a rambling message word for word.

“Apparently Caroline is upset,” he says, sitting up and smiling at me. Carl enjoys the conflicts and rivalries of the Pistol Belles and always anticipates a juicy tale or two when I get home on Wednesday evenings.

“Caroline doesn’t usually wear her emotions on her sleeve,” I say, taking the Ruger out of its case and placing it carefully on an old towel I’d laid on the dining room table before I’d left. “If Jean called to tell me Caroline is upset, did she say why?”

Carl watches as I take out cleaning fluid and brushes from the cleaning kit. He picks up his glass and sips slowly.

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“Because you haven’t asked her to help you with the gun safety program,” he says.

“I’ve barely had chance to ask anyone! Jean only knows about it because I called her this afternoon to vent about Sandersen. And, for the record, I asked her if she would help me and she said no.”

In fact, she’d turned me down flat.

“I know guns,” she’d said. “But I’m tired of kids. I had five of my own and they had fifteen and the fifteen have had ten more. That’s to date. At least, that I know about.”

Jean had guffawed down the phone, enjoying counting her descendants even if she’d grown weary of children.

“You’ll find somebody,” she’d said. “But, to be honest, I don’t know who. You may just have to get your butt around thirty-four schools on your own.”

“But, Jean, you’d be great,” I’d persisted, hoping that with a little buttering she might relent. It hadn’t worked.

“Mona, I’m not good with kids anymore. I don’t have the patience, I don’t have the energy and I definitely don’t have the hearing. Kids don’t listen to eighty-year olds. I could be Annie Oakley herself and they wouldn’t take me seriously. You need to find someone a lot younger than me.”

“Well, I’m not exactly young either!”

“No, but you act youthful. You’re full of energy and enthusiasm. Most folks wouldn’t guess you’ve got half a century on you.”

Jean knows how to bring a compliment down to size.

“How about Madison?” she’d asked.

I’d told her Madison would be ideal but she is already under pressure with classes and her rifle team. Jean had not made any further suggestions.

“Carl, honey,” I say as he watches me push the bore brush through the barrel to dislodge lead left there from firing cartridges. “The reason I didn’t ask Caroline is because she has a full-time job. I doubt she’d be able to take time off work to visit every elementary school in the county.”

“I hear there are thirty-four of them,” says Carl, laughing.

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“There’ll be one less when I blow Lincoln Elementary to smithereens.”

“Mona,” says Carl, his laughter gone in a flash. “People with guns must not make threats.”

“Don’t worry,” I say, pulling out the brush and peering into the barrel. “I’ll make sure Dr. Sandersen is the only person in school.”

“That’s not funny, Mona. You cannot joke about guns and schools. It is not funny and it never will be.”

Carl is right. Careless comments and tasteless jokes paint a picture of gun owners as reckless, violent or ignorant. And as the new coordinator of a public school gun safety program, my words and attitude will be under scrutiny.

“You’re right,” I say. “I’m sorry.”

Carl smiles at me and I blow him a kiss.

Carl is not a shooting man but is a staunch supporter of my right to own a gun. More than once he has sprung to my defense when a friend or acquaintance has made negative comments about firearms or has challenged my right to participate in the shooting sports. There are a couple of reasons Carl doesn’t like being told his wife shouldn’t own guns. First of all, no-one tells my husband what to do and actually achieves the desired result. Many of his students have fallen afoul of this fundamental rule. “Professor Milton, you should start with Chaucer and skip *Beowulf* and then it will be...”, “Professor Milton, you should give the test before Spring Break and not after and then it will be...”

It will be a ‘D’.

Carl tells me that the last sentence his former wife uttered to him prior to him starting divorce proceedings began, “Carl! You should have called to...” Apparently, he should have called to tell her that his presentation at the Mid-Atlantic States Higher Education Forum had been moved from late to early afternoon, thus giving him the unexpected chance to catch an evening flight home instead of staying overnight and returning the following day. And it seems he should have called to tell her he would be home by midnight so she would have had time to get her lover out of the bedroom before her husband tiptoed quietly—so as not to disturb his sleeping beauty—up the

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carpeted stairs of their comfortable town home. I am eternally grateful to Carl's first wife for her faithless heart and her willingness to engage in risky sexual escapades, and I am forever thankful that she did not know what her husband would and would not tolerate.

The second reason Carl doesn't want people to say his wife should not own guns is because he believes in our right to make our own choices, as long as we take full responsibility for them.

"If Mona had taken up golf," he says to the few people who still feel compelled to express an opinion about my hobby, "she would own several golf clubs and lots of golf balls and accessories. She'd belong to a club and she would go to it often. But she didn't choose to chase a ball, she chose firearms. She, therefore, owns several guns and lots of ammunition and accessories. She belongs to a club and she goes to it often."

Carl's willingness to defend me makes me love him more than ever. Slightly built, he stands only a couple of inches above me and, though fifty-five years old, stays slim in spite of mountains of steak, spaghetti, bread, cheese, hamburgers and potatoes. My darling professor does not have sophisticated tastes when it comes to the gustatory delights, although he claims that the bottle of red wine he consumes every evening adds whatever class may be missing from his plate. But deep inside Carl's unimposing physique is an able pugilist who enjoys standing up to my detractors.

"You look worn out, Mona," Carl now says, getting up from the couch and walking over to me.

"It was a rough day," I say, putting my gun down and reaching up to him.

He wraps his arms around me and pulls up hard on my back. I'm locked in a bear hug. It's exactly where I need to be.

"I feel a story," he says, kissing the top of my head.

I rest my head on his chest. He strokes my back.

"I feel a story about gun safety right here on your spine," he says.

"What are you?" I ask, laughing. "A spine reader?"

"No, I'm the husband of a woman I can read more easily than the book I just tossed on the couch."

"Oh, yeah?"

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“Yes, and the couch is exactly where you need to be tossed.”

He picks me up, carries me across the room and slowly eases me down onto the soft cushions. He climbs on top of me and kisses my face. We lay still for a minute or two.

“Did you find out any more about John Williams?” he asks.

I push Carl off me and jump up and go back to the dining room table.

“Abandoned already,” he says, picking up his glass and settling back on the couch. “Someone at Skyline must have said something about Shelby or her father.”

“No, everyone is amazingly quiet and I haven’t spoken to Shelby since I threw the rule book at her last week.”

“Do you have to clean your gun right now,” he asks, changing the subject.

“Yes, honey, I do,” I say in the mock-tired tone I use each week when he asks me this question. “I prefer to clean it right away so I don’t have to lock it in the safe and then get it out again tomorrow. And I don’t want to forget to clean it.”

“You would never forget to clean your gun. You’re obsessive-compulsive when it comes to gun care.”

“And Carl care.”

Carl raises his glass and smiles at me. His complaint about the smell of cleaning fluid is a Wednesday evening ritual. I continue pushing the rod through the barrel.

“I love to see a woman work a rod,” he says.

I smile at him and pull the brush out of the barrel. I then slowly push it in and out several times. He watches me for a minute and then comes and sits with me at the table. He knows I’ll stay on task until I’m satisfied my gun is clean.

“I wonder what’s wrong with John Williams,” he says.

“I’m surprised you’re so interested in Shelby’s father. You’ve never had much of a soft spot for his daughter.”

“I teach all my classes in Williams Hall, don’t forget.”

I had forgotten. The university is built on land donated years ago by the wealthy and prominent Williams family. The family has been

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in our town for generations and is the closest thing we have to royalty. It's not surprising that Shelby behaves like a little princess.

"Have you ever met him?" I ask.

"Last fall," says Carl. "On Founder's day the school invited past supporters. John Williams came and said a few words and I remember him remarking that he's the last Williams alive."

"Shelby's a Williams, born and bred."

"He mentioned her, of course, and his son-in-law and their children. I think the youngest had recently been born. He seemed very proud of them all, but he did mention that they don't carry the Williams name."

"No, but they carry his blood," I say, for some reason defending the ability of a woman to carry on a family line though I have not done so myself.

"True, but the point he was making was that he is the last Williams to carry the name and that there'll be no-one in town with that name after he is gone."

"Sounds like he was already thinking about dying," I say, wiping oil around the trigger and the slide. Good shooting demands a well-oiled gun.

"He looked to be in his sixties, so I guess it's not surprising that he has a sense of his own mortality."

"So it's good to have your name on a building."

"Or a litter of grandchildren," says Carl.

I turn to look at him and a silence hangs between us.

"Maybe Michaela will give us grandchildren," he says, laughing.

I laugh with him. Neither Carl nor I can blame each other for our childlessness. We made our own histories.

"You must have met John Williams up at Skyline," says Carl. "I'm sure he's been to watch his darling daughter shoot."

"He came to see the Pistol Belles once," I say, recalling the tall, fair man with his patrician airs and confident manner. "He was with Carmine and I remember thinking how different they were. Williams is so pale and lean and Carmine is short and very dark."

At the time I'd remarked on the difference to Jean and she'd laughed and said that the stock has run out on the Williams family

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and that John should be forever grateful to Carmine for marrying his spoiled daughter.

“I don’t think his son-in-law’s swarthy looks are a concern,” says Carl. “He spoke very highly of him and said that Carmine is the kind of guy who keeps our country strong. He said he is proud his daughter and grandchildren are named Lombardi. Carmine works hard, is a dedicated husband and father and apparently develops real estate all over the country.”

“And he hunts with his father-in-law.”

“He didn’t mention hunting, which was smart considering his audience. But I thought it was pretty classy how much he praised Carmine.”

“Jean says the one good thing she can say about Shelby is that the girl had powerfully good instincts when it came to choosing a husband. She needed a man with money and when she met Lombardi she snapped him up before anyone else could grab him.”

“Yes,” says Carl. “Carmine Lombardi will already have worked a lot harder than John Williams ever did. Williams will have gone to the best schools, inherited property, the works.”

“Well, I’m sure whatever is left will go to Shelby. I hope she appreciates it.”

“She won’t appreciate her inheritance the way you do. She’s grown up expecting it. It’s the original entitlement program.”

I pack away the cleaning kit, put the Ruger in its case and take everything down to the basement. Using the combination lock, I open the safe, put the gun inside, close the door and spin the dial. I leave the cleaning bag on the floor beside the safe and trudge back up the stairs.

“I still don’t understand why Caroline is upset with me,” I say, bringing the conversation back to Jean’s phone call. “Even if Jean told her about the safety program, why would she expect me to ask her?”

“Forget that she’s upset. That’s not the part of the message you need to hear.”

“I don’t need to know that she’s upset?”

*Veronica Paulina*

“Not as much as you need to know that she’s unemployed and has indicated that she’d like to help you with the program.”

“I’m very surprised to hear she’s out of work. That’s bad news.”

For as long as I’ve known Caroline she’s worked at Smith Pharma.

“Yes, but it is good news that she’s available and willing to help you.”

I sit down next to Carl and he puts his arm around me and strokes my hair.

“Mona, this isn’t something else for you to feel guilty about. If Caroline has lost her job you will be doing her a favor by asking for her help.”

“Am I destined to always gain from somebody else’s loss?” I ask, wrapping my arms around his waist and trying in vain to keep my oily hands away from his shirt. I should have washed them before sitting down.

“You’ve had misfortunes of your own. You’ve paid your dues. Bad things come to everyone, including you. But the gun safety program is a good thing. You wanted a volunteer project and you found one. You need help with it and it sounds as if Caroline is available.”

I nod and rub my nose on his flat belly. How does he stay so lean?

“Call her now,” he says, pushing my phone toward me.

“It’s late. I’ll call her tomorrow.”

“She’s lost her job and is no doubt feeling rejected. Don’t make her wait another night.”

“I wonder what happened to her job,” I say, picking up the phone and scrolling for her name.

“Don’t ask. She’ll tell you but probably not tonight.”

Carl props his feet on the coffee table, cupping his wine glass between two fingers.

“Caroline, I’m so sorry to call you at this hour,” I say, surprised when she picks up on the first ring. “I’m sure you have to get up early tomorrow morning.”

Carl raises his eyes up to the ceiling and shakes his head.

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“I didn’t get the chance to talk to you at the range,” I continue, thumping my head with my fist. “I don’t know if you heard about the gun safety program I’m going to be giving in the schools. I have a real problem on my hands. I have to start the program on Friday. Yes, the day after tomorrow! I have to do the program twice at each elementary school in the county and there are...”

Carl twirls his right hand in a gesture which tells me to get to the point.

“Gosh, I can’t believe you know that! Yes, there are thirty-four schools. That means sixty-eight sessions.”

Carl smiles, picks up the wine bottle and fills his glass.

“No, you’re right, I can’t do it alone. Oh, Jean told you I needed help?”

Carl laughs out loud and I grimace at him.

“Right, the principal of Lincoln Elementary is in charge and he wants the program completed by the end of the school year. That’s about ten weeks.”

Caroline tells me that she’s looked at the calendar and that allowing for Easter break and Memorial Day there are about forty-seven school days left. In the interest of time-management she recommends we do both programs in a particular school on the same day and that, where possible, we do them at the same time. I could take the younger group and she would take the older group. Alternatively, we could split the schools up and each teach both age groups. I could be at one school while she’s at another.

I don’t know anything about Caroline’s work, but I’m guessing it’s something to do with logistics. I can’t believe Smith Pharma let her go.

“You have no idea what a relief this is to me,” I say, smiling into the phone. We talk for a few more minutes and I ask her to come to the house tomorrow morning so we can start making appointments. I mention that I must have the sample materials to Sandersen tomorrow. I don’t tell her that he will want to meet her and has the power to either accept or reject her participation. I don’t want to lose her before we’ve even begun. I thank her again and put down the phone.

“She didn’t sound in the least bit upset,” I say. “Did Jean really say Caroline was upset with me?”

Carl looks at me without smiling. Suggesting Carl might have misinterpreted a message gets the same result as telling him what he should do.

“Of course she did,” I continue, answering my own question. “Because Jean knew that if I heard Caroline was upset I would call her. She must have found out that our fellow Pistol Belle was unemployed and knew Caroline would be too proud to ask me to include her.”

“Jean got you both the help you need. You need an articulate, reliable woman who is knowledgeable about guns and she needs an outlet for her energy and organizational talents. And, anyway, who else can you ask?”

No-one, Caroline’s availability is a godsend.

“I have to get her through Sandersen. I’ll have to prep her so she doesn’t alienate him with her women’s supremacy stuff.”

“Maybe he’ll like her. Caroline sounds like a no-nonsense, get-it-done type. They’ll be kindred spirits.”

“That’s nice of you to say, but I doubt it. You can afford to be optimistic because you won’t be at Lincoln Elementary tomorrow, or on Friday.”

I picture Sandersen’s fat, wobbling belly and Caroline’s lithe, taut body. No-one would imagine this pair would find mutual respect. The shared characteristic of impatient, get-it-done command will probably spark nothing more than competition. Once again, I’ll be the referee.

“However, from what you’ve told me about her, you’ll have to make sure Caroline pays as much attention to the boys as to the girls,” says Carl, swallowing the contents of his glass and turning off the radio. “You don’t want her to direct her talk solely to the little sisters.”

“Right and she can’t give her usual speech about how girls and women need to be able to protect themselves,” I say. “Caroline tells everyone that women need to learn to shoot so they can take responsibility for protecting themselves and not assume a man or the police will be around to defend them.”

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“She makes an excellent point,” says Carl. “But it’s not the right message for children in grade school. That can come later. But if you’re following an approved curriculum there won’t be room for personal opinions on the pros and cons of owning a gun.”

“That’s right, we’re following a program and we’ll go through it together as soon as it arrives,” I say, knowing that I’ll be pacing around the house until the mailman arrives tomorrow. “But if we split up to teach in different schools or age groups, how am I going to know she doesn’t go off message?”

“Training and trust. First you train her in the curriculum and then you trust her to stick to the program.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

“You fire her.”

“She’s a volunteer!”

“You’re both volunteers, but you have to stick to the program. You’ll learn the material and do the first session together so you can keep each other on track. After the first session is over, you’ll hold a post mortem.”

“That’s not a good word to use when discussing a gun safety program,” I say, enjoying catching Carl in a rare instance of poor word choice.

“OK, so after the Friday sessions you’ll review how they went. I’m sure Sandersen will monitor the whole thing and won’t be shy in telling you where you went off...off target?”

I laugh, but then groan at the thought of Sandersen. A man I didn’t know existed until my phone rang last week is now consuming my thoughts and emotional energy.

The wrong man.

“Carl,” I say. “Let’s go to bed.”

## Chapter Thirteen

The Ruger is locked in the trunk, my ammo bag and the green salad are secured on the floor of the backseat, and the note card bearing the crucial three words is in the pocket of my jeans. I put the gear stick into reverse, glance in the rear view mirror and am about to press my foot down on the gas pedal when I see a figure dart behind me. I quickly shift my foot from the gas pedal to the brake and thrust the gear back into the park position. A pair of arms is flapping behind the car.

“I just want to have a quick word,” calls a shrill voice.

“I almost ran you over,” I say, opening the window, surprised to find that the flying figure is Susan. “One more second and I would have backed right over you.”

“That was stupid of me,” she says, panting and leaning her hand on the roof of my car.

It suddenly occurs to me that if Susan was to die, Michaela would be all alone. Neither Michaela nor Susan ever speaks of her father, and the only relatives they’ve ever mentioned are an uncle and aunt in California.

“I’m sorry, Mona, I know you’re always in a hurry on Wednesday evenings, but I want to thank you for last weekend.”

Three days have passed since Susan returned home to find her daughter safe, nourished and happy, although the latter may be an exaggeration as I would not describe a lonely thirteen year old as happy.

“Consider me thanked,” I say, looking at the clock on the dashboard. “I have to run, Susan. We’ll chat some other time.”

Being late makes me feel out of control and this evening I must convey leadership and authority. I cannot do this if I don’t feel completely in charge.

“You’re very kind, Mona,” Susan continues, ignoring my last statement. “I just wanted to say how much I appreciate all you do for Michaela. She loves you.”

We live next door to each other and I can describe the physical characteristics of her daughter in intimate detail, but I realize I

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haven't seen Susan in the flesh for several months. Our brief conversations take place over the telephone and Susan usually thanks me by email for taking care of Michaela. A distance of no more than twenty five feet separates our homes and it irritates me that she doesn't simply knock on my front door in order to say please and thank you. But, in spite of our proximity to each other, I rarely see Susan arriving or leaving her house. She must scurry in and out of the back door, no doubt racing to be either across the threshold of her home or behind her desk at the office. The place she will want to be least of all is in transition. Looking at Susan now, I notice how much older she appears than when I last saw her and that, even in the soft evening light, her face is lined and drawn. I guess maternal guilt doesn't make for a pretty face, and neither will the constant pressure of trying to be in two places at once.

"We love Michaela, too," I say, smiling and putting the car back into reverse. Right now there is just one place I need to be and it isn't sitting in my driveway with the engine idling. "We're happy to help whenever we can."

Once again, I look in the mirror and start to back out.

"There is something I was going to talk to you about," Susan says. I slowly put my foot on the brake and turn to her. "But I know you're in a hurry."

Her face is crunched up as if she is in pain and she is wringing her hands.

Is another weekend out of town coming up? A business trip she can't avoid? Are Susan's constant absences really due to working overtime or does she have a secret lover? Right now that doesn't appear to be the case. A woman run ragged with sexual *assignments* wouldn't look so worn and dispirited.

"Are you alright, Susan?" I ask, accepting that I will be late and putting the gear back into park. "If there is something you need, just ask."

"No, it's nothing in particular. I'm really fine," she says, apparently forgetting that a minute ago she had something to talk to me about which was so urgent she risked getting mown down.

"You must go," she mumbles. "We can talk some other time."

*Veronica Paulina*

Not wanting to miss my chance to leave, I smile at her and reverse out of the driveway. Susan stands and watches me as I turn the car forward and then wave and head down the street. I am curious to learn what it is she wants to talk about and know I'll be chewing it over with Carl later tonight. He'll hazard a guess which will later turn out to be one hundred percent accurate.

My anxiety about being late turns out to be wasted energy as, in spite of the brief delay, I've left sufficient time to be the first to arrive at Skyline. I put the salad in the clubhouse kitchen and place my Ruger case and ammo bag outside the door to the range. I take my speech out of my pocket and say the three words out loud: cooperative, committed, competitive.

As if on cue, the personification of this message hurtles through the door.

"The ice cream is melting," Madison shouts. "I bought it near school and now it's a dripping mess."

I run into the kitchen and open the freezer door as Madison rips a container of ice cream out of a plastic bag and hurls it in. She throws the bag in the garbage can and goes to the sink to wash her hands.

"I hate sticky things. Ice cream seemed like a good idea but I didn't realize it would melt so fast."

"You'd think the chemicals would keep it rock hard," says Caroline, appearing behind us. "Don't worry, Madison, in another hour your ice cream will have been entirely consumed."

"What was that about rock hard, Caroline?" asks Pete, coming through the door from the range. "Is there something you need?"

Madison and I laugh, but Caroline glares at us as she puts her dish on the counter and sits down on a stool, her legs spread out in front of her.

"There is nothing I need from you," she says, looking directly at Pete, and then jumps up and starts to unwrap her dish.

"What delights do we have tonight?" says Pete, ignoring her rudeness. "I got here early because I didn't want to miss the celebration."

"What celebration?" I ask.

The three of them are silent.

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“What do you mean, Pete?” I ask, turning to him. “What would we be celebrating?”

“Mona, Mona,” he says, putting his arms around my shoulders. “Don’t take everything so seriously. I thought from last night’s discussion you’d be making an announcement about the Pistol Belles joining the competitive league.”

“Pete, you know that’s not decided yet. You also know there are some difficulties attached to that decision.”

“Not for us,” says Caroline. “The only difficulty for us will be if we don’t do it.”

“We need to do it, Mona,” says Madison. “We’re spinning our wheels right now. We need to stretch and grow.”

“I don’t disagree,” I say, reminding myself that the decision to set the future course of the Pistol Belles is not mine alone. “I came here ready to make that announcement tonight. I just don’t want it discussed during dinner. You have to give me the chance to handle it properly.”

“Ok,” says Caroline. “Your chance is immediately after dinner. If you don’t talk about it then, I will.”

“I don’t even have the facts,” I say, pathetically. Caroline really can be intimidating. I wonder how many of her former colleagues at Smith Pharma were glad to see her go. “I haven’t contacted the league’s organizers yet but I’ll do it first thing tomorrow.”

“You said you came here tonight ready to make the announcement,” she says.

“I am and, trust me, it will be done. The Pistol Belles will be different by the time you leave tonight. But you have to let me do it my way.”

“I contacted the league,” says Caroline, a faintly apologetic tone in her voice. “I told them we wanted to join and that you would call them back.”

I should have known that my failure to take immediate action would leave an opening which Caroline would be eager to fill. But at least she had the grace to present me as the leader of our group.

“That’s fine,” I say, slowly. “Thank you for doing that. I’ll speak to them first thing tomorrow.”

*Veronica Paulina*

I must stay calm and assured and not let Caroline rattle me.

“Come on, Caroline,” says Pete, watching as she continues to fuss over her dish. “Put me out of my misery.”

“What are you?” she asks. “A sick dog?”

Pete laughs dryly. “Some would call it that.”

“Chicken *parmigiana*,” she announces, removing a heavy lid with a flourish. Caroline covers her food with a glass lid and then wraps foil over it and I have seen her look on in horror as Jean and Christine pick pieces of aluminum foil off the top of their potluck dishes.

“I told you it was a celebration, Mona,” says Pete. “This is one of Caroline’s finest dishes.”

Caroline smiles but looks flustered. Can an attractive woman have such little experience accepting compliments?

“Baked ziti tonight,” says Jean, slamming the door behind her. I notice Matthew isn’t with her. Maybe Jean has decided he shouldn’t come to the range if his only purpose is to moon over Madison. Jim follows behind her.

“Jim, this is your wife’s favorite,” Jean says. “I made it specially, so everyone else take notice that there better be leftovers for Jim to take home.”

Jim smiles and rubs his hands together.

“I am forever indebted to you lovely ladies. You have no idea how much my wife appreciates all the food you send home with me.”

“With a bit of luck, she’ll have dessert too,” says Christine, who seems to have appeared out of nowhere. “I made a peach cobbler.”

Could she have come in while we were talking about the announcement?

“I think we should cancel the shooting and just eat,” says Pete. “Whether or not the Pistol Belles can shoot may be up for question, but they sure can cook.”

Madison picks up the ball of aluminum foil which Jean ripped off the top of her baked ziti and throws it at Pete.

“Nice shot, Madison,” says Caroline.

“Maybe if you can’t compete at shooting you could take up softball,” says Pete, tossing the foil back to Madison.

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I have yet to reach for my gun when provoked, but right now I would like to grab my Ruger and fire a shot. Placing a bullet just one inch from Pete's foot would make a point.

"No, we have to stick with shooting!" says Christine, as if Skyline would actually field a softball team. "If it wasn't for Wednesday nights I wouldn't shoot at all."

On the other hand, if I'm going to shoot I might as well put the bullet *in* Pete's foot.

"Me too," says Shelby, who also seems to have been miraculously spirited into the middle of the clubhouse. "Thank goodness I'm back tonight. I really missed you guys!"

Shelby is once again in full spring regalia, sporting pale pink jeans, a bright pink padded vest on top of a white shirt and, of course, her pale blue Stetson. Either she has a laundress at home or does not possess any dark clothing. But I notice the shirt is a turtle neck and I won't have to remind her about the discomfort caused when a hot shell finds a warm cleavage. And, if this is the last night of our merry band of six shooters, I will never again have to concern myself with Shelby's clothing. I feel sadness welling up inside me. In spite of my misgivings about her shooting abilities and the number of times she has exasperated me, I know I will miss her. I also know that if she is ousted from the Belles, I will have to deal with Carmine.

"Caesar salad," she says, putting her huge glass bowl on the counter. "I know it's always the same thing, but next week I'm going to start bringing different dishes. Like you guys do. I know I've not really been trying and I'm going to do better."

If she were talking about her shooting, we'd be able to keep her.

"And I bought a .22 Ruger! It's exactly like Carmine's, only it's mine. I bought it the other day."

Somehow I don't believe this, but it's not my job to stop her from driving around with a gun which she does not own. She knows the rules.

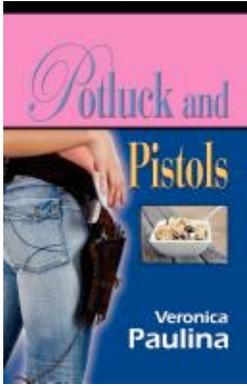
"It's better for target shooting than my Baby Glock," she adds, as if she figured this out all by herself.

*Veronica Paulina*

“Everyone,” I call, clapping my hands. “We have some business to take care of this evening. So let’s eat right away and then I have some announcements to make.”

This is misleading and I know it. I have made it sound as if I have several things to say that concern everyone. I will start by telling them about our progress with the gun safety program, but then I will tell them we are joining a competitive league and that to ensure we field a good team we will be spending the rest of the evening scoring our shots. Those scores will determine who will be in the new Pistol Belles.

And who will be out.



*Eat and shoot with the Pistol Belles! Sparks fly when Mona Milton gets together with the girls every Wednesday evening at the Skyline Sportmen's Club. Mona and the Pistol Belles meet up to eat and shoot, bringing their potluck dishes, their handguns-and their differences-along with them. An intriguing story for both experienced shooters and for women who have never held a gun in their hands.*

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