



Chapter 8

Pink's "So What" started playing on my cell phone at exactly nine forty-two a.m. I groaned. Cracking open one eye, I groaned even louder. I punched the talk button waiting for the onslaught of perkiness to emanate from my phone.

And there it was.

"Girl! You're in Po'thole and you didn't tell me? Shame, shame, shame!" Yep, it was my book agent extraordinaire Saffron Woo. No mama would ever give their child that birth name. I had it on good authority that Saffron's real name was Delilah Brooke, she was Jewish and from South Carolina. I didn't care if she was from Mars and hung upside down, she was a terrific agent and got me great deals on my books.

But, golly Moses, she was an early morning person, I wasn't, and I swear she's the one who taught Katie Couric the extremely annoying technique of being extremely perky at the ungodly morning hour of five. That's fine if you work in morning television, not great if you don't. Loved Saffron, hated her perkiness before ten a.m.

"How did you know I was here?" I groaned as I struggled to navigate my way through the bedroom door to the kitchen where my coffee had just started brewing. "You know if you waited just another five minutes, I'd have coffee in me and I'd be a lot easier to deal with." I grumbled.

"Parker, darling," she laughed. "If I did that, you'd ignore my calls because you could see your caller ID much better."

Reluctantly, I had to agree.

“So, what’s the deal on this Fabergé Easter Egg?”

“What the heck is going on with this egg? Everybody in the world seems to know about it except me and yet I’m the one who’s getting asked all the questions.” I inhaled a mouthful of coffee.

“Apparently you’re the conduit,” laughed Saffron. “So, are you ready for me to pitch another book idea?”

“Nothing to pitch, Saffron. The only thing that’s coming up is that Full Moon Spring Solstice Antique Show.”

“No murders, no nothing?”

“Nope, not a thing, Saffron. This is a very calm trip and I’ll be leaving either later today or first thing in the morning.”

“What about the Fabergé Egg?”

What was the big deal about this egg?! Why were people getting so excited about it? It’s not like Po’thole...or even all of northeast Florida...had a huge population of Russians who were trying to get a national treasure back. After all, the Soviet Union didn’t exist anymore, and their government wasn’t on a major search mission for the eggs as far as I knew. They were predominantly collector items of a bygone era. At least, that’s all I knew about the Fabergé Eggs.

“Did Gracie Blanche call you? Is she trying to get you to ask me to ask Anne and Chauncey to put their egg, if they even have one, in that silly antique show of hers?” I demanded.

“Maybe.”

That one-word answer from the chattiest person this side of normal told me everything and more than I wanted to know. It also meant the water police guys had told her what I had said. Good! I was now officially beyond irritated at Gracie Blanche. She could eat dirt and die as far as I was concerned about that antique show. I wasn't going to help her in the slightest.

In fact, I'd probably go out of my way and badmouth it to everyone I knew in town. Okay, that might only be a handful of people, BUT they were the right handful of people to spread the word.

“Saffron, you can tell that gossipy little person I'm going to tell everyone I know to stay away from the antique show. So there!” I took a deep breath. “Don't call me unless you have another book deal!”

Pushing the end button on my phone, I slammed it down on the countertop and slurped another big gulp of coffee.

I called Missy. “Hey, Potus and I are going to be leaving in the next couple of minutes and heading home. Anything going on?”

“Well, Anatoly Petrov called and wanted you to personally call him.”

“Really? Anatoly Petrov? What about?” This could be big. While I had a number of various government agencies and a few other countries we did dark web security work for, I really didn't have any Russian ones. They tended to play everything very close to their vest and use their own people.

Anatoly Petrov was a Russian billionaire businessman with many rumored unsavory contacts. His office had contacted me several years ago about a possible business deal but nothing ever came of it.

“Do we have anyone who is fluent in Russian?” I couldn’t think of any personnel who was fluent but, then again, my company had grown so rapidly that I really didn’t know everyone anymore. Missy is the one who actually keeps me in the loop. We were still small, about fifty people and I didn’t really run things any more on a day-to-day basis. We had an excellent checks-and-balance system in place. One that I could check on every single day if my little heart so desired, usually it didn’t.

I had key people in place I depended upon and, unbeknownst to them, there was a backdoor in my system that Missy could and did check in on them on a regular basis. She was a lot more versed than anyone gave her credit for. I was happy no one thought she was anything more than my assistant.

“Parker, I think Andrew might be.” I could hear her fingers tapping on the keyboard. “Yes, he was born Andrei Dubrovskaya but goes by Andrew Druber. He anglicized his name, probably to fit in better. His family came to this country in 1980 when he was three. So, he’s just turned thirty. His dad is a professor of economics at Berkeley and his mother teaches ballet here in Atlanta.”

“So, they’re divorced?” I asked.

“No, separated. Separated for about twenty years. The dad taught economics in Russia before coming over here and...Aha! Get this, his mother was a cultural attaché. She was an art historian.”

“Are these guys sleepers?” Oh, great! I might have a potential Russian spy working for me. I might already have a leak within my company.

“Don’t think so, Parker. His dad was quite vocal about the Russian government long before Andrew was born. Her, maybe, unless she was someone’s mistress and got promoted to cultural attaché when they got tired of her...maybe as a reward or something.”

“Is the dad actually Andrew’s dad?” I was making another pot of coffee. Hey, I needed brain stimulation to process all of this information.

“Yes, it would appear so.” Missy’s fingers were still tapping merrily on the keyboard. It’s amazing how much like music typing on a keyboard could sound like. “He got a job offer from Berkeley before ever putting in a request to emigrate from Russia. They were together for about ten years before she split and moved to Atlanta. She brought Andrew with her. Dad visited every other weekend until Andrew was eighteen.”

“Wow! That had to be expensive on a professor’s salary. What else was he doing, either on the side or once he got to Atlanta?”

“Um, shows that he and Andrew went to the zoo a lot.”

“Drop box?”

“Don’t know.”

“How long has Andrew been with us?” Inquisitive minds need to know these things. Also, it might a security issue for me and my company.

“He’s been with us four years. Came on board after getting his master’s in computer science. We’re the only company he’s ever worked for.”

“I want you to...”

“Already on it. It’ll take me the rest of the afternoon to get the voice transcriptions. This is assuming that neither one of them used burner phones.”

“Last question...”

Missy interrupted me, “He’s not involved in anything outrageously sensitive. I’m going to have him come in once we get off the phone and I’ll ask him if he can speak Russian fluently. Then I’ll ask him if knows who Anatoly Petrov is. I’ve got the cameras set up behind my desk, he won’t know they’re there, and then I can get our guy to read the micro-expressions later. I’ve also got the thermal heat detectors set up so we can get the printouts on that as well.”

“Alright, sounds good. I’m going to leave in the next thirty minutes and I should be home around eight. I’m not calling Anatoly back until I hear back from you. Later.”

This was starting to get very interesting. Why would a Russian billionaire businessman call me? I strongly suspected it was something more than computer security he was interested in.

I called Anne and Chauncey to invite them to come to Atlanta any time. They were gracious and declined at this time. They liked the spring weather right here and then the first of June they were going to head back to Maine.

Who knew I’d be seeing them long before June?

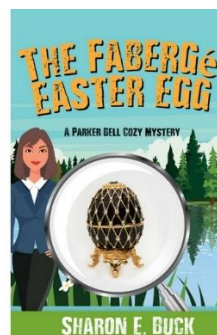
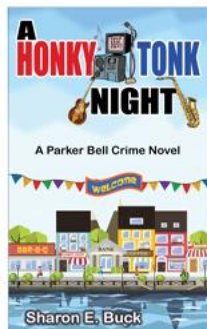
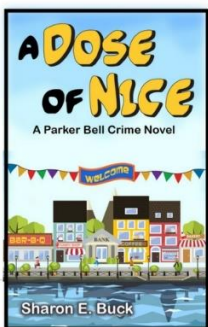
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About Sharon E. Buck

Sharon Buck writes clean, funny, cozy mystery books. She resides in northeast Florida although she is somewhat concerned she may have to move suddenly if people in her hometown realize that her Parker Bell series is loosely (very loosely, according to her attorney) based on them. When Sharon isn’t doing her favorite thing...writing...she enjoys walking her little rescue dogs, traveling, reading books, and cracking her friends up with funny stories and her wicked sense of humor. See more of Sharon at SharonEBuck.com.