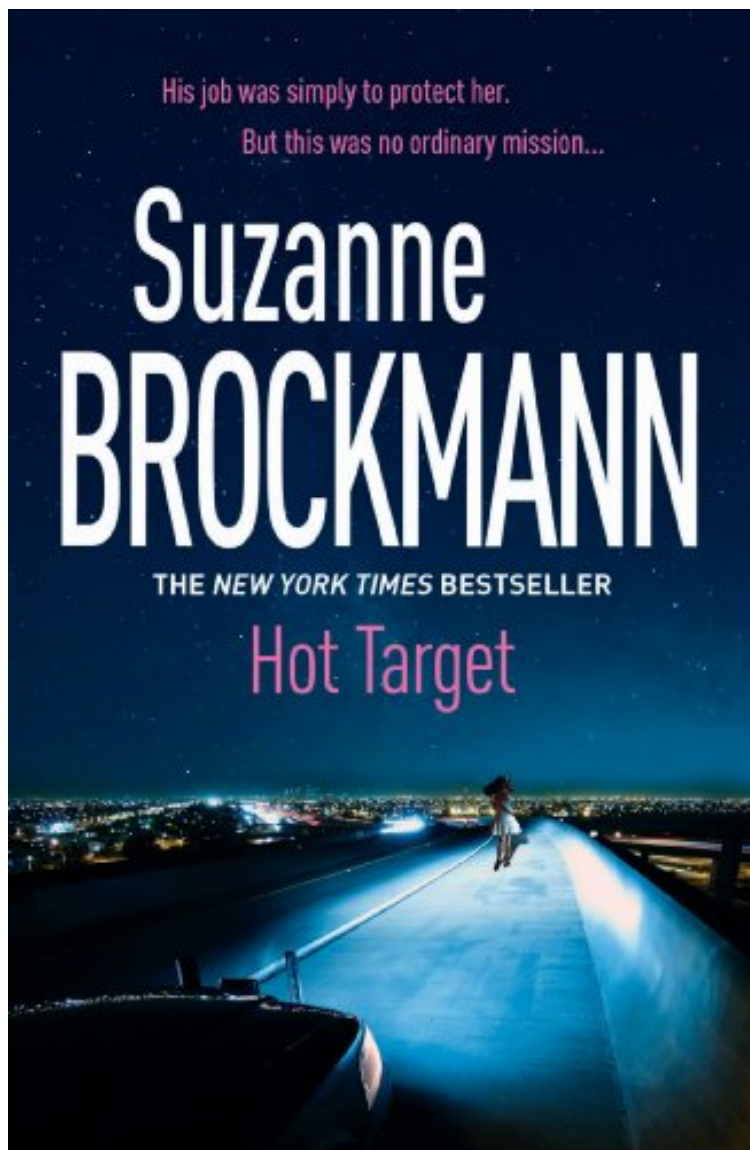


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Hot Target: Troubleshooters 8: Troubleshooters 8



Par Suzanne Brockmann
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurTroubleshooters: They Never Let You Down. The eighth addictive romantic suspense novel in New York Times bestselling author Suzanne Brockmann's Troubleshooters series, filled with thrilling adventure, excitement and passion. In HOT TARGET, Chief Cosmo Richter takes a job to simply protect movie producer Jane Mercedes Chadwick. But he soon learns this is no ordinary mission...High-profile maverick movie producer Jane Mercedes Chadwick hasn't even finished her newest film, but she's already courting controversy. Her portrayal of a real-life hero's homosexuality has roused a storm of media

buzz and the fury of extremist groups. Jane refuses to abandon the project. But then the harassment turns to death threats. On a month's leave from the Navy SEALs, Chief Cosmo Richter agrees to help Troubleshooters Inc. by protecting Jane. Although she initially resists, Jane hasn't counted on the bond she forms with the quiet, capable Richter. Yet even as their feelings bring them closer, the noose of deadly terror draws tighter. And when all hell erupts, desire and desperate choices will collide on a killing ground that may trap them both in the crossfire.

Chapter One

Cosmo's mother was driving him crazy. Well, okay, to be fair, it wasn't his mom, but rather her choice of music that had pushed him out of her condo, into his truck, and back down the 5, here to San Diego. He parked in the lot next to the squat, ugly building that held the offices of Troubleshooters Incorporated. The sun was warm on the back of his neck as he crossed to the door. As usual, it was locked apparently Tommy Paoletti had had no luck yet finding a receptionist for his personal security company. But he had installed a system that would allow him to let people in without having to run all the way out to the door twenty times a day. A surveillance camera hung overhead, and Cosmo looked up at it, making sure Tommy would be able to see his face as he hit the bell. The lock clicked open as a buzzer sounded, and he went inside. Grab some coffee I'll be right out, Tom shouted from one of the back offices. How's your mom? Much better, thanks, Cosmo called back. And she was. Right after the accident, when Cosmo had first gone to see her, she'd been in a lot of pain. Her face had been almost gray, and she'd looked old and frail lying in that hospital bed. But she'd been home a few days now and was feeling far more her old self. Which was great. But, dear sweet Jesus, if he had to listen to the soundtrack from Jekyll Hyde one more time, he was going to scream. You just haven't had enough time to appreciate it, his mother had told him. A few more listens and Oh, no. No, no, Mom. I've heard it quite enough, thanks. Cosmo poured himself some coffee from the setup in the Troubleshooters waiting room. He'd actually liked Urinetown. He could handle repeated listens of The Full Monty, too. And West Side Story, if done properly, could bring tears to his usually super-cynical dry eyes. But most of his mother's very favorite Broadway musicals were those which Uncle Riley had dubbed screamers. They were filled with hyper-emotional ballads with crescendos that swelled to triple forte, delivered by sopranos or tenors who, as Riley had insisted, deserved immediate arrest by the too-too police. Uncle Riley had gotten away with it, but God help him if Cosmo ever said anything like that aloud. Not just to his mother, who would give him her best injured look, then subject him to several hours of lectures on true music appreciation. But God help him also if he talked about such things to the other men in SEAL Team Sixteen. They would look at him as if he were, well . . . Gay. Which he wasn't. Not even close. Not, of course, that there was anything wrong with it. Shoot, with his mother, it would've been easier if he had been. He might've been born with some special genetic ability to actually enjoy Jekyll Hyde. And Phantom and Les Mis and all the other screamers he'd gritted his teeth through, as he'd taken his mother to see them through the years. Cosmo took his coffee and sank down into one of the new leather sofas in the Troubleshooters waiting room. Buttery soft and a light shade of honey brown, they replaced the former mismatched collection of overstuffed chairsthrift shop rejects that had cluttered the area in front of the receptionist's desk. Whoa, the walls had been repainted, too. Magazine racks, potted plants, real lamps instead of overhead fluorescents . . . Tom's wife, Kelly, had been threatening to redecorate for months, insisting that the image Tom was trying for with his new company probably wasn't piss poor and tasteless to boot. But huge leather sofas as nice as they were weren't exactly Kelly's light and breezy New England beach house style. Someone else had done this. Someone besides Tom who was a great leader but seriously fashion and design challenged. Are you here for the meeting? Cosmo looked up. The woman coming down the hall toward him was a stranger. She was wearing a pin-striped suit that had been tailored to accentuate her feminine shape. Petite, with blond hair cut short and delicate features in a launch-a-thousand-ships face, she had blue eyes that were coolly polite. Professional. Intelligent. Ivy-league intelligent. Her hands were ring-free. Both of them. Her fingernails were short, bitten down almost to the quick a direct and intriguing contrast to the career-woman persona. She took a few steps closer and tried again. May I help you? No, ma'am, he finally answered her, then mentally kicked himself. Talk, asshole. She most certainly could help him. He would love for her to help him. And at least be polite. Thanks. I'm waiting for Commander Paoletti. She finally smiled, and it transformed her from merely breathtakingly beautiful to full-power-defibrillator heart-stoppingly gorgeous. He wanted to drop to his knees and beg her to bear his children. You must be one of his SEALs, she said. Yes, ma'am. Stand up, fool. But, Christ, don't spill the coffee . . . Too late. It splashed over the edge of the cup and onto his fingers. Gahhhhd, it was hot. She pretended not to notice as he pretended that he hadn't just been scalded. She even held out her hand to shake. I'm Sophia Ghaffari. Sophia. It was a beautiful name, and by all rights violins should have started playing when she said

it. She looked like a Sophia, she dressed like a Sophia, she even smelled like a Sophia. He tried to wipe his fingers dry on his pants, but it was hopeless. Cosmo Richter. Sorry, Im . . . A freakin idiot. He crossed to the coffee setup, where he found some napkins, thank the Lord. But Sophia didnt run out of the room screaming, Save me from cretins! as he wiped off his hand. You must be here to help out with the Mercedes Chadwick job, she said instead. Im not sure, he admitted. Tommy said something about an easy op in L.A. Thats the one. Now that his hands were clean, she had crossed her arms. Shes a movie producer and I guess a screenwriter, too, she told him. Shes been getting death threats. His chance to touch Sophia, to shake her hand, had apparently passed. What a crying shame. Hey, Cos. Tom Paoletti came out from the back, smiling his welcome. Sorry to keep you waiting. No problem, sir. Before I forget, Kelly said to say shes on for lunch tomorrow. How is she? Cosmo asked. Tommys wife, Kelly, was pregnant with their first child. Other than pissed that she cant fly? Tom asked. She really wanted to go back to Massachusetts for a week on the beach before the baby was born, but her OB just grounded her. We had a four-hour discussion the other night on the definition of highly recommend. He rolled his eyes. The happy ending was that one of our clients owns a house right on the beach in Malibu, and hes always telling me to use it. So were going tomorrow. Actually, you can do me a big favor and drive Kelly up there after lunch. He looked at Sophia. Soph, you better get moving, if youre intending to catch that flight. Yeah. It was nice meeting you, Sophia told Cosmo, then turned back to Tom. Tell Decker Im sorry I missed him. Ill do that, Tom told her. Hes stuck in traffic. Its bad really, you better get going. As she hurried down the hall, he led Cosmo back toward his office. Weve had a change of plans, he continued. Originally Decker was going to meet us here, but the 15s a parking lot. Im going to meet him tonight, at the clients. Any chance you can come along? Sure. Cosmo couldnt help hesitating, turning to watch Sophia hustle out of her office and down the hall and out the door. Tommy, of course, noticed. Sophias handling our paranoia accounts. You know, people who are panicked by the changing terrorist-threat levels. They want to make sure they have the best security system possible. She sets up a team to try to get past their system, see just how good it really is against professionals. She does the face-to-face work, initial meetings, report presentations, that sort of thing. Shes very good at it. Sounds like fun, Cos said as casually as he could as he closed Toms office door behind them. Right up my alley. The breaking-in part, I mean. She need any help? Tommy laughed as he gestured for Cosmo to take a seat. Someone had gotten him new furniture for his office, too. A real desk instead of that rickety table hed been using. Her current assignment is out of state. I thought you wanted to stay close to your mom in . . . Where is she? Laguna Beach? Maybe I could commute. There was actual artwork up on the walls. Watercolors. Scenes of a coastline that was definitely New England and quite probably Tom and Kellys hometown on Bostons North Shore. Tom lifted an eyebrow. To Denver? If it had been Phoenix or Vegas, he wouldve tried it. But Denver . . . Tom knew what he was thinking. Nice try, Chief, he said. But shes recently widowed shes not looking to get involved with anyone right now. And I really need you in L.A. Hollywood, actually. The movie producer whos getting death threats, Cosmo repeated what Sophia had told him. Is Deck the team leader? Decker was a former SEAL and a former Agency operative. Yep, Tom told him. Cos nodded. If he couldnt work with Sophia, Decker would be his strong second choice. Count me in. He backpedaled. If, you know, he wants me. Tom nodded. Ive already spoken to him. He wants you. Lawrence Decker was a spec ops legend. Hed left the SEAL Teams shortly after the terrorist bombing of Khobar Towers, a U.S. military complex in Saudi Arabia. According to the grapevine, Chief Decker had been frustrated by the red tape that, at the time, kept the SEALs from actively hunting down the terrorist organization that had killed so many American servicemen. Hed left the Teams and joined the clandestine and nearly nameless organization known as the Agency, where hed gotten his wish going deep into countries known for harboring terrorists. Now he was one of many former SEALs and Delta Force, Marine, CIA, FBI, and Agency operatives who were working for Tommy Paolettis civilian consultant group. Yeah, Troubleshooters Incorporateds personnel list read like a Whos Who of the elite from the Special Operations world. Youve got how many weeks of leave left? Tommy asked Cos. Three weeks, two days, seventeen hours. His former SEAL CO smiled. Well, at least youre not counting the minutes. Cosmo glanced at his watch. And fourteen minutes. And youre sure you dont want to use this time as a vacation? Tom asked. Im quite sure, sir. Like many SEALs in Team Sixteen, Cosmo wasnt good at taking vacations. After just a few days, he got bored. Restless. I just want to be able to check in on my mother once or twice a day, even just by phone. Youre an only child, arent you? Tom asked. Yeah. Im it, Cos said. Thats why I took the full thirty days. Hed taken the extra time off even though his mom was adamant that Cosmo not be the one to provide her personal care. Shed put it in bottom-line terms by saying no way was she going to allow her grown son to accompany her into the bathroom.

Shes doing really well, but I still want to be close by, you know? She seems to like both her day and night nurses which is good, because with both wrists in a cast, she cant do much of anything without help. That must be frustrating for her, Tom said. Understatement of the year. She has her coping strategies, Cos told him. She loves listening to music, so shes been doing a lot of that. The Cards also putting together a special computer keyboard for her, so shell be able to go back online. God bless WildCard Karmody, SEAL Team Sixteens computer wizard. So tell me about this Hollywood producer. Cosmo got down to business. Her names . . . Mercedes? Like the car? J. Mercedes Chadwick, Tom told him, then smiled at the look of disgust Cosmo shot in his direction. Whatd she do, Cos asked, to piss people off enough to make them want to kill her? I dont need personal protection a team of bodyguards? Thats absolutely ridiculous! Jane Chadwick told Patty, her new college intern. Patty didnt seem convinced, so Jane turned to Robin, hoping for just a teensy bit of brotherly support. But he wasnt paying attention. He was giving Patty one of his hey there smiles. The girl, naturally, was dazzled. Of course, she was impossibly young and didnt yet have the mileage that would enable her to see past Robins gorgeous face to the inner low-life womanizing scum within. Yo, Jane said, clapping her hands sharply at her brother. Half brother. At times like this it helped to remind herself that they shared only a fraction of their genetic makeup. Robin. Focus. Patty, go call the studio back and tell them no. Thank you, but no. Im perfectly safe. Be firm. Unlike that of many young movie-loving girls who made the pilgrimage to Hollywood, Pattys freckle-faced cuteness wasnt an act. She actually wore kneesocks and meant it. Jane didnt know her very well yet, but unfortunately being firm didnt seem to be high on her skill list. But at least she was out of Janes office, closing the door behind her, releasing Robin from her captivating spell. If you touch her, Jane told him, I will kill you and I will make it hurt. What? Robin said. Mr. Innocent. He made that sound that was half laugh, half indignation. Come on. I was just smiling at her. One thing was certain: Her too-handsome half brother was a brilliant actor. If they could get this movie made, and most important if they could get it distributed and seen, he was going to be a star. Besides, he added, you of all people shouldnt be making idle death threats. That was supposed to be funny. Jane didnt crack a smile. That wasnt a threat, she said. It was a promise. Let me put this in terms youll understand, Sleazoid. If you sleep with her, shell think shes your girlfriend. And when she finds out that she was merely your Friday night distraction, shell be badly hurt. Now. Maybe you dont give a rats ass about Pattys feelings, but I do. And I also know what you do care about, so listen close. If you break her heart, she will quit. And if she quits, you will take her place and become my personal assistant, and you wont have a single minute to yourself from that moment until we are done making American Hero. Which means in Sleazoid-speak that it will be two months before you have sex again. Two. Months. Her little brother laughed. Relax, Janey. Im not going to sleep with her. Jane just looked at him. She liked Patty. A lot. The girl was smart, she was sweet, she was way overqualified for this glorified gofer position. The lack of backbone could be worked on besides, Jane had plenty of that to go around. Best of all, though, despite being paid only a stipend, Patty liked Jane. It was a win-win situation. As long as Robin kept his own little win zipped up tight inside his pants and out of the equation. Problem was, Patty had a serious crush on Robin. Which meant it was going to have to fall to him to keep his distance. God help them all. From the Hardcover edition. **Revue de presse PRAISE FOR SUZANNE BROCKMANN** *Gone Too Far* Sizzling with military intrigue and sexual tension, with characters so vivid they leap right off the page, *Gone Too Far* is a bold, brassy read with a momentum that just doesnt quit. **TESS GERRITSEN** *Into the Night* She skillfully builds suspense. . . . With its complicated, complex characters and a sexy romance seasoned with humor and danger, Brockmanns [novel] is absolutely irresistible. **Booklist** (boxed and starred review) *Out of Control* Brockmann consistently turns out first-rate novels that tug on the readers heartstrings, and her latest is no exception. **Publishers Weekly** *Over the Edge* A taut, edgy thriller. **LINDA HOWARD** From the Hardcover edition.