



TONI ANDERSON

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

COLD
JUSTICE
SERIES
SAMPLER

COLD JUSTICE SERIES SAMPLER

Toni Anderson

Dear Readers,

For those unfamiliar with my work (or for those playing catch-up), I thought I'd put together a free sampler of the first three chapters from each of my *Cold Justice Series* books. Each book stands alone as a full-length Romantic Suspense novel, but people probably get the best experience by reading the books in order.

The series, so far, centers on agents working for the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit-4. I plan to expand the stories to include some of the secondary characters who've appeared in the previous books.

I hope you enjoy! Buy links are provided at the end of each book sample. This is a no risk way of checking out my writing. The first three *Cold Justice Series* books are also available in a digital box set for your convenience, and also in audiobook format. If you want to find out more about me or my books then go to my website (www.toniandersonauthor.com) and sign up for my [newsletter](#) for release information. I'm also on Facebook and Twitter.

I love to hear from readers.

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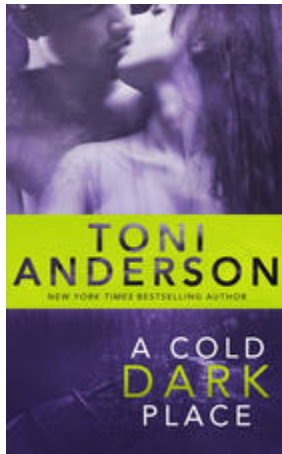
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A COLD DARK PLACE

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Justice isn't always black or white.

Former CIA assassin Alex Parker works for The Gateway Project, a clandestine government organization hell-bent on taking out serial killers and pedophiles before they enter the justice system. Alex doesn't enjoy killing, but he's damn good at it. He's good at dodging the law, too—until a beautiful rookie agent has him wondering what it might be like to get caught.

FBI Special Agent Mallory Rooney has spent years hunting the lowlife who abducted her identical twin sister eighteen years ago. Now, during an on-going serial killer investigation, Mallory begins to suspect there's a vigilante operating outside the law. She has no choice but to take him down, because murder isn't justice. Is it?

Sometimes it's cold and dark.

When Mallory starts asking questions, The Gateway Project management starts to sweat, and orders Alex to watch her. As soon as they meet, the two begin to fall in love. But the lies and betrayals that define Alex's life threaten to destroy them both—especially when the man who stole her sister all those years ago makes Mallory his next target, and Alex must reveal his true identity to save the woman he loves.

PROLOGUE

LINDSEY KEEBLE SANG along to “Fun.” on the radio, trying to pretend she wasn’t freaked out by the dark. It was one in the morning and she hated driving this lonely stretch of highway between Greenville and Boden. Rain was threatening to turn to snow. The wind was gusting so forcefully that the tall trees looming high above her on the ridge made her swerve nervously toward the center line. The back tires slid on the asphalt and she slowed; no way did she want to wreck her precious little car.

She worked evenings at a gas station in Boden. It was quiet enough she usually got some studying done between customers. Tonight everyone and their dog were filling up ahead of a possible early winter storm. You’d think they’d never seen snow before.

A flash of red lights in her rearview had her heart squeezing. *Dammit!*

She hadn’t been speeding—she couldn’t afford a ticket and never drank alcohol. She signaled to pull over and stopped on the verge. Lindsey lived responsibly because she wanted a life bigger than her parochial hometown. She wasn’t some hillbilly. She wanted to travel and see the world—Paris, Greece, maybe the pyramids if the unrest settled down. She peered through the sleet drenched glass as a black SUV pulled in tight behind her.

A tall dark figure approached her vehicle. A cop’s gold shield tapped against the glass. Frigid damp air flooded the interior as she rolled down the window and she huddled into her jacket as rain spat at her.

“License and registration.” A low voice rumbled in that authoritative way cops had. He wore a dark slicker over black clothes. The gun on his hip glinted in the headlights of his vehicle. She didn’t recognize his face, but then she couldn’t really see his features with ice stinging her eyes.

“What’s this about?” Her teeth chattered. She found the documents in her glove box and purse, and handed them over. Her hands returned to grip the hard plastic of the steering wheel as she waited. “I wasn’t speeding.”

“There’s an alert out on a stolen red Neon so thought I’d check it out.”

“Well, this is *my* car and I’ve done nothing wrong.” She knew her rights. “You’ve got no reason to stop me.”

“You were driving erratically.” The voice got deeper and angrier. She winced. *Never piss off a cop.* “Plus, you’ve got a broken taillight. That gives me a reason.”

Lindsey’s worry was replaced by annoyance. She snapped off her seatbelt and applied the parking brake. She’d been shafted last year when another driver had sideswiped her in a parking lot and then claimed she’d been at fault to the insurers. “It was fine when I left for work this afternoon. I haven’t hit anything in the meantime.” *Goddamn it.*

“Go take a look.” The cop stood back. He had a nice face despite the hard mouth and even harder eyes. Maybe she could sweet talk him out of a ticket, not that she was real good at sweet talk. Her dad could fix the light in the morning but if she had to pay a ticket as well, every hour of work today would have been for nothing.

She pulled the hood of her slicker over her head and climbed out. The headlights of his SUV blinded her as she took a few steps. She shielded her gaze and frowned. “I don’t see anything—”

A surge of fire shot through her back. Pain exploded in a shockwave of screeching agony that overwhelmed her from the tips of her ears to the gaps between her toes. She’d never experienced anything like it. Sweat bloomed on her skin, clashing with sleet as she hit the tarmac. Rough hands grabbed her around the middle and hoisted her into the air. She couldn’t control her arms or legs. She was shifted onto a hip where something unyielding bit into her stomach. She fought the urge to vomit even as her brain whirled.

It took a moment to make sense of what was happening.

This man wasn’t a cop.

Still reeling from the stun gun, she couldn’t get enough purchase to kick him, but she flailed at his knees and tried to elbow him in the balls. It didn’t make any difference and she found herself dumped into the cold confines of

the rear of his SUV. He zapped her again until her fillings felt like they were going to fall out and her bladder released.

The world tilted and she was on her front, face pressed into a dirty rubber mat, arms yanked behind her as something metal bit into one wrist, then the other. Handcuffs. *Oh, God.* She was handcuffed. A sharp pain ripped through her chest—if she didn't calm down she was going to die of a heart attack.

A ripping sound rang out in the darkness. She was shoved onto her back, and a piece of duct tape slapped over her mouth. It tangled with her hair and was gonna hurt like a bitch when it came off.

Something told her that was the least of her worries.

There was no reason for him to kidnap her unless he was going to hurt her. *Or kill her.*

The realization made everything stop. Every movement. Every frantic breath. Her heart raced and bile burned her throat as she stared into those cold, pitiless eyes. With a grunt he slammed the trunk closed, plunging her into a vast and consuming darkness. Rain beat the metal around her like an ominous drum. She was scared of the dark. Scared of monsters. Humiliated by the cold dampness between her legs. How could this have happened to her? One minute she was driving home, the next...

Where was her phone?

She rolled around, trying to feel it in her pockets. Shit. It was still in her purse in the passenger seat of her car. There was a crashing sound in the trees. She closed her eyes against the escalating panic. He'd gotten rid of her car. An elephant-sized lump threatened to choke her. She'd worked her ass off for that car, but finances and credit-ratings were moot if she didn't survive this ordeal. This man was going to hurt her. She wriggled backward so her fingers could scrabble with the lock but there was nothing, and the panel above her head didn't budge even when she kicked it. *How dare he do this to me?* How dare he treat her as if she was nothing? She wanted to fight and rail against the injustice but as the SUV started up she was immobilized by terror. All her life she'd fought to make things better, fought for a future and this man, this *bastard*, wanted to rip it all away from her. It wasn't fair. There had to be a way out. There had to be a way to survive.

She didn't want to die. She especially didn't want to die in the dark with a stranger who had eyes as cold as death. Tears brimmed. It wasn't fair. This wasn't fair.

CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS CLOSE to midnight and Alex Parker sat in darkness.

Edgar Paul Meacher had left three hours ago, driving the white panel van he kept for this purpose alone. Meacher would have switched plates along some quiet dirt road, before going on his own little hunting excursion.

Alex had searched the farmhouse—found enough evidence to confirm this guy was the real deal, but nothing else of interest. His chair was in the shadows, facing the doorway. The sound of an engine rumbled up the drive. He wasn't nervous. He hadn't been nervous since his first assignment back in two thousand-five.

The farmhouse was about a mile outside the small town of Fleet, North Carolina; the walls pervaded by the slight sulfurous odor of rotten cabbage from the fields surrounding the property. No neighbors close enough to witness the wild parties held at the Meacher residence. No passersby to complain about the screams either. It worked for Alex too.

He tapped his finger against the cold metal of the SIG P229 fitted with a threaded 9mm barrel and suppressor, listened to the sound of a door slamming, then another door opening. A grunt of physical exertion as something heavy was dragged and hoisted.

The back door opened. Alex aimed the pistol, ready to end this now. But Meacher trundled straight down to the basement, blind in his excitement to unwrap the latest present he carried in a dirty old blanket.

Alex climbed to his feet. Walked silently across the century-old farmhouse floors and glided down the stairs like a ghost.

The basement was dark and dusty, the faint odor of decay wafting through the air. Classic serial killer lair. A single bulb lit the corner where a camp bed was set up, all comfy and cozy except for the thick plastic sheet draped across it. The floor and walls were decorated in ubiquitous gray with

flecks of rust-colored paint. Except it wasn't paint. It was blood. Blood of victims who ranged in age from nineteen to thirty-five. Women who'd done nothing more than wander into Meacher's field of vision. Ten that the FBI knew about; more the authorities didn't know about. Yet.

There was a conveniently placed drain in the middle of the floor. A bucket, a hose and a few big bottles of bleach—obviously bought in bulk. Several rolls of plastic were propped against the wall, and stacks of duct tape were stashed beside the furnace. Experienced and practical—the guy was an old pro at killing.

So was Alex.

Meacher was busy securing his latest victim to the bed. Handcuffs laid out in readiness, waiting for the next lucky recipient. The scumbag—a math teacher from the local high school—generally kept the women alive for about a week before putting them out of their misery.

Alex pushed thoughts of past victims out of his head. Dead was dead and thinking about them only added to his nightmares.

Meacher snapped on the cuffs, fitting them snug to the woman's wrists, the ratcheting sound loud in the otherwise deathly quiet of the basement. Having the woman incapacitated worked for Alex, so he let Meacher finish. He didn't want her mobile. He didn't want her getting in the line of fire.

The guy never turned, never looked away from the brunette. You'd think someone attuned to stalking prey might sense another predator in his lair.

Obviously not.

Meacher licked his lips and ripped open the woman's blouse. Buttons scattered and pinged across the basement floor. Alex's revulsion for the man grew with every despicable act.

"Edgar," he whispered softly.

Meacher turned, lips forming a surprised circle as he spotted Alex on the stairs. There was no time for the man to lunge or fight as Alex put another circle between his eyes. Double-tap. The so-called "Snatcher" crumpled to the floor, too dead to bleed out.

Despite the suppressor, the sound of the gunshot made Alex's ears pound but he ignored the discomfort. Headaches plagued him from his time in a Moroccan jail, but he'd been lucky to get out alive and figured they were part of his penance. *This* was the other part.

He picked up both shell casings with a handkerchief and placed them in a silicone pouch he'd had custom-made. He removed the suppressor and slipped the SIG into the shoulder holster. Then he walked over to where The Snatcher's last victim lay restrained on the camp bed. Her head lolled from side to side as the effects of ketamine—Meacher's abduction drug of choice—wore off. As much as Alex wanted to release the cuffs and set the woman free, the vibration in his pocket told him it was time to leave. Her knights in body armor were about to burst through the door.

He touched her hair and spoke gently. "The feds are coming. You're going to be OK." Then he was outside, melting into the darkness as vehicles raced down nearby roads.

The FBI had once estimated there were approximately two-hundred and fifty serial killers active in the US at any one time. Alex's job was whittling that number down, one murderous asshole at a time.



FBI SPECIAL AGENT Mallory Rooney held her government-issue Glock 22 flush against her thigh—round in the chamber, finger *off* the trigger—and crouched between her fellow agents and law enforcement officers. Her Taser was on her belt, and back-up Glock 21 strapped to her ankle. The bulky flak jacket kept out some of the November chill and adrenaline did the rest. Her temple throbbed from an earlier altercation, but a couple of extra-strength Tylenol and judicious application of make-up had masked the problem well enough to get her on the team. No way in hell was she missing *this* because some gangbanger had smacked her in the face.

SWAT was tied up with another hostage rescue situation in Charlotte that was going downhill fast. She'd be lying if she said she was upset about that, given she now got to participate in this assault instead. They had some highly experienced agents and local cops with them. Sheriff's deputies manned the perimeter.

She was the only first office agent—FOA—on the team. Two take-downs in one day might be a record for a rookie.

Sweat trickled in a cold line down her back. Her heart hammered but she breathed steadily and forced her pulse to calm. She'd trained for this scenario a million times over; kicked some serious butt in Hogan's Alley. But going

after a serial killer who'd butchered at least ten women meant she couldn't help the tiny trill of fear that laced her nerves. Not that she'd show fellow officers that weakness. Nor would she show them the fierce sense of determination that surged through her bloodstream, to take this guy down, whatever the personal cost.

Play it cool. Do the job.

She wiped her left palm surreptitiously down the leg of her black pants, every sense on high alert as to what was going on behind the unassuming farmhouse door. She was so close to the agent in front she could smell his laundry detergent. Her best friend and mentor, Special Agent Lucas Randall, crouched behind her—probably scenting apprehension that no amount of deodorant could hide. Another four law enforcement officers mirrored their actions at the front of the building.

They'd examined the blueprints and knew the basic layout. She and Lucas were to take the basement with two sheriff's deputies covering the storm doors. The external doors and locks were shitty but they had a breacher with a battering ram prepared to open it up just in case.

She didn't move. She concentrated instead. They were waiting for the signal to enter the house of suspected serial killer, Edgar P. Meacher. Dubbed "The Snatcher" by the media, this guy had eluded authorities for four long years, taking women not only off the streets, but also from their homes, instilling terror into the heart of every woman in the Carolinas and surrounding states.

Mallory understood that visceral fear better than most. She'd lived with it every day for the past eighteen years. Her whole life was shaped around the question of why someone had taken her sister but not her. What made one person a target and another safe? How did bad guys choose their victims?

But she didn't have time to think about that right now.

The Bureau's Behavioral Analysis Unit—part of the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, NCVAC—based in Quantico, Virginia, had developed a sophisticated profile of The Snatcher. This guy, Meacher, fit it to a T.

An anonymous tip-off had been phoned in to their office just as she'd finished writing her FD 302 regarding this morning's arrests. A member of the public had informed her that the guy they were looking for was one

Edgar Paul Meacher of Fleet, North Carolina. It didn't mean Meacher *was* their guy, but a woman matching this UNSUB's preferred victim profile had been abducted earlier this evening, and they didn't have time to sit around debating the best course of appropriate action. They were going in. They had to.

Her fingers tightened on the butt of her pistol.

Supervisory Special Agent Petra Danbridge gave them the order to "go" over the radio. Adrenaline surged through her bloodstream. The breacher rammed the door and with a loud crash they all raced inside. Speed was of the essence because stealth had been blown out of the water when they'd smashed down the doors.

Mallory and Lucas took the stairs to the basement. Sweat formed on her brow despite the cool air flowing up the stairwell. She caught the aroma of blood and that faint echo of death. Mentally she braced herself for whatever lay ahead. Even so it shocked her.

Meacher lay crumpled in a small pool of his own blood. No weapon visible.

"Subject down, in the basement!" she yelled. Feet pounded the boards above them as the house was systematically searched.

She and Lucas cautiously approached the prone figure who sported a dime-size bullet-hole between his eyes. Mallory peered closer. There were actually *two* bullet holes, so close together as to be almost indistinguishable. Whoever killed him had either gotten lucky or was a hell of a marksman.

She held her gun on the suspect as Lucas reached down to check Meacher's pulse. Her gaze flickered to the victim who lay perfectly still on the bed. It was Janelle Ebert, the woman who'd been reported missing.

Alive, or were they too late?

"He's dead," Lucas confirmed.

Mallory walked swiftly over to the woman, touched two fingers to her neck, searching for a pulse. A huge swell of relief burst through her at the feel of warm flesh and a solid beat at the base of her throat. "She's alive. I don't see any obvious injuries." Her voice caught and she stumbled through her own nightmares. *Put it away, Mal.* She scanned the restraints. "She's also cuffed. Who the hell shot Meacher?"

They went back on high alert, she and Lucas moving in tandem to clear the rest of the basement. It wasn't big. There was a massive upright freezer—Mallory could wait a lifetime to go through that sucker. Steps to storm doors off to the right. There was also a small room built into the corner, with the door firmly closed. A furnace fired up, making them both jump. She and Lucas looked at each other, nodded in silent communication, and stood on either side of the doorway to the small room. Lucas turned the knob and pulled the door outward. Mallory went in low, but there was no one there.

There *were* enough glossy photographs plastered to the wall that even if there hadn't been a woman handcuffed to a bed, Mallory would have no doubt Meacher was their UNSUB. *Sweet Jesus*. A choking sensation rose up in her throat but she forced it away. She quickly scanned the photos, searching for a sister she hadn't seen in eighteen years even as she told herself not to. Then she made herself stop. There were other things to deal with first.

SSA Danbridge came down the stairs; the woman's boots were lethal weapons but at least Mal always knew where her boss was.

"It's clear," Lucas shouted.

"Get the EMTs down here," Danbridge yelled behind her, stepping around Meacher's corpse and walking to where Mallory and Lucas stood staring into what had to be Meacher's trophy room. "I didn't hear a shot."

"He was already dead when we got here." Lucas looked disappointed as he holstered his weapon. "Which is a damn shame because I'd have loved to haul his ass off to jail."

The woman on the bed groaned and Mallory strode across to her, holstering her own weapon even though the creepy cellar made her scalp prickle. "Where are those EMTs? Can I take these cuffs off?"

Danbridge looked pissed but nodded, then, "Wait!" She pulled out her cell phone and took a series of photographs of the woman, the cuffs, the proximity of the bed in relation to the body. Meacher was a serial killer but he'd obviously been murdered. This was a crime scene on multiple levels but the safety and comfort of living victims always came first.

"Do you think he had a partner who tipped us off and then killed him?" asked Lucas.

“Meacher’s only been dead a few minutes. You can still smell the gun powder.” Mallory sniffed the air. “It would have been a hell of a risk to tip us off just before he killed him.”

“I’ll set up roadblocks and a search party.” Danbridge spoke quickly into her radio.

“Someone might have set up Meacher to be the fall guy,” Lucas offered.

“Maybe.” Mallory grimaced. “But nothing about the profile suggested Meacher had a partner and those images”—she jerked her thumb over her shoulder—“only show one male subject in action. We should search for video footage. No way he’d be satisfied with just photographs.”

EMTs arrived on the scene and pounded down the wooden steps. Danbridge herded them away from Meacher’s body. “You don’t need to worry about him.” Tall and blond, Supervisory Special Agent Danbridge put the ‘bitch’ in ambitious. Mallory had a great deal of respect for her boss as an agent, but she wasn’t an empathetic being. No warm and fuzzies in the girls’ restroom back at the office. “Touch anything apart from the woman on the bed and I’ll report your asses.”

Yup. About as warm and cuddly as a tarantula.

Both EMTs rolled their eyes as Mallory unlocked the handcuffs using keys Meacher had left tauntingly close to the bed, just out of reach of the victim. The woman started to moan, then blink and frown in confusion.

“You’re okay, Miss. Can you tell me your name?” the EMT asked, strapping a blood pressure cuff to her arm.

“Where am I? Was I in an accident?” Her voice was hoarse. “The man said I was going to be okay. Said the feds were coming. Why would the FBI be here?” She closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead.

“Lie still,” the medic admonished.

“I feel dizzy. God, I didn’t have that much to drink.”

“Who told you the FBI were coming?” Mallory asked, exchanging a glance with Lucas. The trouble with special-K was it could produce vivid hallucinations and often made witness statements not only inadmissible, but downright freaky. Still, right now they had nothing else to go on. Maybe she’d remember some detail about whoever shot Meacher. “Did you get a look at his face?”

“A really nice looking guy. Unless I was dreaming.” Dark brown eyes focused and unfocused as she squinted at Mallory’s face. “Are you with the FBI? What happened? Where am I?”

But before Mal could answer, the woman caught sight of Meacher’s corpse lying on the floor, and seemed to become aware of her ripped blouse, the crinkle of plastic beneath her. She half sat up, looked around at the cold dank basement, and started to sob. Then she started to scream.



SEVEN HOURS LATER, Mallory stood in the shadowy parking lot at the back of the hospital, sipping too-hot coffee and wishing SSA Danbridge would pick up the damn phone. Her feet were numb; toes tingling blocks of ice. Giving up on her boss, she stuffed her phone back in her pocket and jammed her free hand under her opposite armpit. She should have grabbed an overcoat to go over her black wool pantsuit before she’d left the division yesterday but had been too excited to even think of it. A hard layer of frost covered the ground—ridiculously cold for North Carolina even in November.

Danbridge had assigned Mallory the task of accompanying the victim to the hospital and getting a statement. If the “alleged” serial killer had still been at large there was no way a lowly agent like her would have gotten this job. Mal sighed. By the time a doctor examined Janelle Ebert’s injuries and collected evidence from her clothes and person, it had been three AM. Then the poor woman had requested a nap while Mallory paced the hallway. Finally Mallory had gotten a statement which told them nothing they hadn’t already known. Janelle had been out for a drink in a bar and Meacher had snatched her from a poorly lit parking lot. She remembered nothing between leaving the bar to waking up in that basement.

She’d been reported missing by a friend who’d arranged to sleep over at Janelle’s apartment and who’d worried when Janelle hadn’t arrived to let her in. When the friend had gone back to the bar and seen Janelle’s car still in the parking lot but the woman herself nowhere in sight, she’d called the cops.

Now Janelle was sleeping quietly with a local sheriff’s deputy guarding the door to her room—more as a protection against members of the press

than any unknown attacker. If the person who'd killed Meacher had wanted Janelle Ebert dead, he—or she—had had ample opportunity.

Janelle was a very lucky woman.

Mallory wanted to leave. Wanted to help search the house of horrors and see exactly who Edgar Meacher had killed. But she needed her job and pissing off her boss topped her list of things not to do if she wanted to keep it. She took another scalding mouthful of coffee and then watched her breath freeze on the exhale. The sun was rising over the eastern horizon lightening the gray of twilight to pale mauve and pink of dawn.

It made her pause.

Her twin sister Payton had loved watching the sun rise over the woods that surrounded their West Virginian home. At the time, Mallory had resented being poked awake with the birds, but nowadays she found it oddly reassuring—another fragile connection to the sister she'd lost. No matter what happened, the sun always rose. And until the day the solar system decided to implode and take this galaxy with it—it always would. It reminded her exactly how small a speck in the universe she really was.

Her colleagues had found photographs of twelve victims so far—one was even a former pupil of Meacher's—but no mention of anyone who resembled her identical twin.

Payton had been nine when she'd disappeared without a trace from the bedroom they'd shared in their West Virginian mansion. Mallory hadn't really expected to find evidence of her at Meacher's house, but there was always a tiny flicker of hope she and her parents would eventually get closure. The sheer number of monsters she'd encountered since she started working for the FBI stunned her.

Footsteps approached. A man ambled toward her.

She turned to face him, mentally mapping out her surroundings. Even though it was early there were too many people and too many cameras for him to be a real threat but her right hand slid closer to her weapon anyway. Cataloging the man's big wool overcoat, nicotine stained fingers, and razor sharp eyes she knew exactly what he wanted.

He held out a pack of cigarettes. "Smoke?"

"Thanks, but I don't smoke."

“You a fed?” He’d accurately assessed her bullshit meter to be in the red zone and decided to be direct. Small mercies. “Know anything about this whole serial killer business?”

“You with a paper?”

“Charlie Fernier. The Post.” He held out his hand, which she pointedly ignored.

She slugged back her coffee, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Silence was her best friend when it came to the press.

“Hey, don’t I know you?” He angled his chin to get a better look at her face, his gaze lingering on her eye which had darkened overnight to form a nice blue-rimmed socket. “You look real familiar.”

Mallory held her ground even though she wanted to run. Ice formed inside her chest. That old familiar cracking sensation when someone recognized her from her mother’s annual campaign to keep her sister’s disappearance in the public eye. Who needed computer generated aging software when you had a readymade replica on hand?

Well, not this year. She was done with pretending Payton might still be alive, and done giving her abductor a thrill as she begged for information. She wanted to see *him* begging—for mercy as she held her Glock to his head. The image startled her out of her reverie. Too much coffee; not enough sleep.

“No. You don’t know me.”

“Are you sure, Special Agent...?”

She started to walk away. “I’m sure, Mr. Fernier.”

“Hey!” His voice boomed off the glass and concrete of the hospital behind them. “You’re that girl”—every muscle in her body flinched—“the one whose twin sister was taken all those years ago.”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.” Her mother had a *lot* to answer for.

“It’s gonna make a great headline, ‘Senator’s daughter still searching for justice after all these years.’”

She stuck her middle finger in the air without turning around and heard a strong male laugh behind her. Her life was more than a news headline. Tossing her coffee cup in the garbage she climbed into her car, checked her mirror and saw the reporter walking away, probably plotting how best to spin

her involvement in this case. She started the engine and reversed out of her spot. By the time the story went to press she'd have either succumbed to a nervous breakdown or taken down Meacher in hand-to-hand combat and saved Janelle's life. How to piss off your colleagues and influence people. Like her life wasn't complicated enough.

Making an executive decision, she turned right out of the parking lot to head back to the farmhouse. Her phone rang. It was her boss. Mallory rolled her eyes.

"Where are you?"

"Still at the hospital."

"You not done there yet?"

Mallory bit down on a retort. "Just finished. Janelle's sleeping and I have the evidence locked in the trunk." Clothes. Rape kit. Although there was no evidence of assault.

"She say anything about the person who shot Meacher?"

"He had beautiful eyes and she thinks he touched her hair."

"Pity they haven't invented a DNA test that sensitive yet."

"Anything in the farmhouse?"

"Enough photographic evidence to suggest Meacher killed at least twelve women. We've found his video cache. There are probably more."

Mallory braced herself. "You want me to help look through it?"

"BAU is sending two agents to assist in the evidence collection and they specifically want eyes on the video and photographs to try and link unsolved murders."

Which meant, as the junior agent, Mallory would be reduced to fetching coffee. But it would be worth it to pick the brains of these people.

"I want you to go back to division and start tracing that anonymous tipster—"

"What?" She winced. Damn. She sounded like a whiny kid, but the tipster wouldn't lead her to her sister's killer.

"Somebody suspected Meacher was The Snatcher before we did. I'd bet the same person put a bullet in his brain. Whether it was an accomplice or an outraged member of the public I want them brought to justice." Danbridge hung up on her.

Mallory tossed her phone on the seat. *Great. Just frickin' great.* Everyone else got to dissect the mind of a serial killer. *She* got to trace a phone call.

CHAPTER TWO

OUTSIDE THE FRONT of FBI Charlotte Division a light dusting of snow clung to the sidewalk. “What do you mean you can’t trace it?” Mallory tugged on the small gold hoop in her ear as she looked through the window. “I thought you could trace anything.”

“Not this.” Mike Tanner specialized in communication systems. He was a super nice guy and everyone in the Bureau tried to exploit that fact. Ex-military, he’d helped design some of the software that used voice recognition to pick up suspected terrorists talking on cell phones during the Iraq war. “He bounced the signal off different servers *and* used a burner cell which has since been switched off and deactivated. I could possibly tell you where the call was made from—if I devoted the next six months to this one thing. Unfortunately my boss will have other ideas.”

Securing the phone handset with her shoulder, she checked her email. “What about voice analysis?”

“It was electronically disguised.”

“So you’ve got nothing?”

“More specifically, *you’ve* got nothing.”

“Ha. *Thanks*, Mike,” she said it with enough humor that he laughed.

“Always a pleasure, Mal.”

She hung up as Lucas Randall came into the room. His black hair stood on end, a day’s growth of beard darkened his jaw. He was a good looking guy and she was aware of speculation that they were secretly a couple. Not true. They’d been friends for years. He’d always been like a big brother to her.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Unit briefing in the conference room in fifteen minutes. Two BAU bigwigs in attendance.” He pointed his finger at her. “Danbridge was pissed to see you making an appearance on *The Post* website.”

She pulled a face. “Like I planned that. Some journalist cornered me at the hospital, recognized me from my mother’s yearly media circus and pounced. Believe me, I am *not* seeking any form of attention.” She stood, stretched out her back, then followed him over to his desk. Her fellow agents had been processing the Meacher residence non-stop for the last eighteen hours while she’d been chasing her tail, achieving nothing. The tight cast to Lucas’s lips and added weight to his shoulders suggested the day had taken its toll. “Bad?” she asked.

She’d only been in the FBI for twenty-two months and was still on probation, but she’d already seen things she’d take to her grave. As much as she wanted to be involved in the Meacher investigation she knew dealing with this sort of evil took a toll. It was one thing to see crime scene photographs; quite another to be in the lair of a serial killer, uncovering victims.

“We’re up to fifteen women,” Lucas’s voice was gruff. The dark circles under his eyes added a worn out quality to his grim expression. He answered her silent question with a shake of his head. “I didn’t see any kids and no one who looked like Payton.”

Mallory was torn between disappointment and relief.

“He kept more personal trophies in his bedroom. Whoever shot the sonofabitch did the world a favor.” A flicker of unguarded emotion crossed his face. Then he buried it beneath six years field experience and a flat cop stare. “You’ll hear all the details at the briefing.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Lemme get a coffee and we’ll head over together.” He froze as a stranger wearing a visitor badge and carrying a laptop walked through the office doorway. “Alex? What the—?”

“You missed the meeting, asshole.” The man’s expression was fierce. “Thought I’d hunt you down and make you buy me a beer.” His gaze darted to her. “Looks like a bad time though.”

“That was today?” Lucas palmed his forehead. “Jesus, you’re right. I’m an asshole.”

“I already covered that.” The man—Alex—grinned, and Mallory got a fierce blast of gorgeous.

The response wrung a reluctant smile out of Lucas. “Believe it or not, Mal, this is a good friend of mine, Alex Parker. I asked him to attend a

Counterintelligence Awareness Group briefing I organized so he could tell us about some of the latest internet security measures being developed in the private sector. He runs his own company in DC. Does a lot of government contracts. We served together in Afghanistan.” His gaze swung back to Alex. “I assume the meeting went ahead without me?”

Alex nodded. “We managed to fumble along without your incisive brilliance.”

“Yet *I’m* the asshole,” Lucas grinned. “This here is Special Agent Mallory Rooney.”

The stranger held out a tanned strong-looking hand as they were introduced. His skin was warm, fingers firm as they squeezed hers.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Agent Rooney.” The self-deprecating smile was a killer. So was the short, ruffled light-brown hair and days’ worth of scruff on his jaw.

Despite the tailored suit, he hadn’t been intimidated enough by the high powered members of that committee to shave. The contrast snagged her attention. He was different from the law enforcement personnel and political players she usually met. There was something underplayed and restrained about him that didn’t mesh with the keen intelligence she saw in his eyes, nor the taut looking muscles that filled out that suit. It intrigued her. She hadn’t been intrigued on a personal level in a long time.

“You work in security?” she asked.

“Keeping Trade Secrets secret—or trying to. It isn’t exactly running the gauntlet every day like you guys.”

Lucas sat atop his messy desk. “Says the man with the Distinguished Service Cross.”

Something vulnerable sparked in those slate eyes. “I got caught in a firefight and managed not to get killed. *I* got lucky.” Those eyes of his weren’t revealing anything now—all emotion banked. “I better let you get back to work. It’s a long drive back to DC.”

Their boss walked in and Mallory stiffened. Danbridge’s gaze skimmed Alex with a cursory glance that notched up to feminine appreciation on the second go ’round.

“Special Agent Randall, I need a word.” Then she walked into her office, heels tapping.

Lucas swore under his breath. “Alex, I owe you big time, buddy. I’ll be in touch. Will you show him out for me, Mal?”

“Sure,” she said. The longer she could avoid her boss the better. The two men shook hands and said goodbye.

“I can find my own way,” Alex said softly.

“No problem. I need to stretch my legs anyway.”

His gaze flicked to her boots and up, the brush of it almost as intimate as a physical touch. An unfamiliar sliver of sensation unfurled inside her, nearly unrecognizable because it had been so long. Attraction.

Telling herself she wasn’t deliberately prolonging their time together, she took the stairs as she led the way out. He was taller than she’d first realized. In her low-heeled boots she stood just under five foot nine and he was four or five inches taller. She frowned. Seeing him at a distance standing beside Lucas, she’d have described him as medium height and just *okay* looking. Up close, when you got the full force of those intelligent gray eyes and that perfectly proportioned masculine face, he was a hottie. Made you appreciate the inaccuracy of eye-witness accounts. No wedding ring either.

It was her job to pay attention to detail.

Even though she maintained a space between them she was hyperaware of him beside her. Outside the front entrance of the five-story, white concrete building he turned to her and asked, “Can I take you out to dinner sometime?”

“I don’t date.” The answer came out automatically before her brain engaged. Crap.

There was a long pause while those beautiful eyes of his wandered over her face, resting on her bruise from yesterday. He didn’t argue or try to change her mind.

“It was nice to meet you, Special Agent Rooney.” And then he walked away.

She squeezed her hands into fists. Damn, why had she said no?

Because she didn’t date.

She watched Alex Parker climb into his car—a low-slung sporty job—and raise a hand before he drove away. His car disappeared and a familiar sense of loss rushed over her. She clenched her jaw, turned around and went back to work.



ALEX DROVE AWAY trying not to think about why Mallory Rooney didn't date. The sight of her in the rearview mirror made his chest tighten. It seemed a shame for someone so young and beautiful to isolate herself like that. Not that he'd have done more than take her to dinner—*you keep believing that, buddy*—but the flare of attraction had been instant and unexpected.

What made it truly ironic was he didn't date either. And he didn't like surprises.

The snow hadn't stuck; it scraped across the asphalt like cotton swabs and gathered with dirt in the gutter. The grimy edge of his reality bore down on him. He didn't like lying, didn't like killing. Didn't like death. But he had no choice. When his debt was paid he'd move on and rebuild a life to be proud of. In the meantime, he owed five-hundred and forty-two days on his contract and had no right to be thinking about pretty women with sad amber eyes. His phone rang and he took the call, grateful for the distraction. Work kept him busy. Too busy for regrets.



MALLORY HEADED BACK into the building and went straight to the briefing room. Two serious-looking guys in suits sat at the head of the table next to the Special Agent in Charge of the Charlotte division. He eyed her over his glasses and she gave him a weak smile. Damn that reporter.

"Who're they?" she whispered to Lucas as she sat next to him.

"Supervisory Special Agents Hanrahan and Frazer from BAU."

These guys were legendary in the Bureau. Hanrahan was silver-haired with tanned craggy features. He'd interviewed serial offenders from every state in the Union and wrote the book on profiling the sick bastards. Mallory always wondered how much you could expose yourself to these people without some of your morality wearing off. Frazer was much younger, gleaming blond hair, arctic blue eyes, and Ryan Gosling handsome—if you liked that sort of thing. He was a rock star in law enforcement circles. In Afghanistan he'd tracked down a serial killer who used the war to hide his crimes. After that he nailed a black widow who'd been on husband number four—who just happened to be billionaire Robin Greenburg who owned

media companies across the globe. Needless to say, Frazer never got bad press. Polished and perfect, just looking at him made her teeth ache.

The image of Alex Parker flashed through her mind and she wished she hadn't brushed him off. There was a rugged quality to his looks that appealed to her. But she hadn't had time to date since she'd joined the academy and didn't have time now. She drummed her fingers on the wooden conference table, irritated and frustrated with her lack of life outside work.

SSA Danbridge strode in on her black heeled boots with a toss of her long blond hair. She shot Mallory a narrow-eyed glare that made her want to squirm in her seat. Mallory held still. Danbridge looked more tense than usual, though she'd taken the time to change into a fresh power suit. Mallory's gaze shot to the two men as she finally got it. *Duh*. Danbridge had applied for an opening at Quantico and was hoping to impress these guys enough to make it happen. Mallory's throat went dry because she had nothing to say that was going to make her boss shine.

Danbridge started the meeting and outlined what had happened last night.

"How did you narrow it down to Meacher?" SSA Hanrahan asked. He had a lovely voice. Level but warm.

"We got the tip-off about Meacher yesterday afternoon at six-fifteen."

"You personally?" Hanrahan asked.

Danbridge pointed to her.

Mallory swallowed. "Erhm. It came into the office, and I picked up."
Gosh, really Mallory? You managed to answer a phone all by yourself?

"You are?" Hanrahan asked.

"Special Agent Rooney, sir."

"I saw you on the news."

There was a huff of smothered laughter behind her. She held still when she wanted to turn around and glare. Hanrahan was watching her closely, knowledge alive in the depths of his blue eyes. *Damn*. She hated being the center of attention or an object of curiosity. That clear gaze told her he knew everything about her from her pedigree to her shoe size. She wanted to disappear into the floor. Unfortunately her powers of invisibility failed her.

"On a normal day you'd probably have left the information to deal with the next day. Why didn't you?"

Because I have no life. “I started digging a little into Meacher’s background and realized he was a perfect fit to the profile your unit provided, sir. So I took the information to SSA Danbridge”—her boss’s eyes glowed with approval, because, *yes*, they both worked late almost every night and weekends and now everyone knew it—“and then we received a call from state police concerned that The Snatcher had claimed another victim.”

Danbridge interrupted her. Thank God. “I took the information to the Special Agent in Charge and we moved immediately to act on the information we’d received.”

Relief that a vicious killer was off the street was evident on every face.

“Where are you on identifying the anonymous tipster?” Danbridge asked her.

Crap. “Call was made using an untraceable cell and the voice was electronically enhanced. It’s a dead end.”

SSA Hanrahan met Mallory’s gaze. If she’d given them anything useful she might have smiled, but she’d contributed nothing.

Danbridge’s lips tightened. “Keep on it. Don’t let those IT geeks drop the ball on this.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Mallory wanted to be involved in the Meacher investigation, not investigating an anonymous phone tip but she bit down on her frustration.

Danbridge moved on with the briefing. “We found photographic evidence of what appears to be Meacher torturing fifteen different women. Comparing those photographs to images of missing or murdered women using a preliminary facial analysis program the BAU brought in, we are almost positive at least ten of those victims’ remains have been recovered.” Which left five victims unaccounted for—presumably dead.

“We have teams of people collecting DNA from the farmhouse and tomorrow we’re sending cadaver dogs to search out any possible bodies buried on the property. We’ll enter the DNA samples into CODIS. The work will continue until we identify every woman featured in those photographs and videos.” Her boss’s knuckles whitened. “Meacher was forty-four years old and we believe he’s been killing since his late teens, early twenties. Again—this is based on photographic evidence and the details need to be verified. We know he moved at least four times over the last two

decades and we need to search each of those properties for potential evidence.”

How to increase the property value of your home—not.

Danbridge was finishing off. “Although there’s no criminal prosecution for Meacher we need to make sure the scene is processed carefully so that we can find his killer and gain closure for all the victims’ families.” The woman’s eyes blazed. “We are treating Meacher’s death as a homicide. Special Agent Randall will be case officer on that investigation.”

Mallory’s gaze shot to Lucas. He sent her a wink. Chances were the tipster and killer were related in some way, so hopefully that meant she’d get to help him out once she’d finished pissing off every IT technician she knew.

The meeting broke up and Mallory snuck out behind Lucas and went back to work. It was November and the anniversary of her sister’s abduction loomed large, as did her mother’s annual request to pose for photographs.

Not this year.

Payton was dead. She’d finally accepted it. Maybe it was the twin thing, but for years after her abduction she’d sensed her sister was out there somewhere. Now there was nothing but a cold and empty void. Try explaining that phenomenon to her mother. *I don’t think so.*

When she got back to her desk she had a message from Mike Tanner saying he’d managed to narrow the call down to the eastern seaboard of the United States—which was a real bonus given that millions of people lived there. She investigated different units that electronically disguised voices but couldn’t pinpoint exactly what unit had been used, and according to Mike, neither could NASA.

Mallory leaned back in her chair. The shooter had hit the *exact* same bull’s eye twice on a moving target. That was a hell of a shot. He’d also cleaned up after himself—no shell casings. It was almost like this guy was a professional hit man.

That was crazy, right?

She frowned and opened ViCAP. Entered “suspected killer” and “nine-millimeter” and got several thousand hits. She palmed her face. *Okay.* She typed in “suspected killer found dead.” Still a lot of hits. She delved deeper into some of the files—it included suicide, accidental death. *Damn.* She rubbed her eyes. “Suspicious death” “suspected killer found dead.”

Still a lot of hits but manageable. She went over to the coffee machine and filled another mug. The office was buzzing, despite the fact most of the agents in this office had skipped bed last night. She smothered a yawn and trudged back to her computer and pulled out her notebook, going through each record, looking for similarities with Meacher.

Hmmm. Last April, a serial sexual offender had been found in his Tampa apartment with a matching pair of slugs rattling around in his brain. Cops had no idea who killed him, but they'd received an anonymous tip-off *after* he was dead suggesting he was a rapist they were hunting.

Bingo.

She trolled through thirty more cases where suspected criminals had OD'd on crystal meth or been killed by rival gangs. Not what she was after. Then she found another case similar to Meacher. Suspected pedophile. Nine millimeter between the eyes. Anonymous tip.

Mallory straightened.

Holy shit.

A yawn grabbed hold and contorted her face and she knew it was time to go home before she passed out from exhaustion. Okay, there was no solid evidence, and every case was just different enough not to create alarm bells ringing in the system, but...

"Agent Rooney." It was SSA Danbridge standing with her coat over her arm.

Mallory jerked. The office was dark except for her desk.

"You're making the rest of us look bad. Go home."

"Yes, ma'am." Eyes drooping, she typed in one last search term "vigilante" while she pulled on her coat and scarf. The file was huge so she forwarded the results to her email. "Night, boss."

She headed out the front door of the building and into the star-spangled night and found herself recalling the exact shade of Alex Parker's eyes as he'd asked her to go to dinner. Her lips tightened. She'd messed that one up.

Tears made the stars blur. "Sorry, Pay. I'm so damn sorry."

CHAPTER THREE

FOUR AM WAS a lonely time, the darkness had an empty feel to it. Trees cracked and creaked as the temperature dropped. The icy breeze scraped over exposed skin like pumice, raising a dull flush. A light dusting of snow made everything brighter, colder. Lonelier.

He pulled his ski-mask lower over his face, got out of his SUV, and checked that no one was around. He drew on gloves, blowing into the palms of his hands to heat cold flesh. Getting rid of a body was harder than most people would credit. He was physically fit and even he had trouble pulling a full-grown woman out of the back of his car and moving her dead weight any distance.

The body bag made it awkward to get a grip but with a little effort he managed to get it over his shoulder. He closed the trunk quietly, picked up his flashlight and headed into the bush.

There was a spot he remembered from a hike last summer, about three hundred yards off one of the official paths. She was unlikely to be found before spring, and it was close enough to the creek that critters were bound to come across the body sooner rather than later and help destroy any lingering evidence. And as careful as he'd been he wasn't naive enough to believe there was nothing left to link her to him.

He'd have buried her, but the ground was like concrete. This would have to do.

He ducked off the path, crunching through the detritus that littered the forest floor. He found the spot he'd earmarked and turned, scanning with his flashlight, looking for the best way to conceal the body. There was an eroded bank undercutting a huge sugar maple. He strode over, dumping the heavy bag on the ground, relieved to be rid of his burden, rolling his shoulders to ease the ache.

It took a moment to grasp the zipper with his gloved fingers, then he rolled her out like a broken toy. Except for the bruises, she was pale against the snow. He caught her wrists and pulled her up against the wall of the earthen bank. Her hair dragged through the dirt, leaves tangling in the black strands.

She'd been a mistake.

Her hair was the right shade, but her eyes were mud rather than whiskey. Jaw line too square. Hands too big. Mouth too vulgar and bitchy. By the end she'd repulsed him. He straightened her legs, moving her hands to cover her pubic hair. He'd burned her clothes; wiped her body down with Lysol.

There was a dull throb in his chest. A heaviness that affected his breathing. He'd thought she might be the right one, but she wasn't. He touched the initials carved above her heart, regret and loneliness slamming into him. His fists curled.

She shouldn't have died. He shouldn't have lost her. It wasn't fair.

His breath shuddered out of his chest and he wanted to smash his fist against something. He eyed the girl's swollen features and looked away. She'd been a mistake, but he couldn't stop searching until he'd found a replacement. He stood, kicked leaves over the body, covering it from prying eyes, removing it from his sight. In a few hours the snow would shroud her, and when spring came the creek bubbling lazily at his back would flood this spot and sweep her away like garbage. He picked up the body bag, quickly scanned the area for anything he might have left behind, and started back to his car. Fifteen minutes in and out.

Cold air burned his lungs and he shivered beneath his sheepskin jacket. He got in the SUV and started her up, blasting the heater. Taking someone so close to home posed a risk in some ways, but in others it was smart and might throw people off the scent. And he didn't need to keep killing...just until he found the right one. He hadn't realized it would be so hard.

You know where to find the right one...

He gripped one hand over his skull, knees automatically curling into his stomach as he fought to control the SUV.

He couldn't do that.

It made sense.

No, no!

But Mallory Rooney's features superimposed themselves over those of the last victim. How many other women had to die because of some stubborn misplaced loyalty to the family?

His gut churned. If he carried on like this eventually he'd get caught. His fingers tightened around the leather of the steering wheel and he straightened in his seat. No way in hell was he getting caught. No way in hell.



ALEX STOOD ON the top step of the Lincoln Memorial and watched people stream toward the WWII Memorial for the early morning Veterans' Day ceremony. He'd arrived back from North Carolina late last night. He should be sleeping but instead he was here.

The jingle of a police horse's harness rang across the wide open space. Elderly men, many using canes or wheelchairs, were helped by relatives and friends to attend the laying of wreaths at the monument at the far end of the Reflecting Pool.

He remembered being a small boy standing beside his grandfather—a man who'd flown bombers over Germany—not understanding why they were out on a cold November morning, dressed up in their Sunday best. He remembered slipping a hand into his grandfather's palm and the feeling of safety that had enveloped him in that moment.

Heat tingled in his palm. His fingers curled.

This was why he came to the ceremony every year. To honor the dead. To beg their forgiveness. As minutes marched onward there was a hum of respectful silence. An energy of fierce pride that was both emotionally charged and quietly stoic. It made him proud to be an American. Despite its idiosyncratic betrayal, he still loved his country.

"Reveille" echoed through the mist that clung to the smartly shorn grass and elegant marble edifices. The piercing notes of the bugle rang through his bones and made him quiver like a tine. His chin lifted, shoulders stiffened, fingers itched to form a salute. But he wasn't worthy.

Working in the shadows was a cold dark place.

His phone vibrated in his pocket.

Choice had been taken from him when he'd failed his last mission, and failed his country so he edged through the crowd, away from the dignified

tribute to fallen comrades. Without the bargain he'd made he'd still be rotting in that North African jail with all the other vermin. He put his phone to his ear.

"I need to see you in your office." *Jane Sanders*. His boss's lackey.

He clicked off and hailed a cab. Ten minutes later he stood in front of the old brownstone in Woodley Park, which held a small brass plaque beside the front door with "Cramer, Parker & Gray. Security Consultants" etched in small block letters. It was quiet on the streets. Early morning on a national holiday. He hadn't been followed.

Jane got out of her car and came up the steps behind him. They didn't speak.

He unlocked the door and walked inside. The house had all the appearance of a normal business—reception counter, row of uncomfortable-looking chairs, low coffee table with glossy magazines laid neatly across the surface. Although they weren't exactly the usual nine-to-five operation, he and his partners—Haley Cramer and Dermot Gray—ran a legit security and crime prevention business that had made all three of them rich. They'd been best friends since MIT.

Haley and Dermot knew he hid stuff from them. They knew he'd been in jail in Morocco and had fought hard to get him released. But they sure as hell didn't know what he did for the government on a part-time basis. And that was the whole point of being a covert operative.

Welcome to the dark side.

He turned off the alarm system and unlocked his office door, indicating Jane should precede him inside. She flinched at the sound of the lock turning behind them. His office was soundproofed and swept for bugs before and after every appointment. Not that he handled many clients—just enough to make it look like he earned his pay the traditional way. Which didn't involve blood.

He turned on the signal jammer as a precaution he only used when the building was empty. Jane Sanders also had another job, but it was their work with The Gateway Project that brought them together.

"The Gateway Project" sounded so innocuous, like a community garden or construction company. Instead they did their best to show serial killers and pedophiles the Gateway to Hell. The Project involved some rich, very

powerful people at the highest level of government. Dangerous people. Ruthless people. People who had a hell of a lot to lose should things go sideways. The work was more covert and deniable than any foreign assassination he'd ever carried out and, morally, he had less of a problem with his current targets than his former ones. The fact he had a problem at all was why there was a time limit on his commitment.

As always Jane found it impossible to hold his gaze for more than a fraction of a second. His being an assassin made her nervous, even though the only woman he'd ever shot had been decked out in a suicide vest. No direct orders necessary.

He didn't say anything. Just slumped in the chair behind the desk. Fading into the background was one of the things he did best and he'd be lying if he said he didn't enjoy needling this woman. They were about the same age and there the similarity ended. She was blond and pretty and put together like DC Barbie. If she had a mind of her own it was hidden under the thick agenda of their mutual task-master. She watched him from the corner of her eye the way you watched a supposedly tame lion—very, very carefully.

She stood in her tailored black suit, looking out through the window's old fashioned net curtains, so beautiful he wondered why he wasn't the least bit attracted to her.

One touch of Mallory Rooney's hand had electrified his skin, heart tripping like a teen on speed. Of course, *she* didn't know what he really did for the government and had blown him off anyway. Smart woman.

"Any trouble?" Jane asked.

Again he said nothing. She wasn't his superior and it pissed him off when she pretended she was. She was as complicit in the deaths of these people as he was, but she never got her hands dirty. They weren't pals. They weren't brothers-in-arms. He'd bet two fingers on his left hand she'd never even seen a dead body—why that irked him so much he didn't know.

"Did you find anything...?"

He waited for her to make full-on eye contact. Shook his head.

She cleared her throat. "I suppose you're angry because we cut it a little fine with the timing the other night."

He raised one brow. He'd had to call upon all of his magician skills to disappear without being seen at Meacher's house. Not that he'd really

worried. The Bureau always followed procedure while the Agency did its best work by bending the rules. Not that Alex worked for the CIA anymore; and on paper he never had. But he expected this new operation to keep their end of the bargain, part of which was to supply critical intel and insider information on the exact movements of specific law enforcement personnel in a timely manner.

“My source said there were technical issues—”

“They fucked up.” Accidentally or on purpose he didn’t know. “If I go down I take everyone with me. Don’t forget that.” It was his only insurance from being screwed by these people. He’d learned his lessons the hard way.

Her hands fluttered over the hem of her jacket, the first physical sign of real nerves he’d seen in the woman. “They said there was some sort of dead zone.” Her gaze flashed uneasily to his.

More silence, lengthening to discomfort. Hers.

“Who tipped off the cops?”

“I don’t know—”

“Someone called it in *before* I’d done the job.”

Her eyes went wide and frightened, and he felt a thousand years old.

Between the early tip-off regarding Meacher’s identity and the delayed warning that the cops were on the way, the op had almost been compromised. Alex rubbed his hands over his face. He was exhausted and didn’t want to deal with Jane’s paranoia on top of his own. “Forget it. I’ll figure it out.”

Eager to be gone, she fumbled open a briefcase and pulled out a file. She almost handed it to him but changed her mind and slid it onto his cherry wood desk instead.

Scared was good.

Scared kept people at a distance and that’s where he wanted them. For some reason Mallory Rooney popped into his head again, with her short hair as dark as a raven’s feather and sparkling amber eyes. No point lying to himself—he wouldn’t mind a little less distance between himself and that particular federal agent.

“They found another body,” Jane Sanders said without preamble.

“Where?”

“In a remote wooded area in Virginia, near the West Virginia state line. A couple walking their dog. The killer took the trouble to hide the body.” Excitement vibrated low in her voice. “I don’t think he expected this one to be found until next spring.”

Alex stood and opened the file. Looked down at the graphic color photographs of more pointless death. On top of eliminating serial killers they were also trying to solve one cold case. He picked up a photograph. Frowned. “The connection’s a little thin, don’t you think?”

Slim shoulders rose and fell with false confidence, as if she wasn’t terrified to be in the same room with him. Because *he* was the scariest thing she knew. Pissed, he smiled. Maybe she was right. He was more dangerous than most of the monsters they hunted.

He studied the photograph. This particular killer generally dumped bodies out in the open in drainage ditches in remote areas. Why was this victim different? Or was it simply the first time law enforcement had found a body that he—or she—had hidden this way? Impossible to say for certain.

“Can we get access to the police and Medical Examiner’s reports?” He wasn’t a psychologist but he understood killers better than most. He didn’t get the compulsion or the buzz, but he definitely had a handle on the mechanics, and the mechanics were usually what tripped these guys up. Like the FBI profile combined with Meacher’s cell phone data had finally earned him his just rewards.

“Not immediately unless someone hacks them, but now the local PD has started searching ViCAP. It won’t be long until they find a connection to the other bodies. The feds will be all over this very soon.”

His eyes flicked over his wall map of the United States. Forensics took time. Finding a killer took time. “I have some other appointments that require more immediate attention—”

“The boss is most insistent—”

“It’s a long shot at best.”

“After all these years, *everything* is a long shot.”

Alex hid his reaction by staring out of the window. It wasn’t ghosts of the people he’d killed that kept him awake at night. It was the wreckage of families he’d left behind. He’d always followed orders. Right up to that last fateful mission when he’d been poised to break the neck of an international

arms dealer. Then the man's twelve-year-old daughter had walked into the room and Alex had frozen. A better assassin would have killed them both, but he couldn't do it. He'd left them alive and walked away.

He'd had plenty of time to regret that decision.

What bothered him most was he still wouldn't be able to kill that arms dealer in front of his daughter. Even after the bastard had exacted some personal retribution in prison. Maybe Alex had deserved it.

Jane gathered her things, obviously in a hurry to get away from him. "There's something else," she lowered her voice to barely above a whisper. "Someone involved in the Meacher investigation started snooping."

It had only been a matter of time.

"We need to adjust some of our practices." A little more assisted suicide and a little less lethal force. "You need to inform the others."

Her slight gasp made him frown. Did she really think he didn't know about the two other assassins The Gateway Project had recruited for this operation? He hoped they weren't as fucked up as he was. "Who's the person doing the snooping?" He'd tap their email and cell phones.

"I'm surprised you don't already know." There was a bite to Jane's tone that almost made him smile. "The boss wants you to keep a close personal eye on the situation." She paused again, but it would take more than a well-timed silence to crack him. "The person doing the digging is one Special Agent Mallory Rooney, FBI Charlotte Division." She walked out without another word as though she hadn't just smacked him in the face.

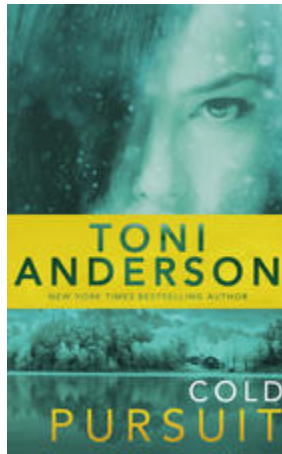
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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Single mom Vivi Vincent is thrust into her worst nightmare when she's trapped inside a mall during a terror attack along with her eight-year-old son. With the help of Jed Brennan, an FBI special agent on enforced leave, Vivi and her son survive the assault. But the danger is far from over.

Vivi's son may have witnessed critical details of the terrorists' future plans and is targeted for death, but he's mute, and he's traumatized. Still someone launches a strike against the FBI's safe house, and Jed fears the bad guys have an inside man. No longer knowing who to trust, he hides mother and son in a log cabin deep in the heart of the Wisconsin Northwoods. There Jed and Vivi try to figure out how to unlock the information inside her son's head. What they don't bargain for is the red-hot attraction that flares between them, or the extent of the sinister plot that threatens to rip apart not only any

chance of happiness they might have together, but also the very fabric of American society.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ROLLER COASTER thundered high above them in the mall and people screamed. Vivi Vincent's son's blue eyes widened with wonder as he watched with obvious delight. He grabbed her sleeve and grinned like any normal eight-year-old boy.

The bright colors of the rides and glaring sunshine through the glass roof made her eyes water. That's what she told herself. It had nothing to do with the disastrous meeting they'd had first thing this morning with Dr. Hinkle.

She patted Michael's hand, and he caught her gaze. The intelligence that shone in his eyes took her breath; as if all the secrets of the universe were locked up inside that bright, young mind.

He kept tugging her arm, trying to get her to go on the ride, but her stomach was too jumbled to even think about going on a roller coaster right now. And no way would she let him go alone—if something went wrong who knew what could happen? She'd never forgive herself if he got hurt just because she was too chicken to go on an amusement park ride.

"Want to visit the toy store?" she suggested instead.

He nodded and smiled, but she knew he was disappointed from the look of yearning he sent to the seventy foot monstrosity behind them. They headed past old-fashioned carousels and giant mushroom-shaped swings—much more her speed. The Minneapolis Mall, a smaller cousin to the Mall of America a few miles across the city, was a kid's paradise.

She straightened her shoulders. Michael *would* enjoy this outing today, even if she had to subject herself to the terror of going on that thing. It would hopefully make up for his being poked and prodded by Dr. Hinkle this morning, then patronized within an inch of sanity by a local TV reporter doing a feature on the famous psychiatric neuroscientist's research program.

The woman had interviewed them about Michael's "issues" and drawing ability. Hopefully it wasn't a slow news day in the twin cities.

Michael spotted the intricate green serpent who guarded the entrance of the toy store and any lingering disappointment in his expression vanished. They stood in silent fascination for several long minutes as they took in the display that clambered up and over the shop. There was a teddy bear in cowboy gear riding a horse, a dinosaur on a motorcycle, and above it all a giant clown that made Vivi distinctly uneasy. What was it about clowns?

"OK, let's go inside. You can choose one thing from the store, and then we'll go find something to eat. Later we'll hit the rides."

He grinned and ran inside. Vivi hid a smile. She took a step after him only to collide with someone massive and bulky who knocked her on her ass. She ended up sprawled on the floor as the man kept on walking. Her jaw dropped at his rudeness, and she climbed awkwardly to her knees, cradling her wrist, which hurt from the unexpected impact with the floor.

"Need some help?" A man crouched beside her. He had short, black hair and rich, brown eyes that crinkled attractively at the outer edges. His fingers were strong and firm as he eased her to her feet, holding onto her good arm.

"Thank you."

She gripped him for balance as she slipped her shoe back on. He had a straight nose, full bottom lip and a cleft in his chin. Those dark eyes ran over her critically as if assessing her injuries, then something changed and they warmed with frank male approval. She let go of his hand, and her knees wobbled. She blamed it on the high heels she so rarely wore.

Another round of screams from the people on the roller coaster broke through her reverie.

"Thank you, again. I'd better go find my son." She nodded toward the toy store. It had become automatic to use Michael as a barrier, and the habit was starting to wear on her nerves. Maybe one day she'd get over the trust issues her ex had instilled in her.

Maybe.

One day.

"Good luck getting him out of there." The handsome stranger held up a plastic bag with the distinctive logo on the side. It looked incongruous against his smart business clothes—a black suit, blue shirt, purple tie. How

someone carried themselves revealed a lot about a person—his posture suggested a military background—and maybe some sort of law enforcement. He also exuded an air of competence and authority she recognized from her days working at the UN. The last guy who'd affected her this way had taught her that a handsome face and commanding manner were no substitute for compassion or morals. Still, it was nice to look at.

"I got my fix buying for a friend's kid." For a split-second a shadow passed across his features then disappeared. Maybe she imagined it. He took a step away. "If you're sure you're OK?"

She nodded and he smiled back and then strode away.

Gone. Vivi blinked.

It had been a long time since a man had looked at her like she was anything except a frazzled, single mom over thirty. The sensation of being a flesh and blood woman slid over her body like a skintight dress, rekindling a part of herself she'd forgotten existed. *Great*, another thing to add to her list of frustrations.

Walking toward the store she fingered her sore wrist and decided it was nothing more than a mild sprain. She'd ice it when they got back to the hotel later tonight.

A loud boom erupted from the center of the atrium. She jumped and spun around. Screams grew louder and for a moment she thought the roller coaster was malfunctioning. Then a weird noise peppered the air, one that sounded familiar but she couldn't identify at first. Then she did. *Gunfire.* People started running. A man standing beside the candy store dropped to the floor, and the glass from the window shattered and rained down on him as a wide pool of blood spread around his body.

Oh, dear God.

There was a shooter in the mall.

Michael!

She spun and ran inside the toy store, searching frantically. People were rushing around desperately looking for children and loved ones. A display crashed to the floor, and a model disintegrated into a thousand pieces. She skidded on the tiny bits, but righted herself before she fell. A woman rammed a stroller into Vivi's ankles in her determination to get to her

toddler, who was wandering off to the front entrance. Vivi grabbed the kid and thrust him back into his mother's arms.

"Thank you." The woman's face was white with terror. She had a baby and a toddler to deal with, along with masses of shopping bags.

"Leave the stroller. Grab the children and get out of the mall as fast as possible," Vivi told her. That's what she intended to do. She scanned the store for the carrot-topped head of the most important person in her world. *There.* She pushed her way through people milling around in confusion.

Michael was starting to get agitated and stood silent and shaking. She got to him and cradled his precious face with one hand, pushed back his hair with the other. She had to calm him down if they hoped to get out of there alive. "I'm here, Michael. I'll look after you, but you have to listen to me and you have to concentrate, OK?" *Please don't freak out.*

Blue eyes cleared and focused. Her incredibly brave son squared his shoulders and nodded, taking her hand and squeezing tight. He knew they were in danger. Love for him swelled inside her so enormous it wanted to burst through her skin. The terror was bigger. It wanted to crawl through her veins and eat her alive.

She would do anything to protect this child. Anything.

One of the cashiers was on the phone, presumably talking to security. Another cashier yelled, "Cops are telling us to sit tight while they assess the situation."

Sit tight? No way in hell.

The sound of gunfire was getting louder now; bullets blasted glass and concrete. Metal hit metal and she could hear the ricochets whizzing around the structure, turning the mall into a deadly pinball machine. Gunpowder was growing thicker in the air, clogging her throat. Then more shots, but these sounded much closer, on the other side of the store. Her mouth went dry.

Two shooters.

And she and Michael, and all the other customers and employees, were trapped between them.

She walked quickly to one of the doors at the back of the shop and peered out cautiously. A man at the far end of the corridor stood holding a large automatic weapon. The same man who'd knocked her to the ground earlier. Thank God he hadn't stopped. He was facing the other direction,

scanning the area, then pausing and squeezing off rapid bursts of gunfire. Screams rose, some of which were cut horrifically short.

Bullets rained down from the balconies above and the over-sized model creations on the roof of the store shattered.

The sweat on her skin went cold. There were at least three shooters. They were in the middle of a war zone.

Vivi looked back over her shoulder and froze. A gunman was winding through the rides toward the stores. His face was covered, but his gait was relaxed, almost indolent. This was a man who'd killed before and would show no mercy. She'd worked with this sort of man, at the White House, at the UN.

What the hell could she do? The second gunman was too close in the corridor behind the store and they were trapped. Others spotted the approaching danger and started pouring out the back of the shop screaming, including the woman with her two children, still pushing the stroller and clutching her shopping bags. Michael tried to follow them but Vivi pulled him back and pressed his face into her stomach as the people who'd run were mowed down.

Bodies fell. Contorted in agony. Blood smeared the floor. The woman with the stroller crashed atop the toddler, but the little boy's leg kept twisting as if he were trying to get free.

Stay still!

Her gut twisted and bile rose up her throat. The bright, white halls of the shopping mall were being turned into a butcher's shop.

Michael shook in her arms. She hugged him closer. "I won't let them hurt you," she whispered. But she had no clue how to stop them. She kept one eye on the man approaching through the amusement park rides and peeked out to see where the other shooter was. He was about six stores down, looking into the store windows. Unless he turned around and moved off, he'd spot them as soon as they made a run for it. If it was just her she could maybe slip past him, but dragging an eight-year-old through a rain of bullets? Was it even worth making a break for it in that direction or should they head toward the bus and metro station? But looking at how organized these terrorists were—and what else could they be except terrorists?—she figured they'd have the main entrances covered. The shops then? Some of

them must connect to the outside world through back exits but she didn't know which ones.

She spotted the cupboard beneath the cashier's stand and an idea took hold. "Michael," she whispered in his ear. "We're going to play a game of hide and seek. Only this is a very serious game because these people want to hurt us, so you mustn't give yourself away. Understand?" He nodded, those blue eyes of his wide with fear, but also total understanding. He wasn't stupid the way some people assumed, but his intelligence wouldn't matter a damn if one of these monsters put a bullet in him.

If anything happened to him, she'd die too.

She hugged him fiercely, then sank to her haunches and made him follow her as she crawled to the register. She slid one cupboard door quietly open. It was full of supplies. Staplers, receipt rolls, plastic bags. She shoved it all to one end of the cupboard and urged him inside. He lay there, curled up, shaking, eyes wide and frightened.

"You have to stay here and not make a sound." She laughed a little hysterically at that. "Don't thump your head or hands and feet against the sides, or else they'll hear you, understand?"

He nodded but grabbed her hand in a desperate plea.

"I'm going to run to those two shops over there." He rapidly shook his head. He'd seen what had happened to the others who'd tried to run. "I'll wait for the bad men to look the other way before I go. I'm a fast runner." She slipped off her heels, squeezed his fingers. "I swear I will come back for you, but whatever happens you have to promise not to move from here. Not to make a sound. Promise?" She held him so tight he winced, but he nodded even as tears started to roll. She held his fingers to her lips and then kissed his warm cheek. "I'll be back, Michael. I won't let them hurt you. You trust me, right?"

He nodded.

"And I trust you because I *know* how smart you are." Tears blurred her vision but she blinked them away and a solid wave of determination moved through her. She kissed him again. "No moving from here until I come get you. No matter how long it takes." She held his gaze. "I'll be back as soon as I can. I promise."



FBI SPECIAL AGENT Jed Brennan did not spend a lot of time hanging around malls—especially not during the run up to Christmas. He'd rather have a root canal.

Officially he was off duty from the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit-4, taking some long-overdue vacation days. Unofficially things were a little more complicated.

His boss had insisted he take some time after using excessive force on a suspect. That's what you got for punching a wealthy serial killer in the face when you arrested the fucker. No matter Miles Brandon had smacked him so hard his skull still buzzed, or that the guy had tried to slip a slender blade between his ribs. Let alone what he'd done to his unsuspecting pick-ups from DC gay bars. Didn't matter. Breaking the asshole's nose was against the rules.

It was a fine line he'd crossed and he doubted ASAC Lincoln Frazer—newly promoted after the old unit leader had unexpectedly retired last week—would have done things different.

Thankfully, he and Frazer were old friends, going back more than a decade to when Jed had been stationed at the Kandahar Air Force Base and had called in the FBI to investigate a suspected serial murderer. The young soldier, together with the inexperienced FBI Special Agent, had caught the killer, but Jed had been too late to save Mia, the woman he loved. The case had made Frazer a media superstar, but the guy was a solid investigator who'd devoted his entire life to the BAU.

Friend or no friend, Frazer had the power to not only bench him, but to put him out of the game permanently if he wanted.

There were plenty other federal agents eager to fill Jed's size eleven boots. So, he'd wait his boss out.

He had cases to work on his own time. He'd make the most of his enforced vacation and visit his family during the festive season. The holidays made humanity's general bat-shit craziness worse so it was usually hard to take a break then. The world was full of whackos and sadists with nothing better to do than figure out new ways to hurt people. It was his job to keep a lid on the insanity although some days he thought his own head would burst from the horror of it all.

Hell, maybe his boss was right. Maybe he could use some downtime in one of the quietest, most peaceful places on earth—the Northwoods of Wisconsin. The fact he'd have to visit Bobby's widow and young son was beside the point. He should have done it months ago.

Last night he'd visited an old Army buddy he hadn't seen in a couple of years—Jack Donovan—who was a homicide detective with Minneapolis PD. Today he was hitting the road for the much shorter drive to America's Dairyland. It was close enough to Christmas he could nail all his family holiday obligations in one relatively painless swoop. Hence, the mall.

Root canal. Maybe even a flesh wound.

The woman with the bright red hair and intriguing eyes was an unexpected bonus. The asshole who'd knocked her over was oblivious to the damage he'd left in his wake. Jed had been torn between going after him and helping the woman up off the floor. The protective streak he and his brothers had inherited from their father was too ingrained to just abandon her.

He'd been knocked off balance, too, by her beauty. Plus, she had that innate poise and confidence that totally did it for him. He shrugged off a moment of regret that he'd never see her again. He loved women. It was relationships he avoided at all costs. His job wasn't exactly nine-to-five, and since losing Mia in Afghanistan all those years ago he'd put a firm guard around his heart. Which was exactly how he liked it.

Still, it didn't hurt to look.

A hunting store caught his eye. Thousands of knives of every size and color. *Oh, yeah.* He went inside and started looking for new knives for his dad and two brothers and a pocket knife with lots of handy gadgets for his mom. Two shops and he'd be done.

Happy Christmas.

BOOM!

An explosion reverberated from the amusement park rides. *What the...?* Then the sound of shots being fired. Terrorists or heist? Jed reached for his gun, swore when he realized he wasn't wearing it. He'd left the SIG locked in the car because he'd wanted to take a whirl on the roller coaster for old times' sake—something him and Bobby and Liam had always done as

teenagers. He hadn't wanted to be armed with a deadly weapon while experiencing g-force.

He flashed his shield at the store's security guy. "Call 911 and mall security. Any way out back there?" He pointed to the hidden door at the rear of the shop.

The guy nodded even as he held his cell to his ear. They made their way toward the back of the store. A woman in a black suit, probably the manager, put a key in the lock.

"Hang on. Got any hunting knives behind the counter?" Who knew what lay behind that door? He wanted a weapon. Jed's car was in the parking lot on the opposite side of the mall, otherwise he'd have gone for his SIG. He eyed the glass cases on the walls. He could smash one open but didn't want to draw that much attention to himself or the other people hiding here.

The security guy looked at him uncertainly.

Jed thrust his badge closer to the guy's face. "Off duty FBI Agent. Get me a damn knife...now!" A blade wasn't much against a sub-machine-gun but it beat the hell out of the plastic toy he currently held. He placed the box on the floor. He'd pick it up later. Hopefully.

Bullets sprayed along the corridor outside, and more sounded from levels above them. People crouched in terrified silence. Piercing screams told him civilians were dying and he was ill-prepared to save any of them until he could get a gun. The security guard hustled behind the desk and handed Jed a knife with a six-inch blade. *Better.*

"What do you want me to do?" the guy asked.

"The mall has its own security, correct?"

The guy nodded but looked uncertain. "Security Center is on this floor. Over near where that first explosion came from. No one answered when I tried to call them."

Crap. If these guys took out the security nerve center before they attacked they were highly organized and deadly serious about doing as much damage as possible. Or stealing a massive amount of money with total disregard for public safety.

Jed ran his eyes over the ten or so people milling around uncertainly. "Get them out of here and tell the cops outside what you know. Which other stores along this block have rear exits?"

“Just us and the restaurant at the end of the row. Once you’re in the corridor, there are exits to the parking garages and the loading bays used for deliveries.”

Jed nodded. “Leave the premises ASAP but watch for shooters on the outside. Tell cops there’s an—” he tested the point of the knife with his thumb “—almost unarmed FBI agent inside.”

He pulled out his cell phone and dialed the local FBI office. Busy signal. He texted his boss instead and shoved the cell back in his pocket. So much for R&R.

They cautiously unlocked the door at the back of the shop and checked the corridor—clear. The security guard took the lead. Civilians started to pour out, hopefully on their way to safety.

A black shadow passed the front of the store and Jed held his breath. It was the asshole who’d knocked over the pretty redhead. Everyone in the shop froze and then started hustling faster as the guy slowly turned toward them, shouldering an assault rifle and aiming it right between Jed’s eyes. Jed had no choice. He threw himself through the door after the others. He slammed it shut as bullets tore through the walls beside him.

“Run.” He waved the others frantically in the opposite direction. Held his position as he listened closely for footsteps. He’d switched into attack mode and he’d done this sort of drill a million times over. He’d just never done it armed with nothing except a blade, and surrounded by potentially thousands of innocent civilians who could get caught in the crossfire.

CHAPTER TWO

VIVI QUIETLY CLOSED the sliding door of the cupboard, leaving it slightly ajar so Michael wouldn't be in complete darkness. Satisfied no one would see him unless they actually opened the cupboard door, she peered up over the service desk.

The mall had gone eerily quiet as if everyone was holding their breath, hiding. No sign of the shooters. She had a horrible vision of the gunmen lying in wait for the unsuspecting shoppers trying to escape. The rides still flashed with bright lights and garish displays, but they'd all stopped moving. Her eyes rose to the roller coaster in the distance. If they'd been on that ride there was a good chance they'd already be dead. Her legs trembled at the awfulness of this moment. She'd seen this stuff on the news, but had never expected to get caught up in it herself. Especially not with her child in tow.

Small pockets of people crouched and hid around the store. She met the terrified eyes of a middle-aged man who clutched a little girl to his side. His eyes seemed to beg her for help but what was she supposed to do? She had no training, no weapons. She nodded to him anyway. She'd do whatever she could to get them out.

At the back door of the shop she used the reflection in some of the windows opposite to look for the bad guys. She stilled when she saw the shooter prowling some distance away down the corridor. The toddler on the floor in front of her started writhing and trying to get free of his mother's unresponsive arm. Vivi's eyes flashed back to the shooter. He went into one of the shops and she braced herself to move. Gunshots rang out from inside the store he'd entered. *Don't think about it.* She ran across to the little boy, dragged him from beneath his mother and picked him up. But a glance in the stroller showed the baby, all pretty in a pink bonnet, eyes wide open, and smiling.

Oh, hell. She couldn't leave a baby.

Vivi placed the kid on the floor and he grabbed onto her leg. She pulled away the blankets to undo the straps on the baby harness. Her fingers shook and couldn't manipulate the hard plastic snaps. She kept looking at the shop where the bad guy had disappeared. More shots. Her blood pounded through her ears so loudly she was deafened to everything but her own erratic heartbeat. Finally she got the catch free and eased the baby onto her shoulder. Then she took the toddler's hand and urged him to run to the clothes shop immediately in front of them.

She quickly scanned the interior of the store. It was empty of people which gave her hope for escape. She headed through to the changing rooms at the back. The door to the storeroom was firmly locked. She knocked gently and whispered, "Is anyone in there? I have a baby out here. Can you let me in?"

No sound came from behind the door, but the weight of fear hit her in a wave. *Dammit.* She couldn't blame people for not putting themselves at risk but...

The baby snuggled against her shoulder and started gurgling. Her heart twisted with grief for the mother and for the others who'd already died, for the cruel needless waste of human life. Who were these monsters? What did they want?

She was torn about her decision to leave Michael. So torn she could barely function, but she had to. He was hidden and hopefully safe until she found a way out of here. Being in small compressed spaces comforted him, the tighter the better. But what if something happened to him? Or to her? Doubt and uncertainty whirled inside her brain until her heart raced as if she was about to have a heart attack. She forced herself to calm down. Yoga breaths. *Don't let these bastards scare you to death.*

She opened every unlocked door in the store, but found only small storage spaces. No escape. She went back into the main entrance, crouched low behind the clothes rails. The little tyke held onto her leg in an unbreakable grip and moved like a third leg. She stroked a hand over his curly hair. He was going to be traumatized for life.

Using the reflections in the glass, she once again scanned the corridor. No one was visible. She ran into a restaurant next door and ducked inside. It

was dimly lit with lots of alcoves. Probably a good spot to hide, but she didn't see anyone, which gave her more hope that there was a back way out of this hellhole. If there was, she'd run to get Michael.

She cradled the baby carefully against her shoulder, darting looks around every corner before rushing forward. She reached the kitchen and was hit by a weird combination of smells. Food cooking on the gas burners, mixed with the stench of violent death.

Three bodies lay twisted on the ground. *Oh, no.*

She spun around, hoisted the toddler into her other arm as she stepped over the corpses to check out the back of the kitchen near two massive walk-in freezers.

Where the hell were the cops?

The sensation of sticky blood on her stockinged feet made her want to throw up. Her arms ached from the weight of the children, but she gritted her teeth and kept moving. She spotted a door with a fire exit sign. That was it!

The metallic click of a weapon had her freezing and turning around slowly. The man who'd knocked her over earlier was pointing a matte-black assault rifle at her face. She clutched the baby tighter, put the little boy on the floor, and tried to push him behind her leg.

The gunman was tall, over six feet four; Arabic features, small, hard ebony eyes in a round face that couldn't have been over thirty. His olive skin was free of sweat. No visible sign of remorse.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked.

His nostrils flared.

She asked him again in Arabic.

His eyes widened and then swept over her uncovered hair. She saw him draw in a deep breath and knew he'd fire on the exhale, so she threw herself to the floor behind the kitchen counter. She tried to shelter the baby who started to cry at the sudden jarring movement and blast of noise as bullets ripped into the wall behind where she'd been standing just seconds ago. The direction of the bullets followed as he started walking toward them and she scrambled and dragged the boy and the baby along the floor by their padded jackets as she tried to escape. Her nylons made her slip on the bloody floor. She sprawled and scrambled, clawing for purchase. The gunman came

around the corner of the kitchen bench and she closed her eyes and braced herself for a bullet. Instead she heard a grunt and more deafening gunfire pelting the metal in the kitchen. Then silence punctuated by heavy breathing. She opened her eyes but no one was there.

She held still, unsure what had happened.

“He’s dead. Come on out,” said an oddly familiar voice.

She climbed to her feet and there stood the guy who’d helped her earlier in the mall. A knife in his hand dripped crimson droplets of blood onto the tile floor. The terrorist lay twitching at his feet. Her stomach turned, relief competing with horror. Her rescuer grabbed the bad guy’s rifle, searching through the man’s pockets for more weapons and ammunition which he shoved in his jacket pockets.

“Thank you. *Again.*” Her voice was rough as crushed gravel. If it hadn’t been for him she and the children would be dead.

He nodded. “FBI Special Agent Jed Brennan at your service, ma’am.”

He wasn’t just handsome; he’d just taken on superhero status.

“Very happy to make your acquaintance, Special Agent Brennan. You saved our lives.” The baby started crying, and she joggled her gently in her arms and kissed her sweet forehead. She walked towards the FBI agent. Now she could go get Michael, and they could get out of here. She handed him the baby. He handed her straight back.

“You don’t understand,” she told him. “I need to go get my son. I left him hiding in the cupboard beneath the cash registers in the toy store.”

He frowned in confusion. “So who’re these guys?” He pointed to the toddler and baby.

“I found them outside. Their mother was shot.” Her voice caught. She tried to hand him the baby again, but he took a step away. OK, less superhero, more federal law enforcement officer—another brand of male she’d dealt with in the past. She dared not raise her voice in case she attracted the attention of more bad guys, but she was desperate. “*Please.* I need to get my son out of there. Other people too.”

“How many others?”

“At least fifteen, maybe twenty in that store alone, many children.”

The sound of footsteps rushing toward them had the FBI guy pushing her and the children behind him and them both crouching behind the

kitchen counters. The middle-aged man who'd caught her eye in the toy store came tearing into the kitchen with a whole swathe of people running behind him. They crashed to a halt when they saw Special Agent Brennan holding a gun.

"He's OK. He's with the FBI," she assured them.

The faces of the scared shoppers relaxed slightly, but the terror at the situation remained. They were far from safe.

She scanned the crowd, then frowned. "Where's my son?"

The gray-haired man stepped forward. "I tried to get him to come but he wouldn't budge."

Her heart sank. *Oh, no*. She'd made him promise not to move.

"We need to get out of here." Agent Brennan spoke quietly but made it an order. He eased open the fire exit door and peered down the corridor. "This way. Quickly. Keep your hands in the air in case you meet cops who think you're part of this terrorist gang. Keep your eyes peeled for shooters."

Vivi tried to pass the baby to another woman, but the kid wouldn't let go of her and started crying even louder.

"What are you doing?" the fed asked impatiently. Those chocolate eyes were now as black and cold as obsidian.

"I *need* to get my son. I *promised* him I wouldn't be long."

"If that baby keeps crying you're putting all these people's lives at risk." The sharp gleam of intelligence in those eyes reminded her of Michael. "Let's get everyone here out and then we'll come back and get your son, OK?" He tried to put a little warmth into his voice.

The fed was manipulating her and right now she hated him for it. She didn't buy it, but the idea one of the bad guys might find them all because the baby was crying wasn't something she could live with. "You don't understand, my son won't go anywhere without me." She soothed the baby, who quieted. "So if you're lying to me..."

"I never lie to beautiful women." The brief flash of smile was not a compliment. It was a *move-your-ass-now-before-I-make-you* smile.

She wasn't intimidated. The only thing she cared about was getting Michael out safely. She opened her mouth to argue, but was swept along by the crowd. The little boy grabbed her leg again, and she scooped him up even though he was heavy as hell. Her biceps burned. She found herself tucked

between all the other terrified people as they ran down the long corridor toward the parking garage. *Damn it.* She gritted her teeth. OK. She'd get these kids out and go back for her own baby. Five minutes, tops. Please God keep him safe until she got back. Her body shook from shock and exertion, but she concentrated on getting the kids out. Then she'd go back. Then she'd save her son.

A wave of fresh, cold air hit when they got to the parking garage; her bare feet immediately frozen against the unforgiving concrete. Jed Brennan dangled the weapon he'd taken from the bad guy by the strap and held his gold shield in the other hand.

Her arms felt like they were about to drop off. Shouts rose, and men in black uniforms herded them toward a cordoned off area. The cops held them at gunpoint and made them put their hands on their heads. Didn't they understand they were victims here? The babies both started screaming when someone took them from her. They were safe now so it didn't really matter how much noise they made, though it tugged at her heartstrings. She hoped they had a loving family to take care of them.

She whirled toward Jed Brennan, and he was watching her with those keen eyes as black as midnight.

"Let's go get my son," she urged him.

A police officer pushed her toward the others but she stood firm and argued. "That FBI agent said I could bring out those two children and then go back for my own son."

"The fed isn't in charge and no one is going into that mall who ain't law enforcement, ma'am. You're staying here until we can verify your identity."

"Special Agent Brennan!" she started shouting. He was talking to someone who looked like they were in charge. His expression went carefully blank and then he turned his back on her. He wasn't handsome any longer. He was just another guy who'd lied to get what he wanted, and then walked away on his vows.

She shouted louder. "You *promised* I could go back for my son!" Rage filled her and she tried to dodge the cop on guard duty. Next moment she was on the ground, chin grazing the wet, dirty pavement as her wrists were cuffed. "You lied to me. If anything happens to my son, I'll... Stop. Stop!" she hissed at the cop who was manhandling her. "There's something you

need to know about Michael!” She broke off because nothing would matter if anything happened to her beautiful son. Brennan looked at her again as the cop hauled her off the ground and started pushing her away from the mall. She didn’t let go of the FBI agent’s gaze, not even when she tripped and fell. “Get him out of there, please, or so help me God...”



JED COULDN’T FILTER the guilt or the hysterical redhead out of his brain even as he tried to concentrate on the update from the commander of the SWAT team. The fact he’d lied to her to get her out of the mall shouldn’t bother him, but she’d left her son behind and the kid was in extreme danger. That made his insides ache.

Push it aside. Don’t let empathy for the victims cloud your judgment—his boss’s words were good advice. Hell, he *was* trying.

The terrorists had taken out the Security Center first and all cameras were down so they had no eyes inside the mall except for a couple of armed security guards who were pinned down in the northwest corner, and trapped shoppers who were tweeting the cops for help. Police had advised them to stay off social media in case the bad guys were also monitoring it. Not a good idea to state your exact location to the world when someone with a loaded gun wanted to kill you. There were reports of multiple casualties and at least seven gunmen, probably more. Two on each floor and one hosing down the transit center with an assault rifle; waiting for people to try and escape that way, or for the cops to move in. Many people had gotten out. Many more were still trapped inside—like the redhead’s son. His name was Michael, apparently, because she wasn’t done yelling at Jed yet.

The fact he’d killed one of these assholes was starting to make him feel better about what was rapidly morphing into one of the worst days of his life—and he’d had some humdingers. The redhead screamed at him again and a cop tackled her. He opened his mouth to get the guy to ease up when he caught her gaze.

Hatred and desperation poured off her. He’d lied to get her out of there, but now her kid was stuck smack bang in the middle of a gun battle that was about to get a hell of a lot worse. *Shit.*

He could deal with the hatred; it was the desperation in her dark blue gaze that twisted his gut. And the certainty that if the other police officer wasn't forcibly restraining her, she'd have run back into that death zone, armed with nothing more than her sharp tongue and a pair of brass balls, and tried to rescue her kid herself.

"Because that's what real parents did." The voice inside his head was his father's.

"Get him out of there, *please!* Brennan, please!" she shouted louder.

He swallowed the knot in his throat. Nodded.

The SWAT guy eyed him like he was an idiot.

"I need to get back in there."

"We don't need any dead heroes, son."

"You didn't see the bodies of all the civilians these guys have already killed. They don't want hostages. They want blood." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I *am* going back in there."

"Not on your own you're not." The commander eyed him the same way his boss did when he thought he was about to do something stupid. The guy said something into his mike.

Jed stood taller and braced his legs apart. "I'm SWAT trained. Seven years in the bureau and Army before that—sniper school. Give me some men and we can start evening the odds, protecting civilians."

The captain's eyes flicked to the woman being cuffed. "What's going on with her?"

"She left her son hiding in a cupboard in the toy store while she searched for a way out. I promised her we'd go back for him together. She just realized I lied."

The guy let out a heavy sigh. "You did what you had to do to get her out of there."

"And now I'm going back to get her son like I told her I would." Jed held the man's steady gaze. "Give me a couple guys otherwise I'm going in alone."

The man's expression turned amused. "I'll give you two guys, but only because that was already my plan. You're the backup. Let's try and get that kid out alive."

Jed nodded. He knew he shouldn't make promises he might not be able to keep, but he couldn't witness the fierce maternal passion on the woman's face without at least trying. "Thanks."

The captain's gaze went back to the furious redhead who was glaring at them both. "Don't fancy your chances with that one, son."

Jed huffed out a laugh. "No kidding. I've got more chance of helping the Packers win the Super Bowl."

Two heavily-armed officers approached him. One handed him tactical body armor, comms, a fully loaded assault weapon and Glock. He geared up, put spare ammo in his jacket pockets, checked both weapons and nodded. "Let's do it."

The other guys, Wright and Marcos, led the way back into the mall. Jed felt a hell of a lot more comfortable going back in with these guys than he had leaving with all those unarmed civilians. Didn't mean it wasn't about to get a lot more dangerous though.

He directed them to the restaurant kitchen fire exit. Paused long enough to photograph the face of the guy he'd taken down earlier. Emailed it to his boss. A team from the Critical Incident Response Unit would be on the way ASAP.

Wright cleared the kitchen area and radioed in to the commander who could see and hear everything via an onboard camera.

They moved slowly toward the front of the restaurant. Jed counted bodies along the way. Three so far, not counting the terrorist scumbag he'd helped meet his maker. They got to the open front of the restaurant and squatted behind a fake rock facade. *Shit*. The carnage was gut churning. Men and women lay strewn across the glittering mall, broken glass sprinkled like diamonds across ruby-red blood.

Not everyone who lay there was dead. He could see some movement. The odd, shallow breath, the flicker of an eyelid. But they were injured and vulnerable and goddamned they were hurt. Fury rose inside but he pushed it down. Emotion wouldn't help. Tactical training and well-placed bullets would.

He eyed the toy store, which looked empty. The white cabinet beneath the cashier's register was still closed and not riddled with bullets. A good sign.

They were about to move when a gunman came into view inside the toy store, pacing back and forth. They all froze. The guy wore a balaclava rolled up his forehead. Aviator sunglasses and a black-trimmed beard. His features were hard to make out. Wright lined up a shot.

“Hold fire,” Jed murmured as he saw something else reflected in the glass at the other side of the store. Another gunman, then another figure—that looked like a woman under some bulky clothing and a headscarf. One of the notorious black widows? She was talking rapidly to the others though he couldn’t see her face. They were all heavily armed, no doubt conferring about their sadistic battle plans.

The cupboard door moved a fraction.

“Hell, kid, don’t come out now.” It was terrorist central, and the last thing he wanted was a firefight with a child slap bang in the middle.

CHAPTER THREE

“ANY CHANCE WE can get someone to create a distraction on the other side of the plaza so we can get in there and extract the kid?” He looked at Marcos.

Marcos kept low and moved back into the depths of the restaurant to talk to his boss.

Jed scanned the mall and spotted several shooters in the wings, all watching and waiting. For what? Victims? Cops? Santa?

“Think they’re Muslim radicals?” Wright asked him softly.

“Beats the fuck out of me. Could be Muslim, could be domestic pretending to be Muslim to stir up trouble. We’ll know more when we get an ID on the dead guy. All I really know for sure is my mother sometimes shops at this mall and that could be her lying there dead. The idea they’d shoot her as easily as they’d shoot anyone else pisses me off.”

Marcos hunkered down behind Jed’s shoulder as they watched the terrorists. “Boss has a team about to do a hard entry from the north side. They’re trying to get to the security guards who’re holed up, and hopefully get better intel on what went down earlier.” The guy stared at his watch. “Ten seconds.”

Jed counted down in his head. It felt like an eternity.

A flash bang went off, and the terrorists jerked to attention. Three of them ran in the direction of the firefight, a fourth came out of the store and started patrolling the corridor in front of them with his weapon raised. As soon as he turned his back, Marcos drew his knife, ran up behind the guy, and cut his throat. Wright moved out to cover him, sweeping his gaze and his gun over the upper levels. Jed was sprinting to the toy store before the terrorist hit the deck. He slid to a halt and opened the cupboard door. A pair of big, blue eyes locked onto him, huge with fear.

“I’ve come to get you out...”

The kid shrank to the back of the cupboard. Then he closed his eyes and started to rock, which was about to make a lot of noise in the enclosed space.

There’s something you need to know... The redhead *had* tried to tell him. He was an asshole for not listening to her.

He spoke quietly but firmly “Michael. Your mom sent me to get you out.”

The kid stopped rocking.

“You don’t believe me?”

The kid opened his eyes. Jed wished he’d say something. They had to move fast and get out before the bad guys came back and started shooting. He fished out his badge and showed it to him.

“Your mom is a redhead just like you, right? But prettier.” He joked. “And she’s loud when she’s angry, really loud, and she was angry with me for not letting her come back in here to get you like she promised.” Jed swallowed the saliva that pooled in his mouth. “She yelled at me a lot. So I guess she’s got a redheaded temperament too, huh? Fiery?” *Passionate*. He mentally kicked himself for his thoughts wandering in that direction when people were dying and he was trying to save her son. Still, he was a guy and adrenaline was pumping, amping up his idiot quota by a factor of a thousand.

The kid’s eyes locked on him. Connected. Concentrated. Jed had him, and he wasn’t about to let him go. “I don’t think she likes me very much, but if I get you out of here like I promised, I think we can get her to stop yelling at me. You think you can help me with that, Michael?”

Something weird was going on inside that kid’s brain, but clearly he wasn’t dumb. Maybe he was traumatized. Jed got it. This was not how he’d wanted to spend his day either. He offered his hand and dragged the kid out, giving him a quick squeeze of reassurance. The boy leaned down and picked up a pair of high-heeled shoes from the floor.

“Brennan, let’s go,” Marcos said. He and Wright scanned constantly for shooters. Jed held tight to Michael’s hand as they ran toward the restaurant. A woman who lay curled up on the floor groaned. Wright and Marcos didn’t break stride as they each took an arm and dragged her along too. Gunshots peppered the floor behind them, blasting out of nowhere. Jed grabbed Michael and picked up the pace. He ran inside the restaurant and turned, saw

Wright stop and take aim high above them. Two seconds later came a cry and a whoosh of noise as the shooter fell and landed not ten feet from where they all stood. Jed covered Michael's eyes and forced him to keep moving.

They sprinted fast through the kitchen and along the exit corridor, Jed taking the lead, Wright covering their asses and Marcos carrying the severely injured woman in his arms.

Wright radioed ahead that they were coming out. Fresh air hit them with a blast and they held up their hands for as long as it took to be ID'd as good guys. Another team passed them on the way back inside. Marcos handed the wounded woman off to a paramedic and Jed heard a shriek that pierced his brain.

"Michael!"

The sound of running had him bracing himself for impact.

The redhead had escaped her police babysitter and launched herself at her son like a rocket. Thankfully they'd uncuffed her. She grabbed her kid in her arms and swung him around in a tight circle, kissing him and squeezing so hard Jed winced.

"He's fine." Jed holstered the Glock.

The blue eyes told him to fuck off. Apparently rescuing her son wasn't enough to win back any good points. Too bad. Michael passed his mother the shoes and Jed noticed for the first time her feet were bloody and bare.

"Thank you, Special Agent Brennan." She surprised him. The words were tight and angry, but she got them out without choking. She closed her eyes for a moment before slipping the shoes back on.

"You're welcome. And I'm sorry I lied to you about letting you back in there..."

"Don't worry." Her lips curled. "You're not the first man to lie to me."

Ouch. Back with the glare again. He raised his hands in surrender. Another time and he'd have tried to get into her good graces, but people were trapped and bad guys were running amok in this city, killing innocents.

The redhead glanced at the woman being put on the stretcher. "Oh lord, I thought she was dead." She whirled and waved over the cop who was supposed to be in charge of her. Jed didn't know who this woman was, but she was certainly not cowed by authority. "That's the mother of the baby and toddler." She pointed to the kids she'd carried out of the mall, reminding Jed

she'd done some pretty brave things herself today and didn't need to thank him for a damned thing. "They should stay together."

The cop nodded and went off to arrange it. She turned back to him. Michael pulled away from his mother's grasp and grinned. Despite his ordeal the kid looked remarkably OK.

Press bulbs started flashing. Jed put up a hand to shield his eyes. "What the hell are they doing so close? Get them away from here." A couple of beat cops moved the offending press back to a safer distance.

Jed glanced at the woman. She and her son looked very alike though her face was so pale he could see the occasional blue of a vein beneath her skin. "He was exactly where you left him." He ruffled the boy's hair. "He was great. Never made a sound even when we were shot at."

The kid lit up like a flame, but the woman's eyes narrowed and she opened her mouth as if to lay into him. *Crap. Wrong thing to say.*

Jed held up a finger to intercept a barrage of censure. "I promised your super-brave son that you'd stop yelling at me if he came out of there with me."

She closed her mouth again. Then looked down at the carrot-topped boy and swallowed whatever she'd been going to say. "He did?"

Michael nodded rapidly, but his shoulders started to shake, shock finally setting in. Kids bounced back with ridiculous speed although they'd probably all need therapy for this one. There'd be fallout in the short-term to deal with first.

"Right." She looked drained. "I'll stop yelling then. Can we go?"

The idea of never seeing her again felt wrong, but they were in an ongoing terrorist situation. It wasn't time to ask for her number or make plans to meet for coffee.

"We need to interview both you and Michael about what he saw or overheard in the mall. What's your name?"

"Veronica Vincent—but everyone calls me 'Vivi' because of my initials." Her eyes misted, and the kid looked at the floor and scuffed his shoes. "We won't be able to tell you anything you don't already know."

"You don't understand." He lowered his voice. "Michael spent time in that store with some of the terrorists. He could have seen something or

overheard a conversation that might seem like nothing to him, but could be vital to the investigation.”

“No, *you* don’t understand.” She lifted her son in her arms, and he buried his face in her neck. “I tried to tell you earlier, but it was a little difficult from my position handcuffed on the ground.” Those eyes of hers were spitting mad with recrimination. “Michael doesn’t speak, Special Agent Brennan. He doesn’t write and he doesn’t sign. So I’m afraid he can’t help you, and I’ve already given my statement to that nice police officer over there.” She jerked her head to the guy who’d cuffed her. “Can we go now? I want to get him checked out at the hospital.”

Jed’s mouth went dry. He nodded. She turned away, but not before he spotted the anguish on both their faces.

Perplexed and frustrated, he didn’t have time to ask what the hell was up with that. Her son didn’t talk? Ever?

Shit. He rubbed his brow and went over to the command center. It was time to get the rest of these people to safety. The redhead and her kid weren’t his problem.



PILAH’S FELLOW ATTACKERS rushed toward the flash bang the authorities had thrown into the mall. The cops were beginning their assault. She hung back from the others and then spun around and watched as Jamal was shot and tumbled from the upper balcony.

Three, no, four running figures headed toward the restaurant that had a fire exit to the outside world. She glanced at the weapon in her hand and made her decision. Now or never, and she wasn’t ready to die. She ran toward where Jamal had landed, quickly wiped down the weapon they’d given her for prints, then dropped it beside the twisted wreckage of the man’s body.

Such horrific injuries—it turned her stomach. But she’d seen so much violent death and destruction over the past few years it barely registered. It wasn’t as if Jamal was someone she loved. She didn’t even like him very much.

The feds could track the burner cell she’d used, so she wiped it clean against her thigh and slipped it into Jamal’s jeans pocket.

Renewed gunfire made her hurry. She ran inside a clothing store next to the restaurant and found her size in pants, a blouse, sweater and a jacket. She took everything behind the counter and removed the security tags and price labels, then took off her boots and stripped down to her underwear. The sound of movement and the battle was getting louder. It wouldn't be long until the cops stormed the mall. Quickly she pulled on the new clothes, stuffing her old ones and headscarf under the counter. Hand sanitizer sat on the countertop and she rubbed that over her skin, hoping to disguise any gunpowder residue. She grabbed her boots and then ran to hide behind a rack of dresses, deep inside the shop.

She laced her boots and then sat perfectly still, listening to the gun battle play itself out as her heart thumped madly in her chest. Would they catch her? Would they know she was part of the attack?

It was a full ten minutes before she spotted the shadow moving across the front of the shop window. The quiet punch of footsteps reverberated up her spine. Then voices and she heard a group of people scurry out of the storeroom. She moved quickly and joined them when the cop had his back turned. A saleswoman looked at her and Pilah burst into tears. "I thought I was going to die," she sobbed.

The woman wrapped her arm around Pilah's shoulders and hugged her tight. Made her part of the group. "We all did, honey. We all did."

They followed the cop back into the mall as he led the way out. The other women gasped at the blood and carnage. Pilah covered her face with her hands. Jamal had made the ultimate sacrifice and his battle was over. Razur too. They'd be revered as martyrs the same way her husband was revered. But his ghost made a cold companion in their bed and a poor substitute as a father for their girls.

The image of her eldest daughter, Sabreena, flashed through her mind. Murdered by government troops simply because she had been in the wrong place and the wrong time. That's why Adad had taken up arms in the first place—revenge. But their other children were now stuck in Syria, a country torn apart by civil war while the West refused to act. Sargon said they needed to demonstrate that the instability in Syria could overflow even as far as the heartland of America and then the Americans would intervene. Breadcrumbs

of evidence would point to the Syrian Government, and maybe then the West would arm the rebels and help expel the vicious tyrant from power.

Sargon had requested her help, told her that her children would be raised as his own if anything happened to her. Promised to help get them to safety if she succeeded.

Well, she *had* succeeded. She'd worked at the mall for several months and supplied all the information they'd needed to stage the assault. Her stomach clenched. Many of the people she'd worked with had been killed today.

She sobbed loudly and someone patted her back. The faces of the people who had died flashed through her mind and her sobs became louder. Then she saw her own daughters. Her beloved husband.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. They'd been such normal people leading such ordinary lives. Now she had to get her daughters out of Syria, out of danger. Save her babies before the real war started.



SARGON AL SAHAD sat in his villa in Rabieh on the outskirts of Greater Beirut and chuckled at the events unwinding on his satellite TV. He'd already checked his bank account and then transferred the first half of the payment into a Swiss numbered account. He was now a very wealthy man.

Of course, he'd already been a wealthy man. And he wanted the second half of his payment, along with the luxury of time to enjoy his riches.

He popped a fresh, succulent fig in his mouth and savored the sweetness that flooded his senses. The phone beside him on the couch rang. He'd been expecting the call.

"You've done well," the voice said with no introduction.

Sargon preened. "Did I not tell you I could do it?"

"Do your people suspect?" The man's voice was deep and full of undercurrents of immense power.

Sargon craved that sort of power. "They believe we are setting up the regime so the West will step in, which I suppose is true. No one suspects anything else. Our secret is exactly that. As promised." A Syrian by birth, Sargon was sick of watching his country being systematically torn apart from the inside. For good or bad his homeland would be rid of the old regime and ready to rebuild. And when the fighting died down, he intended to be at the

forefront of that political revolution. Until then he was biding his time in Lebanon—although the people he'd recruited in the US believed he was still fighting on the frontlines. A necessary subterfuge.

“As long as the American people never suspect where the terrorist plot truly originated.”

The enemy of my enemy is my friend. “That would be a death sentence for us both,” Sargon agreed.

The man gave a heavy sigh. “Is the next part of the plan in place?”

A film of sweat bloomed on his back and made the thin cotton of his shirt stick there. This was the part that made him nervous. It was a tightly balanced plot that had many potential downfalls. He prayed it would work.

“Do not worry, my friend.” If his part in it was ever revealed it would make him the most hunted man on the planet. He didn't want Bin Laden's fame or his fate. “We both have too much to lose for this to fail. No one will link either of us to the attack. The evidence will point elsewhere.” Nothing could connect back to him or his powerful ally.

“I won't contact you again,” the man said.

Sargon put the handset back in the cradle and climbed slowly to his feet. Time to move on. People who got sloppy didn't live to get old. Sargon intended to grow very, very old.



SNOW OBSCURED ELAN'S vision, making it hard to see from his position on the roof of an insurance building a half kilometer east of the Minneapolis Mall. The mall itself was surrounded by emergency vehicles; people were running through the streets, heading away from the chaos and violence. In his homeland this was where the danger was greatest, but these people seemed oblivious.

Helicopters buzzed in the air above, risking much as the weather ramped up to a bitter, arctic storm.

Ambulances streaked through the streets below him, lights flashing, sirens screaming with a compelling sense of urgency as they swept through intersections.

Right now everything was going to plan, but he wasn't foolish enough to trust blind luck. A helicopter turned and headed toward him, back to the airport. He withdrew into the shadows.

His breath condensed on his binoculars and he wiped the lenses clean. His heart was heavy. Life was precious. But stakes were too high to lose his nerve. He had his orders, to watch, to oversee, to clean up any mess that might lead back to them. He was very good at cleaning up other people's messes.



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COLD LIGHT OF DAY

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Physicist Scarlett Stone is the daughter of the man considered to be the most notorious Russian agent in FBI history. With her father dying in prison she's determined to prove he's innocent, but time is running out. Using a false identity, she gains access to the Russian ambassador's Christmas party, searching for evidence of a set-up.

Former Navy SEAL, now FBI Special Agent, Matt Lazlo, is instantly attracted to Scarlett but life is too complicated to pursue a politician's daughter. When he discovers she lied to him about her identity, he hunts her down with the ruthless efficiency he usually reserves for serial killers.

Not only does Scarlett's scheme fail, it puts her in the sights of powerful people who reward unwanted curiosity with brutality. The FBI—and Matt—aren't thrilled with her, either. But as agents involved in her father's

investigation start dying, and the attempts to stop Scarlett intensify, Matt and his colleagues begin to wonder. Could they have a traitor in their midst?

As Scarlett and Matt dig for the truth they begin to fall passionately for one another. But the real spy isn't about to let anyone uncover their secrets, and resolves to remain firmly in the shadows—and for that to happen, Matt and Scarlett have to die.

CHAPTER ONE

“I FEEL SICK,” Scarlett Stone warned in a sharp undertone to her lifelong best friend, Angelina LeMay.

“They don’t know who you are,” Angel responded with a pat on her arm. “Relax and enjoy yourself for a change. I can’t believe you actually came with me, but I love you for it.”

Her friend wouldn’t be quite so understanding if she knew what Scarlett had hidden in her panties. She took a gulp of champagne. This was a stupid idea. Who did she think she was—James Bond?

The thought shot fear through her bloodstream. Too close to home. Too real.

But this wasn’t spying on State secrets. She was investigating an old crime, looking for the truth before it was too late. No one would help her. God knew, she’d begged every one of them over the years and they’d all refused. Now it was up to her.

The reception room where the Russian Ambassador to the United States was hosting his annual Christmas party looked like the inside of a palace, with fantastically high ceilings, icy white walls inlaid with gold detail, and two huge chandeliers shining like a galaxy of tiny stars. A grand piano off to one side was being played quietly in the background. The subtle scents of pine mingled with perfume and the spice of mulled wine—the effect cloying, yet oddly nostalgic. The place was crowded. The sense of opulence and history, staggering.

Until 1994, the ambassador’s residence had been the Russian Embassy and reeked of a rich clandestine history of secret power struggles. Fitting under the circumstances. Her father had told her the KGB used to operate out of two trailers in the back yard, in the shadow of the huge Washington

Post building. She didn't know where the KGB's modern-day equivalent, the SVR, was secreted and she hoped she never found out.

Angel's parents—her father was Congressman Adam LeMay—had received an invitation to tonight's Christmas party but hadn't wanted to attend. Angel had begged Scarlett to take the place of her sister who was hiking in the Mojave Desert. Considering the new ambassador was Andrei Anatoly Dorokhov, Scarlett hadn't been able to refuse, no matter how dangerous and desperate her plan might be. She had no choice.

She took another drink. She needed a little Dutch courage, maybe even a sedative.

“Scar, don't look now,” Angel's voice dropped to low and breathless, “but I think my future husband just walked in the door.”

Angel LeMay fell in lust on a regular basis.

“I hope you'll be very happy together,” Scarlett said without turning.

“Navy dinner dress blues and a gold cummerbund.” Her friend fanned herself with her free hand. “I am in love.”

“I thought you were only getting married for money?” Scarlett teased.

Angel flashed her dimples. “I'll make an exception for a war hero, and anyway, he might be loaded.”

Angel might be her best friend, but it didn't mean Scarlett was blind to her flaws. Her parents indulged her every whim. She “*worked*” on Capitol Hill in her father's office, doing God only knew what—answering the mail if tonight was any indication. Scarlett figured brain atrophy explained most of Angel's poor choice in men. Not that hers was much better. Lab rats and academics were the only guys she dated, and “dated” was an optimistic term. “Grabbed coffee with between experiments” was probably more accurate.

Over Angel's shoulder, Scarlett watched another guy wearing a black tux making his way toward them. His intense coal-eyed gaze never left her friend's butt. Angel was wearing a little black dress, with the emphasis on “little.” Few men could resist and fewer tried. He looked up and caught Scarlett watching him. A dimple appeared in one cheek and ebony eyes twinkled. No remorse that she'd caught him ogling her friend's ass. Just that sense of entitlement that if he wanted to stare, no one was going to stop him. Confident and powerful. Somewhere in his late twenties, early thirties, the man had player written all over his handsome face.

He walked up and introduced himself. “Welcome to the home of the Russian Ambassador to the United States. May I say it is a pleasure to welcome such beautiful young ladies. My name is Sergio Raminski, the ambassador’s personal assistant.” His *W*s sounded vaguely *V*-like, but apart from that his accent was perfect.

He looked more like a bodyguard than any personal assistant she’d ever seen, but maybe she was paranoid. Actually there was no *maybe* about it. A shiver of unease hummed over Scarlett’s skin. If ever there was a candidate for foreign intelligence agent, Raminski was it.

According to her dad, a portion of the embassy staff here were actually agents for the Kremlin, the same way some of the Americans in Moscow did more than stamp passports. Angel introduced herself and then introduced Scarlett as her sister, Sarah. Scarlett’s nerdy appearance had been overhauled by a pro, something Angel had been doing at every opportunity since kindergarten. She and Sarah looked vaguely alike now that Angel had plastered her with makeup and pulled back her hair. Scarlett had borrowed a strapless, silver gown that shimmered in the candlelight. The skirt had a net petticoat and double layers of gathered silk which flounced around her knees. Four-inch heels meant she was almost chin-level to most of the guys in the room.

Sergio bowed first over Angel’s hand, then Scarlett’s. When she tried to let go, he surprised her by holding tight for a moment, making her pulse skip a beat, though not in a good way. A blush heated her cheeks and she pulled firmly away.

“Your father was unable to attend?” Sergio asked.

Scarlett’s mouth gaped.

Angel stepped in. “After the Vice President’s funeral today he felt a little unwell. He sends his apologies.”

Scarlett swallowed the knot that had formed in her throat. Her father was the real reason she was here.

“Nothing serious, I hope?” Black eyes were alight with interest.

Insider knowledge is always of interest to Russian officials no matter how seemingly mundane—her father’s warnings flashed through her mind.

“Just something he ate at lunch.” Angel smiled. She was a pro at lying and manipulation to get what she wanted. From the hard light in his eyes, Scarlett bet money Raminski was better.

“You were lucky you did not all succumb to the sickness.” Raminski cranked up the warmth of his smile. “I would have missed out on the best part of the evening—meeting two such lovely, young ladies.”

Gag.

It wasn't only Raminski's cheesy lines that made her queasy. She was about to do something that could get her arrested. The idea made her stomach cramp. *Once in a lifetime opportunity*, she reminded herself. And once in a lifetime might be an overstatement. Fate. Serendipity. Seize the moment. *What is the worst that can happen?*

They could lock her up and throw away the key.

Crap.

She swallowed more champagne.

Angel—born flirt—smiled an electric smile and smoothed her hands over her concave stomach, as if more attention needed to be drawn to her goddess-like figure. “I wanted to fit into my dress tonight so I was a good girl at lunch.” The expression in her eyes suggested she wasn't normally a good girl.

“Your efforts are much appreciated, Ms. LeMay.” Raminski inclined his head courteously to Angel, and then to Scarlett.

He was *so* not her type. She liked men who appreciated a woman's brain at least as much as her body. Not handsome, muscle-bound jerks who only wanted a bout of hot, sweaty, mindless sex.

Gotta get over that, an inner voice complained.

And then it clicked. *This* was her chance. Angel and Sergio Raminski were all distracted and flirty with one another. She just needed ten minutes alone. “Actually,” she touched her own stomach, “I don't feel so good. If you'll excuse me for a moment, I need to visit the powder room.” She took a step back and jostled the elbow of someone behind her.

“*Fu...udge*,” said a deep male voice.

She whirled and came face-to-face with Angel's future husband. She could tell it was him because she'd made him spill champagne down the front of his dress blues.

“I’m so sorry.” She grabbed a white, cloth napkin off a nearby waiter and dabbed at the man’s white shirt and gold cummerbund. “I’m such a dork.”

“That wasn’t my first thought.” His expression caught her off-guard. It contained a very male look of admiration. She blinked. He took the napkin from her hand and she felt a shiver of something that was definitely not repulsion.

The guy looked...like... Well, he looked fabulous. And hot. Tall enough she had to tilt her head way back even wearing these ridiculous heels. He had military-short, dark blond hair that shone brightly under the chandeliers. A lean face, firm jaw, pale hazel eyes that twinkled with obvious humor and a mouth that tried to suppress it. She resisted the urge to fan herself the way Angel had earlier. Her eyes drifted lower, taking in broad shoulders and a chest-full of medals that jerked her out of her perusal. He was an American hero and not for the likes of her.

Sergio Raminski tried to step in. “Allow me to help.”

“Yeah, no thanks.” The guy held up his hand firmly as if to ward the Russian off. *Captain America meets the Dark Prince*. “Not a big fan of champagne, anyway.”

“You’re going to be all sticky.” Scarlett grimaced apologetically.

“Sarah LeMay!” Angel’s laugh got dirty and loud and Scarlett flushed with embarrassment.

She opened her mouth to insist she hadn’t meant it as a double entendre, but snapped her jaw closed. The sparkle in the sailor’s gaze intensified and Raminski’s smirk became a full-blown grin. She rolled her eyes. *Great*. Just great.

“If you’d like to get properly cleaned up I can take you to one of the guest suites, or...” Raminski tilted his head to one side and slipped into silky hospitality mode. “Miss LeMay was just going to find the restroom. Perhaps you can accompany one another?”

The American held the other man’s gaze so long Scarlett began to feel uncomfortable. Then he turned to her and held out his elbow in a courteous move. “Sure, let me escort you. We can get lost together.”

“I know who I’d like to get lost,” she muttered quietly, cutting a glance at Raminski as they walked away.

The sailor flashed her a grin. The last thing she wanted was an escort, especially the kind people noticed with good looks and glittering medals, but she needed to get out of here and making a fuss would garner too much attention. Scarlett Stone might run away and hide, but the congressman's daughters had been raised in wealth and privilege. They expected to be treated like society princesses. Outside, in the hallway, a waiter directed them down a long stretch of dimly lit corridor. According to the blueprints she'd studied, this was where she needed to go.

Her heels clicked off the parquet flooring, her footsteps echoing loudly in the relative quiet of the empty hallway. He moved silently, but she was very aware of the man at her side—his size, his looks, and warm body next to hers. They stopped when they reached the men's room and she quickly disengaged her arm. "I'm really sorry about the champagne."

"Accidents happen." He shrugged easily and held out his hand. "Matt Lazlo."

She shook his hand, his skin warm and dry; grip, strong but not crushing. Her mouth formed her real name for a split-second before she remembered who she was supposed to be. "Sarah LeMay. I'm here with my...sister, Angel." She couldn't hold his gaze, but she could hardly confess the truth just because he had pretty eyes and looked good in uniform. Some secret agent she'd make. She resisted rolling her eyes at herself.

His lips tightened and his expression turned serious. "I'm sorry they made you uncomfortable back there."

Her gaze flashed to his in surprise. She'd spent a lifetime being uncomfortable and few people noticed. She rubbed her bare arms where goose bumps raced over her skin. "It's okay. It was my fault for knocking champagne all over you. I tend to be clumsy unless I'm working." Then her hands were steady as lasers and they needed to be.

"So what is it you do?"

Crap. "Oh, nothing very important," she said vaguely. Sarah worked for an advertising agency but Scarlett didn't want to expand on the lies she'd already told and, under the circumstances, she could hardly tell him she was an expert in solid-state physics.

"Pretty earrings." He tapped one of the sparkling danglies Angel had lent her. Scarlett touched it self-consciously, not used to wearing anything flashy.

She pointed to his medals. “That’s some impressive silverware you have there yourself. Thank you for your service.” The words made her uncomfortable—not because she wasn’t sincere, but because if he knew who she really was, he wouldn’t want her thanks. She hunched her shoulders at the thought, folded up a little on herself. America thought her family was the ultimate in treacherous backstabbers and betrayers. Unless she could prove otherwise, they always would.

She noticed a pair of tiny holes in the material where a pin must have sat on his uniform jacket. She reached out and brushed her fingers over the rough edge of the material. “What did you have there?” She raised her eyes to his and watched his pupils flare in surprise.

“Nothing.”

She withdrew her hand. “So why’d you take it off?”

One side of his lips kicked up. God, he was pretty. “Take what off?” Sharp intelligence spiked those hazel depths, making them a million times more attractive, sending a jolt right through her system. The timing was a death knell to any possible relationship—and wasn’t that the story of her life. She took a step back.

The thought of what she was about to do crowded out the pleasure of meeting a guy who had gorgeous eyes and a keen sense of humor. “I suppose I better hurry up and get back to Angel.”

He pulled a face, obviously as keen to return to the party as she was.

“Why did you come tonight?” Scarlett asked, suddenly curious.

“A direct order from my boss. What about you?” He stood with his legs braced apart, watching her as if he had all the time in the world.

She didn’t have all the time in the world—she had this one brief moment to try and right a terrible wrong. Even then it might not be enough. “My parents made me,” she told him.

It wasn’t a lie.

They stood there staring into each other’s eyes, and Scarlett forgot to breathe. It was one of those rare moments when you met someone and wanted to spend the whole night getting to know them better. She finally broke the connection. It could never be. She turned and walked to the entrance of the ladies’ room, and when she glanced back, Matt Lazlo had disappeared.

Matt Lazlo was not the man for her, no matter how much she might want him to be. His uniform should have served as warning enough.

Scarlett's father's favorite quote had been, "The price of freedom is eternal vigilance," but he'd still ended up in a supermax prison serving multiple life sentences for treason. Now Scarlett was about to take the concept of vigilance to a whole new level and God help her if she got caught.

Inside the restroom, she held the door for a woman who was just leaving. From her position half-hidden behind the large oak door, she spotted the Russian Ambassador coming out of a room across the hall, a room her research suggested was his office. She recognized his face from official photographs—shaggy blond hair and craggy forehead. Short, stocky, but good looking in a blunt, powerful way. Fourteen years ago he'd been the diplomatic attaché here in Washington. He'd returned to Moscow shortly before her father had been arrested.

Coincidence? Scarlett didn't think so.

Her father had always been suspicious of Andrei Dorokhov, but he hadn't found any concrete evidence of espionage. He must have gotten too close, and somehow the Russian had figured out a way to frame him—Scarlett was hoping to discover exactly how and exonerate her father.

The ambassador straightened his fancy white jacket and strode along the hallway in firm strides. Another man left after him, moving in the opposite direction. Scarlett eyed the slowly closing door to the office. Her plan had been to plant her device inside a cleaning supply closet around the corner that shared an inner wall with Dorokhov's office. The technology should be good enough to pick up conversations, but it wasn't ideal. Taking a chance, she dashed across the hall, caught the door just before it latched and darted into the office, closing it gently behind her.

It was dark and she flicked on the overhead light to make sure no one else was in the room. Easier to plead ignorance at the start than to snoop around and find someone sitting in the dark, watching her commit a crime. The room was beautiful in its old-fashioned opulence. A marble fireplace with a large gold-framed mirror above it formed the focal point of the room, and heavy red, velvet curtains shut out the rest of the world. A massive desk made of some dark wood with a satin finish sat to her right.

If she was caught here she didn't know what they'd do to her, but it wouldn't be good.

An ornate brass lamp on the desk was perfect for her needs. She hitched up her skirt and reached inside her panties, removed a small plastic bag. Carefully she laid the lamp on the desk and removed her tiny expandable screwdriver from the bag. It was fiddly, but after only a few seconds she'd removed the base of the lamp and peered inside.

A wave of icy horror swept over her bare shoulders and down her spine. Inside the lamp was another electronic listening device. A sophisticated one. Not a remnant of the Cold War. *Crappity crap*. She wanted to scream but clamped her lips shut. Sweat bloomed on her skin and her palms grew damp. Someone was already spying on Andrei Dorokhov, or his predecessor. And that someone might right now have her under surveillance.

This isn't happening.

She squeezed her eyes tightly shut. Then pulled herself together. It was happening and she needed to get out of there. Fast.

Quickly, she reassembled the lamp and wiped off her prints. There was every chance whoever was spying on the Russians had just witnessed her attempting to do the same thing. Or maybe they only had audio... *Please, only have audio.*

She stuffed the small plastic bag of equipment down her bodice, turned off the light before opening the door a few millimeters. No one was in the corridor so she slipped quickly across the hall into the bathroom. She flushed the transmitter down the toilet and dropped the screwdriver in the garbage.

Her chance was gone. Maybe it had never truly existed—just another fragile hope to keep the illusion alive. She leaned her forehead against the wooden stall door as her heart slammed into her ribs. Adrenaline made her dizzy. Skin clammy. Her body alternated between hot then cold as her reaction shifted from panic to despair. She needed to get out of here. She couldn't believe she'd been so stupid and naïve as to think she could pull this off, but maybe that's how her father had been framed in the first place. Stupid and naïve must run in the family, along with gullible and unlucky.



FBI SPECIAL AGENT Matt Lazlo watched Sarah LeMay hightail it across the plush carpet back to her sister. She intrigued him. Less confident than her sister. Not as obviously beautiful, but certainly more attractive—to him, anyway. Deep thoughts lurking beneath the surface—thoughts he'd like to explore and, come to think of it, a surface he wouldn't mind exploring either. She even smelled good—tangy lemon that was both sweet and fresh.

She wasn't his usual type, all big dark eyes and waif-like figure. He liked lush curves, long hair and a good time smile.

The sister had curves but for some reason it was Sarah who held his attention. They'd shared a connection earlier. He'd have had to be dead not to notice it, and despite many close calls, he wasn't dead yet. He was tempted to ask for her number, though the idea of taking a politician's daughter out for a night on the town did not mesh with his tight budget.

Everyone had to live a little, right?

“A friend of yours?” the Russian Ambassador's wife asked.

Damn. He shouldn't have let his attention wander. She'd cornered him when he walked back into the reception and Matt's survival instincts had kicked in. FBI agents should not hang with beautiful women from the Russian Embassy. If anyone other than Assistant Special Agent in Charge Lincoln Frazer had asked him to do this he'd have wondered about the guy. But Frazer was the rock star of the FBI—he could probably form his own division if he wanted. The guy had received an unexpected invitation to dinner with the President of the United States and had asked Matt to step in at the last minute. Matt would rather be back on his boat drinking beer, but it was hard to refuse Frazer, especially on the day they'd buried the Vice President. The latter had died from a heart-attack at his home in Kentucky. It had followed a series of events that had gotten one of Matt's best friends shot, and the president almost killed. Attending a Christmas reception in Frazer's stead seemed like a small favor under the circumstances.

Matt had joined the FBI for peace and quiet, and a more regular work schedule. The last six weeks had been anything but. He was looking forward to a little R&R over Christmas.

The Ambassador's wife was looking at him expectantly.

“No, ma'am. I only met her earlier when she spilled champagne down my shirt.”

Natalie Dorokhov had inky-black hair and ruby-red lips—more Wicked Witch than Snow White. The woman sipped her champagne and eyed him thoughtfully. “She looks about fifteen.” Her eyes were pale blue and looked a hell of a lot older than fifteen.

Matt smiled politely. Sarah LeMay was not a little girl. She just had that youthful wholesomeness that defied years. Pointing that out to this woman would go down like a case of VD so he changed the subject. “Are you enjoying Washington, ma’am?”

Natalie smiled smugly. “I enjoy meeting new people. My husband was stationed here years ago, before we met, so he knows the city and has friends here.” Her bare shoulders rose and fell. “Though I do dislike being treated like an agent for the Kremlin every time I go to ‘tea.’”

“Comes with the territory, I guess.” No way was he talking Russian security with her, ever.

Sarah was whispering urgently into her sister’s ear before she began physically dragging her toward the door. Sergio Raminski looked pissed. Matt didn’t trust the guy and was glad the LeMay women were putting some distance between them and him. Matt had wanted to talk to Sarah again, but she didn’t even glance in his direction. So much for the connection he’d imagined.

Too bad. He turned his attention back to Natalie. “Your English is excellent, ma’am.”

“Thank you.” Her smile grew wider, as if she was hiding a secret. “I had some very good teachers.” Her expression changed. “Ah, my husband is trying to get my attention.” She put her hand on his bicep and squeezed. It sent a bolt of *get-me-the-fuck-out-of-here* straight through him. “It was nice to meet you, Matthew.” Because he introduced himself as Matt, people made assumptions he rarely bothered to correct. “I hope we will meet again sometime soon.”

He hoped not.

“Natalie.” He inclined his head. First name terms with the Russian Ambassador’s wife...? His old buddies on the teams would laugh their asses off, not to mention his colleagues at the FBI. God help him.

Matt checked his watch, figured he'd fulfilled his duty, and handed his glass off to the nearest waiter. He was dog-tired after pulling a series of fifteen-hour days trying to help get monsters off the streets.

Sarah LeMay and her sister were nowhere to be seen. He gave a mental shrug. Not the sort of woman he should be pursuing anyway. Sarah didn't seem like the no-strings, fling type and he was too busy with work and figuring out his mother's care regime to fit in a relationship. He texted Frazer's driver and headed downstairs. The limo was just pulling along the curb when he stepped onto the sidewalk of 16th Street.

There stood Angel and Sarah LeMay arguing on the pavement. Angel was obviously not happy with her sister. He couldn't hear exactly what was being said but she was shaking her finger in Sarah's face and cursing like a senior chief. The urge to step in and protect the slighter woman was almost overwhelming.

Frazer *had* hijacked his evening and told him to enjoy himself. "Can I offer you ladies a ride?"

Angel's furious expression immediately cleared though Sarah grabbed her arm and tried to hold her back.

"You sure can, handsome." Angel shrugged off her sister's grip and sashayed toward him. He almost swallowed his tongue when her coat gaped and he noticed where her hemline hit her thighs. *Holy cow*. The fact he hadn't noticed earlier was astonishing because the woman had *legs*. It pissed him off. He was a trained observer and he'd been distracted. What else had he missed?

Angel slid into the limo and began searching for a bar. Sarah stood on the sidewalk staring at him with haunted eyes. Her chin lifted a notch and her throat rippled. Angel was a flirt but her sister was a different creature entirely.

"Coming?" he questioned.

Emotions raced behind her eyes and she looked like she wanted to bolt.

"Are you okay?" He took a step forward.

She pressed her lips together and nodded quickly. "Yes, thank you." But her voice was small, all laughter gone. Not the same woman who'd teased him earlier. There was something fragile about her. Considering the cynical nature of his job, he was surprised it attracted him so much. He didn't do fragile. He did tough and feisty. Women who gave him shit and knew the

score. Women who didn't get upset when he didn't call them the next day, or ever. Sarah LeMay looked like the exact opposite of his usual type and he had no idea why she drew him so completely.

"Want to get in the car?"

Her eyelids closed for a moment and then blinked wide as if afraid to drop her guard. She moved toward him, bunching her skirt to climb in beside her sister.

"Where to?" he asked, getting in beside them.

"A club." Angel looked frustrated by the lack of alcohol in the vehicle.

Welcome to the Bureau.

"Home." Sarah's voice trembled. "I'm not feeling well."

It would explain her rapid change in demeanor.

Angel eyed her sister narrowly. "Scar, I swear to God..."

"Scar?" Matt queried.

"Nickname." Sarah said quickly. "Can you drop us at one-forty-five 19th Street, please?"

Matt gave the driver the address while he watched the interaction between the two sisters.

Something was squirrely. Angel's lips were pressed firmly together, index finger tapping impatiently on her exposed knee. Sarah stared fixedly out the window. The short hairs on the nape of his neck went taut.

None of his business.

Angel turned back to him and broke the tense silence. "So where are you going next, sailor?"

Sarah shot her a glare.

"Home."

"And where is home?" She tossed her blonde locks over her left shoulder.

"Virginia."

When he didn't elaborate Angel went back to her impatient tapping.

If Sarah had been the one asking would he have answered differently? Maybe. Would he have offered to bring her home? Definitely maybe. The more he looked at her the prettier he realized she was. Darker brows, dark lashes, perfect lips. Gold streaks amongst mid-brown hair that was pinned messily to her nape. Angel was gorgeous—as was the ambassador's wife—

but neither of them had that...what the hell was it? Sweetness? Vulnerability? Smarts?

But the woman was practically vibrating in her seat. He resisted the need to reach out and squeeze her hand in reassurance.

They arrived at the women's house in awkward silence. He got out and held the door. Angel stalked up the stone steps of her parents' home in heels that could be used as lethal weapons. Killer heels, killer dress, killer face. All of which left him cold.

Sarah climbed out of the limo more slowly. "Th-thank you for the ride."

"You're welcome. I hope you feel better soon." Matt stared at her intently, wishing she'd meet his gaze, wanting to ask her out. She turned away and followed her sister up the steps.

Frustrated because cowardice was not something Matt usually tolerated in himself, he climbed back into the limo and the driver pulled away from the curb. He turned to look through the rear windshield. Sarah LeMay was standing on the top step staring after him as if she had regrets of her own.

Dammit.

CHAPTER TWO

SCARLETT FOLLOWED ANGEL inside the LeMay family row house. The decor was all white walls and pale wood, stylish and appropriate for entertaining bigwigs, as well as being a warm and inviting family home. Scarlett had always felt welcome here. Now she felt like a fraud.

“You’re home early.” Angel’s mother, Valerie, came out of the lounge into the hall to greet them, kissing them both on the cheek. “I thought you were going to a club?”

“Scar wasn’t feeling good so we came home early.” Angel’s voice held an edge her mother thankfully missed. Her best friend was seriously pissed and Scarlett didn’t blame her.

Valerie put a cool hand on Scarlett’s brow. The woman was even shorter than she was. Concerned brown eyes raked her with affectionate concern. “You don’t feel hot but you look pale. You want to stay here tonight?”

“Thanks, Mrs. LeMay.” Scarlett always called her ‘Mrs. LeMay’ even though for years the woman had said to call her Valerie. “I should probably go home. I have work tomorrow.”

“On Christmas Eve?” Those brown eyes widened.

Scarlett nodded. “It’s a good time to be in the lab. Quiet. Mom’s gone for the week to visit Dad...” Silence pressed down like a felled tree. *Crap.*

“You’re coming for Christmas dinner, right?” Valerie asked.

Scarlett shook her head. “I have an experiment—”

“Nonsense. You’re coming here. I won’t hear another word about it.” Valerie nodded decisively and that was that.

“Okay, thanks,” Scarlett finished lamely. Assuming she hadn’t been arrested and stuffed in jail...

“Oh, dear.” Valerie reached up to touch her right ear. “You lost an earring.”

Scarlett froze as her hand shot up to check. Please don't let it have fallen when she was in Dorokhov's office. Chances were slim. It could have fallen off in the reception room or the bathroom or in the limousine. She'd only been in the office for a couple of minutes, tops.

It was easy to tell yourself not to worry but harder to actually make yourself do it.

"I'll leave you guys to it. Your father and I are watching *It's A Wonderful Life*," Valerie said. "We're at my favorite part where they fall in the pool."

Angel shook her head. "I don't know how you stand the excitement, Mom."

"That's why you have to enjoy yourself when you're young because when you're older you'll just want to stay in and watch old movies with your crusty, old hubby." She kissed her daughter's forehead and walked into the family room, closing the door behind her.

"You're about as exciting as my mother, you know that?" Angel muttered. "Except when she was our age she knew how to party. By the time you hit fifty, we may as well bury you."

Scarlett flinched and crossed her arms. Angel had a Ph.D. in bitchery, which she put to good use when she was mad. It was easier to ride out the storm than fight. Scarlett followed her friend up the stairs so she could get changed and leave. She needed to be alone.

"I don't know what the hell is wrong with you," Angel continued. "Two of the hottest guys I've seen in *forever* and you drag me away like we're in mortal danger. Do you even like men?"

Scarlett sighed. "I like men just fine."

"I mean the good looking ones, not the dweebs you date." Angel stomped up to the top floor and flung open the door to her bedroom.

Maturity wasn't her strong point. Loyalty was.

Under the circumstances Scarlett hadn't had much choice except to leave the party—not that she could tell Angel her reasons. She couldn't risk involving her in a potential scandal that might get seriously ugly considering who her father was. Angel would go ballistic if she found out the truth and Scarlett didn't want to deal with it right now. Her jaw ached from clenching her teeth. She really hadn't planned this out very well, too excited at the

opportunity to plant a listening device to think about the repercussions if things went wrong.

She dropped the remaining earring on Angel's dressing table. "Sorry I lost your earring."

Angel grunted and threw off her heels.

Scarlett would replace the jewelry as soon as she could get to the store.

Angel wasn't done. "How many years have I stood by you? Have I ever asked for anything in return?"

Constantly.

"I'm twenty-five years old and I feel like I'm already trapped inside my boring life. We were supposed to *party*, remember? And that sailor—*oh, my God, Scarlett*, did you even notice the way he looked at you?"

"I spilled champagne down his shirt. He looked at me like I was an idiot."

"He didn't." Angel shook her head. "He was scorching hot and he was into you. You didn't even get his number. You're such a pain in the ass."

Scarlett shed her coat and walked through the adjoining door to Sarah's room to hang it on the back of her door. Yes, she'd noticed how Matt Lazlo had looked at her. It was just another crappy part of another crappy day because she'd desperately wanted a man to look at her like that, and now it had happened... *Hasta la vista, baby.*

In the long run she'd saved herself some major heartache. That wasn't fatalism; it was fourteen long years of experiencing what happened when people found out who her father was.

She found the zipper at the back of the dress and tugged it down, sliding off her heels along with the dress. Sarah was the opposite of her sister in many ways though she liked pretty clothes. She was an outdoor nut. Hiking, climbing, skiing. The only interest Angel had in the outdoors was whether or not she'd get her hair and make-up messed up if she got caught in the rain.

Scarlett wiped off the heavy make-up in the bathroom, then quickly changed back into jeans, black sweater and sneakers. She left her hair pinned at the back of her head, which she covered with a tweed, cloth cap. She grabbed her green, wool jacket off the bed, along with a long scarf, which she wrapped around her neck twice to combat the winter chill.

Angel lay on her bed in her underwear. The woman didn't have a self-conscious bone in her body. She was looking at her phone and smiling.

"I have to go." Scarlett stood awkwardly in the doorway.

Angel's blue eyes cut to her. "You have to get over it, Scar, it's past time. Your dad is in prison. Most people don't even remember what he did—"

"He didn't do it," Scarlett snapped.

Angel lunged to her feet and grabbed Scarlett's arm. Her fingers tightened in a painful grip. "He did it. He got six US intelligence officers killed and sold the United States out to the Russians. You have to accept it and you have to move on. You are not your father."

Scarlett stared into the face of her best friend and said the words she'd been keeping locked deep inside since her mother had told her last week. "He's dying. Dad's got cancer and he's dying."

Angel's eyes widened and then closed before she pulled Scarlett into a fierce embrace. Scarlett crumpled and they both dropped to the bed. She wrapped her arms around her best friend and tried to hold back the sobs that wanted to escape.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Angel stroked her back, up and down, a warm, calming touch. "Why do you never tell me anything until I yank it from you by being a complete and utter bitch?"

Scarlett wiped her wet cheeks. "You seem to enjoy yourself so..."

"Ha." Angel let her go and Scarlett sat up.

She studied the thick, wool rug at her feet. "I couldn't talk about it, it was just too raw." She looked up. "I'm sorry I didn't give you the chance to get Raminski's phone number."

Angel raised one brow. "What makes you think I didn't get his number?" Her friend's grin was sly and wicked.

Scarlett opened her mouth. "You acted like you were Cinderella dragged from the ball, only you forgot to drop the shoe."

"No way would I leave behind a shoe." Angel's shoes cost more than Scarlett's car. "But more to the point, I also got the sailor's number." Her blue eyes were assessing. "Do you want it?"

Was Angel bluffing? She had to be bluffing.

Scarlett remembered the way he'd looked at her before she got in the limo. Like he cared, which was crazy because he didn't know her, and if he

did he'd run a mile. No one wanted to know her when they figured out who she was, and that would go double for an American war hero.

She swallowed to moisten her suddenly arid throat. "No, I don't want it." But the lie abraded her tongue.



MATT STRETCHED OUT in the back of the limo, eyes closed. He'd taken a quick detour to the White House to catch up with his buddy Jed Brennan who he hadn't seen since the guy had been shot. Now Jed was off to sleep in some fancy DC hotel with a very lovely redhead. The guy was so obviously in love with the woman and her cute kid that Matt kind of felt choked. Jed was going to make a great dad, something every child should have, something Matt had missed out on. Still, it had made him a better man in the long run. The asshole who'd fathered him had hardly been a good role-model.

Now Matt was on his way home. One more day until Christmas, and although the wackos never stopped doing their whacked-out shit, even the FBI's behavioral analysts got to chill out in a turkey coma for a few hours. Matt was looking forward to some solid sleep and serious time spent with his mother—not that she'd appreciate it, but it wouldn't stop him being there for her.

His cell rang and he dug it out of his pocket. He frowned when he looked at the screen.

What the hell was ASAC Jon Regan, unit chief of TacOps I, doing calling this late?

"Lazlo," Matt answered.

"You alone?"

Matt glanced at the limo driver but the privacy screen was up. "In a government issue limo."

"You were at the Russian Ambassador's residence?"

Matt swung his legs off the seat and sat up, suddenly wide awake. "You following me?"

"No." Regan laughed but it sounded strained. "Can you tell me why you were there?"

Matt buzzed his fingers through his short hair. TacOps I specialized in covert entry in order to place sophisticated listening and surveillance devices

at targeted locations. Basically they were government sanctioned burglars with an array of spy tools that would make James Bond drool.

“ASAC Frazer asked me to take his place at some Christmas party. Pain in the ass.” He thought about Sarah LeMay and pressed his lips together. He didn’t do regrets—something he’d inherited from his father—but right now he had a few when it came to that woman and her big, brown eyes and lack of phone number. “Why?”

“I’m going to send you a photograph. I want to know if you know this girl.”

Matt waited for the image to come through. The picture showed a cute backside encased in a heart-stopping dress with all those crazy petticoats as she leaned over a desk. As distracting as the view was, he concentrated on what she was doing—she looked like she was...dismantling a lamp. *Fuck.*

“Well?” asked Regan.

“Her name is Sarah LeMay—”

“Congressman LeMay’s daughter?”

“Yep. She was there with her sister, Angel. Knocked champagne down my front and I walked her to the restroom so I could get cleaned up.”

“You think it was an accident?”

Matt thought back to the whole thing. “I did. What’s going on?”

“That photo is a still shot of her taking the baseplate off a lamp in Ambassador Dorokhov’s office.”

Matt’s mouth went as dry as a blowtorch. She was an operator? In which case she was beyond a pro. She’d reeled him in with her display of innocent vulnerability. Was *he* a target? Son of a bitch.

Regan cleared his throat. “She was trying to plant a bug in the Ambassador’s office only to discover someone beat her to it.”

“Someone?” Matt asked dryly.

“That’s right.” Humor ran through Regan’s voice.

“Why the hell would she bug the Russian Ambassador’s office?”

“Damned if I know, that’s why I called you. You left the same time as she did.”

Matt nodded, not surprised that there was surveillance on the street. Watching the comings and goings from foreign embassies must be routine for counterintelligence services. “I gave them both a ride home.”

“Give ’em anything else?” The voice was more cautious now.

What’s going on?

“If I said ‘I wish’ do I have to go to sensitivity training?”

“No straight single man on earth would need sensitivity training for telling the God’s honest truth. Those women were hot. You should have seen where she hid the screwdriver.”

Remembering the lines of her dress, Matt had a good idea. *Shit*. He rubbed his forehead. The idea that he’d been duped did not sit well. “I dropped them at the congressman’s house and the driver took me to the White House—”

“You went to the White House?” Regan sounded as if he was choking on his tongue.

“Not inside. Just the rear entrance to meet up with a buddy of mine for a few minutes. It wasn’t planned, and I didn’t tell her I was going there.”

There was a long, tense silence. “Can you meet me at The Center?”

“Now?” Matt virtually passed it on the way to his home. “Do I have a choice?”

“Nope.”

“I had a feeling you were going to say that.”

“Tis the season to give joy.”

“Trust me, if anyone is going to give me joy I don’t want it to be you.” His mind cut back to the elfin face of Sarah LeMay. An operator who’d nailed him with a pair of big, brown eyes. He’d obviously lost his touch. “I’ll be there in ten. Make sure there’s plenty of coffee.”



ANDREI DOROKHOV OPENED the door to his office and strode inside. His wife and Sergio followed, arm in arm. Natalie was drunk, but he didn’t mind. She flirted with everyone she met, male or female, but she’d never betray him. She wouldn’t dare.

Sergio might.

His “assistant” was ruthless and ambitious, but he wasn’t stupid. Sergio Raminski wouldn’t mess with him unless there was something to gain from it. Andrei understood Sergio better than anyone. He’d once been exactly like him.

Andrei walked to the fireplace and opened a box of Cuban cigars, offered Sergio one and then clipped the end of another before lighting it. The soothing aroma of sweet tobacco eased into his lungs. Natalie poured them each another glass of vodka.

“Here’s to a successful evening.” She passed him the drink and smiled at him in that way she had, as if he were the only man in the room.

He was lucky to have her. He raised his glass. “*Vashe Zdoroviye, lyubov moya.*”

He took a drink. He wasn’t tired. He’d spent most nights of his working life walking the streets of various cities of the world, hiding in dark alleys, passing cash and instructions via dead drops. Running agents. Retrieving information. Passing it on. It was a world where he was comfortable and sure of himself. It was here in this embassy that he worried he wouldn’t be what his superiors wanted. He’d pushed for this job. He’d wanted a way to return to the US but to remain untouchable.

A sense of nostalgia uncoiled inside him—it must be the Christmas spirit or one too many toasts to the ladies. For nearly two decades he’d run spy rings around the globe. He missed the thrill of the old days, but he was in DC to make sure the past stayed buried, and certain lies died with the truth. The network of Russian agents had always been more formidable than its American counterpart. Andrei had worked hard and sacrificed much to make sure it stayed that way. Only one man had ever really suspected him, but Andrei had taken care of him the way he took care of everything—with ruthless efficiency.

Sergio wandered over toward the curtains. The younger man was handsome and charming, obviously eager to be off screwing some woman rather than seeing to his master’s needs. Sergio had the looks and skills to go a long way in the diplomatic corp—more importantly, he had powerful connections who were all getting richer as Russia expanded its energy empire.

The first hint of a hangover sliced across the backs of his eyes. A sure sign of age and a weakness he wouldn’t reveal to anyone. “What do we have planned for tomorrow?” he asked.

“Lunch with the Canadian Ambassador, then an afternoon reception at the embassy for all the diplomats and embassy staff. After that you are free until the twenty-seventh when there is a cocktail party at the Smithsonian.”

Russians didn't celebrate Christmas until January 7 and then it was a shadow of the celebrations the Americans indulged in. The only religion that had thrived in Russia for the last century had been Communism. Andrei enjoyed the season, although he saw little relationship between the birth of Christ and shopping. Even so, his wife would have his hide if he didn't get her a generous gift. He planned to take them away for a few days skiing in the mountains, somewhere with a hot tub to soak his aching bones at the end of a day on the slopes.

Sergio continued pacing, then paused, stepped back, bent over and picked something small off the floor that glittered in the light.

Andrei frowned, then strode forward and took it from his assistant's palm. An earring. He raised his brow at his wife. "Do you recognize this?"

Her eyes widened at his tone and she shook her head. "No."

Sergio peered closer into Andrei's palm and pressed his lips together. "It may have been the earring of one of tonight's guests."

"Did you bring her in here?" Andrei asked softly.

Sergio's eyes narrowed. "No, Your Eminence."

"Sweep the room."

"It was swept earlier today, Your Excellency." There was impatience in the man's black eyes.

Andrei gripped Sergio's throat and squeezed. "Sweep. It. Again. Properly this time. Take apart every light-fitting. Every telephone. Examine every cable. No one sleeps until I know the entire building is secure!" Fury ripped through him. He shoved the younger man away and hurled his crystal tumbler at the fireplace where it shattered into a thousand pieces. Clear liquid dripped down the white marble.

He headed for the door.

"Andrei," Natalie called after him. "It's just an earring."

"It's proof someone was in here when they shouldn't have been." He clicked his fingers and though her eyes narrowed, she closed her mouth and followed him out of the room without saying another word. Good. He was not in the mood to control his wife. He was not in the mood to be nice or polite or diplomatic. These people didn't understand the stakes. They might think they did, but they didn't. He would not let the Americans get the better of him. They strode down the stairs, Sergio following closely, past the rooms

used for various social functions and administrative purposes, through the kitchens before taking an elevator down to the basement.

Mishka, his head of security, came out the door to meet him. “Do you need something, Your Excellency?”

Andrei held up the earring, which sparkled, in the dim light. “This was on the floor of my office. How did it get there?” He pushed past the man into the security section, straight to the monitors that showed all the cameras within the residence. There were none in his private rooms—above all, he understood the value of privacy. But all the public areas, all the corridors, were monitored.

The uniformed guard scanning the monitors looked at his boss nervously.

“Show me the footage from the corridor outside my office tonight. Start at 7:20 PM.” He’d been in his office until just after that.

The security guard scrolled back on the time log and then started playing forward at double speed.

“Stop. Her.” Sergio pointed at a woman dressed in a smoky-colored dress, talking to a man wearing a Navy uniform. The guard slowed it down to normal speed.

Andrei watched her closely, noticed she was wearing earrings very like the one he held in his hand.

She and the military man stood close together, as if entranced by one another. *How sweet.* Then she stepped back and walked away. The man went into the men’s room and she entered the ladies’ room. Another woman came out, and then he saw himself striding out of his office, adjusting his sleeves, eager to get to the party.

He moved out of sight and a few moments later the woman in the pretty, silver dress dashed out of the restroom and across the hall, into his office before the door fully closed.

“Fast forward,” Andrei ordered.

Sweat gleamed on the security guard’s brow. It didn’t take long before the woman exited his office and ran back to the restroom. She looked scared and upset. One of her earrings was missing.

“I don’t know how I missed this,” the guard said, voice trembling. “I swear I never moved from my post.”

The head of security cuffed the man across the back of the head.
“*Mudak.*”

“Who is she?” Andrei demanded.

“Sarah LeMay,” Sergio answered quickly. “She was here with her sister, Angel.”

Everything inside Andrei went cold. “LeMay?”

Sergio nodded.

“The congressman’s daughter?”

“They were invited as you requested.” Sergio’s brows crinkled.

Andrei had sent the invitation in jest—as a warning. He’d never imagined any of them would come. “The man in uniform, who is he?” he demanded. This was bad. This was very, very bad.

Natalie answered. “A young man called Matthew Lazlo.”

“He represented FBI Agent Lincoln Frazer,” Sergio put in. “A last minute switch.”

Andrei had wanted to meet the other federal employee. “So Matthew Lazlo is also FBI?”

Natalie shrugged. Sergio nodded.

Fury moved inside Andrei’s veins; cold, precise like razor-sharp ice. He reached inside Sergio’s jacket, watching the younger man’s pupils flare as he took his gun. Andrei whirled and slammed the guard on the side of the head with the butt of the pistol. The man fell unconscious over the console.

“He’s lucky I didn’t kill him.” He spat on the man. “Send him home. We do not tolerate amateurs.” He handed the gun back to Sergio, who took it carefully.

“Do you want to issue an official complaint to the Americans?” Sergio asked in a level voice.

“*Nyet.*” Was the FBI running surveillance on him inside the embassy? Impossible. The stakes were too high, his retribution too potentially damaging. He needed to know what was going on. “Find me the girl, *quietly.*” said Andrei. “I want to talk to her.” The conversation wouldn’t be pretty. “And find out everything you can about the man.” He turned to his Security Chief. “No more mistakes, Mishka. Next time I won’t be so understanding.”

CHAPTER THREE

TO ALL INTENTS and purposes, the top-secret Tactical Operations Center—or “the Center” as agents in the know usually called it—looked like a light industrial manufacturing facility. It was situated off the grounds of the Marine Corps base in Quantico for purposes of safety and secrecy.

Jon Regan held up some sort of wand. Not the magic kind.

Matt raised his arms and kept his mouth shut until the man finished running the thing over his body. *Great.* Another guy examined the limo. What the hell was going on?

“Okay, come with me.” Jon strode away.

Matt followed him through one door and then another, into a windowless room within a room. On one of the big screens, Sarah LeMay was displayed in glorious Technicolor as she flicked on a light switch. On another screen was a live-feed of the same room.

“Play the video,” Regan ordered, standing with hands on hips, watching the screens. “The team monitoring the surveillance feeds gave us the heads up as soon as they spotted her in there. We patched into the feed after that.”

The tech pressed a button and Sarah sprang to life. She entered the fancy office, looked around for a moment, and headed toward the desk. She hitched up her skirts, revealing a pair of shapely legs in those spiky heels. He could just make out the edge of black lace. The atmosphere in the enclosed space got hot and tense as she dipped her fingers into those panties. He could only see lingerie, but it didn’t stop his imagination taking it a step further. Sweat burst out from his skin.

He’d never suspected a thing.

She’d been taking the lamp apart with deft dexterity while he’d been wondering if he should ask her out. He’d been played. The expression on her

face when she saw the other bug was priceless, as was the realization as she glanced nervously around the room, that there might be a camera hidden somewhere. It made him feel a little better.

“Shit. Here we go.” The tech pointed to the live screen. Four men entered the room and started picking up objects and examining them in detail.

“It was only a matter of time,” Regan said with his arms crossed. He sounded pissed.

In her video, Sarah reassembled everything, but Matt noticed something small catch the light as it dropped to the floor. “She lost her earring?”

“That is why we don’t wear jewelry on an op.” Regan nodded. “They already found it.”

This explained the henchmen taking the place apart.

Matt watched the woman tuck the small plastic bag into her bodice with a lot more discretion this time. He hadn’t noticed her missing earring when he’d seen her afterward—too busy looking deep into her eyes. *Asshole.*

There was a knock on the door. Jon Regan went over and opened it. Assistant Special Agent in Charge Lincoln Frazer walked in wearing a tailored tux. He must have left the White House shortly after Matt.

“I’m starting to feel under-dressed,” Regan said dryly. To the tech he said, “Play it again.”

This time when Matt watched the video, he kept an eye on her facial expression, on her body language. “She’s not acting like a pro.”

Frazer leaned back on his heels, considering her. “More like she’s being forced to do something she doesn’t want to do. Why were you bugging Dorokhov?” he asked the TacOps guy.

“That’s need to know,” Regan said apologetically.

“I need to know,” Frazer argued.

“Yeah.” Regan’s lips formed a smirk. “I’ll get back to you on that one.”

“The Russians have a camera set up in that corridor.” Matt pointed out. Even blinded by Sarah LeMay’s seemingly innocent charm, he’d spotted it in the dim recesses. “Is it active?”

Regan nodded. “When we went in, at night when the big wigs were elsewhere, we hacked into security and played a loop of the place in darkness. It was a piece of cake.”

Sarah LeMay had uncanny observational skills. The woman had spotted where he usually wore his Budweiser—the SEAL Trident he'd earned by passing Basic Underwater Demolition/ SEAL training. He'd removed it because he hadn't felt comfortable announcing his special operations background when entering enemy territory. Pity she hadn't noticed the surveillance camera watching the hall. A real operator would have. So, what was she, if she wasn't an operator?

"She didn't do any of that," Frazer said quietly. "So it won't be long before they figure out she was in there. Why would she want to bug Dorokhov?"

"Blackmail? Or maybe she works for another agency or another country?" Regan suggested with a shrug.

"Maybe it's personal," said Matt.

"What was your impression of her?" Regan asked him, "Besides the obvious."

Matt slumped into an empty chair. "She seemed vulnerable. Shy. Uncomfortable."

"You try walking in high heels with a screwdriver in your panties and you'd be uncomfortable," the tech joked.

Matt laughed but inside he felt sick. Duped. "It wasn't that." Jeez, he was gonna sound like a pussy. "She seemed...fragile." He shrugged. "Thinking about it, she seemed okay before she tried to plant the bug, but on the ride home she barely said a word except that she wasn't feeling well."

"Not surprised. She fucked up and she knew it." Regan's tone held no pity.

"She and her sister fought about something." Probably her failed mission. That's why they'd fled so fast, but Angel hadn't wanted to leave...

"You think the sister was a distraction?" Frazer asked.

"Did you see those legs?" Regan snorted.

Matt shook his head. "I don't know. The only person I saw the sister speak to was some asshole called Raminski."

"We checked him out. He's former military, probably GRU or SVR, acts as a PA to the ambassador and bodyguard if the occasion requires. He's good at his job. Has a string of women he loves and leaves on a regular basis.

Seems as kosher as any Russian in DC.” The assumption was that they all worked for Russian intelligence. It was simpler that way.

“What’s Congressman LeMay’s connection to Dorokhov?” asked Matt.

“We got nothing.” Regan threw up his arms.

“He was invited, so there’s something,” Matt insisted.

“Hey, Frazer was invited too.” Regan eyed the man in question. “What’s your connection?”

“I’m a popular guy?” Frazer’s expression switched from joking to serious. “Dorokhov sent out dozens of invitations this year. I got the impression he was trawling the waters, trying to make a good impression and some connections. I asked our consultant Alex Parker to see if he could find anything for us between the ambassador and the congressman.” Alex Parker was former CIA and co-owned a cyber-security firm in DC. The man was also engaged to the newest member of their team at BAU-4, Mallory Rooney, and from what Matt could see, Frazer was taking full advantage of his expertise and connections.

Whatever worked.

“I heard Parker was good.” Regan looked as if he wanted to steal him for TacOps, but was too smart to say anything in front of Frazer. He’d already tried to recruit Matt for his skill set as a former Navy SEAL. Matt liked the Behavioral Analysis Unit, and they kept better hours than TacOps. It was a different sort of job and right now, it suited his needs.

“Ah, shit.” The tech threw down his earpiece as the camera and bug both went dark.

Jon Regan swore and turned off his headset. “Whatever LeMay was up to, she just ruined six months of painstaking surveillance work and our chances of getting anything up and running again for at least the next six.”

Given the shit going on in the world right now, this wasn’t good news.

“Not even Santa will be able to get in that place without a cavity search,” the tech remarked.

“Can they track it back to us?” Matt asked, pointing at the video screens.

“Nah. But the Chinese are about to get a lot of pissed off diplomatic calls.”

Matt looked at the frozen image of Sarah LeMay, her skirt hitched high up her thigh. He had a feeling every guy in TacOps was going to get a look at

that image by Christmas morning. The thought sent a shot of something dark and ugly through his bloodstream. Foolishness. Then he was struck by another thought, something much worse. “Not the Chinese.” *Fuck*. “If they found the earring, the first thing the Russians will do is check the surveillance footage from the hallway and go after that girl. And they know exactly where she lives...” His fatigue vanished and a sense of urgency had him on his feet and at the door. “We need to get back to DC ASAP.”



GUN IN HAND, Raminski entered the house through the garden doors off the patio at the rear of the property. The TV bleated in the distance. He checked the area before walking swiftly through the utility room, then the spotless kitchen, to the arched doorway. On the right of the hallway, there was a glass-paned door into the family room. A movie played loudly inside. The congressman and his wife were curled up on the couch, backs to the door. Good. He took the darkened stairs, moving silently, hearing another TV upstairs.

On the top floor, there were two doors. One open, lights turned off. He went inside, noted the room was empty. The dress the woman had been wearing earlier hung on the back of the door. He checked the bathroom. No one there.

He went to the connecting door and eased it ajar. The hot blonde—Angel—lay across the bed on her front with her knees bent, feet waving in the air. She wore a short, silky nightgown and matching panties as she watched a movie. He ignored the effect she had on his body, and scanned the room. She was alone.

Where was the other one? It was the other one he needed.

No time to play games. He put his pistol in his holster and pulled the syringe out of his pocket, primed the needle. Two strides took him into the room. A knee across the shoulder blades pinned her down as he shoved her face into the mattress to muffle the screams while he jammed the needle into her ass and pressed the plunger home. He couldn't afford for her to see his face. She struggled wildly, but it didn't take long for the tranquilizer to work. Thirty seconds and she was out. He capped the needle and put the syringe back into his pocket. Searched the room but the woman was alone. He went

to her drawers and dragged out yoga pants and a hoodie. Socks and a pair of sneakers. Dressed her, moving her limbs around like she was a rag doll. Found her cell phone and slipped it in his pocket. He hoisted her over his shoulder and retrieved his gun out of the holster as he headed back down the stairs. He paused on the second floor landing and stepped out of sight as someone flushed a toilet on the ground floor. He stayed still until the congressman returned to the family room. The guy didn't close the door fully.

The girl dangled loosely from his shoulder. He eased silently down the stairs. Kept his ears open and eyes on the living room door. The parents never looked away from their movie. His mouth twisted as he recognized the film they were watching. The only Angel getting any wings tonight was their daughter as he spirited her away.

Out of the back door, along the garden path and through the garden gate in the wall that lined the street. The small sedan he'd stolen was still parked there. He opened the trunk and placed the girl carefully inside. He closed the trunk, climbed in the driver's seat, and drove off.

She wasn't the one he wanted, but she was leverage. It wouldn't take long to find the other one.



SCARLETT DECIDED TO walk home rather than take a cab. This part of DC was generally safe and she needed some time and space to get her head together. A part of her knew it was foolish. Another part didn't care. Tonight she'd tried to bug the Russian Ambassador. Everything else seemed irrelevant by comparison. The streets were quiet. Subdued. No one was paying her any attention. Everyone was gearing up for Christmas.

She sank her hands deeper into her jacket pockets, touched another one of the transmitters she'd designed and built. Her sneakers scuffed quietly on the concrete sidewalk. Her breath created a frosty cloud that matched her mood. The snow from a few weeks ago had melted, turning to damp cold that seeped through skin and into marrow. Her teeth chattered. Right now, she didn't think she'd ever be warm again.

She and her mother had decided to split their trips to the prison to maximize the number of visits her father received during his treatment. Plus,

her parents deserved some alone time—if being under constant observation counted as alone time. Scarlett could only imagine the pain of watching the person you loved stolen away from you by the very people who were supposed to have his back. It was bad enough losing her father—but losing the love of your life?

Unbearable.

A Christmas tree shone in someone's living room window—multi-colored lights and a gold star on top. A deep, aching sadness washed through her.

On a cold winter's day fourteen years ago, her father had gone to work as usual, and never returned home. That afternoon the feds had banged on the door and searched their small, brick house from rafters to crawlspace. They'd ripped everything apart—including her trust and innocence.

She'd been twelve.

The press had turned a horrendous time into pure torture. They'd camped out on the front lawn. Cameras pointed at every window. Reporters digging through the trash.

Going to school had proven impossible so her mother had home-schooled her. It had been the loneliest time of her life and she'd thrown herself into her studies. Most of their so-called friends had abandoned them. The only person to stand by her had been Angel. The two families had been close for years. Naturally, the congressman had distanced himself after her father's arrest. Who could blame him? But Angel had always been there for her. Scarlett didn't know what she'd have done without her.

There had never been any doubt in the FBI's mind that they had the right guy. The only people who'd believed him innocent were her and her mother. The lawyer had persuaded him to plead guilty to avoid the death penalty, which Scarlett was grateful for in terms of her dad not being executed, but it made proving him innocent a damn sight trickier.

Her mom would have faded away years ago if it wasn't for the fact Scarlett pushed her and prodded her to keep going, to not give up. It wasn't easy, and if her father died, Scarlett didn't think her mother would be far behind. Some days she already felt like an orphan.

A guy in a hoodie walked toward her and an instinctive lick of fear snaked up her spine. Walking alone at night was the only time she wished she

was a guy. She watched the man out of the corner of her eye, but he carried on past, not paying her any attention.

Two minutes later, she got to the place where she was housesitting for her boss and let herself in. He was on sabbatical in Scotland until the end of next June. They worked at the cutting edge of technology that controlled how devices communicated with one another—like the fridge telling the Internet it ran out of eggs. Scarlett was tackling vulnerabilities that allowed another device to hijack the system and enable it to start typing malicious code. USB connections were particularly vulnerable. In some ways the research was mundane, in others it was the key to the future of all secure communication.

When housesitting, all she had to do was water her boss's plants and screen his mail for anything important. In the lab, she was also in charge of his grad students and putting out any metaphorical fires. She loved being his Research Fellow and she especially loved it when he wasn't there. Maximum freedom. Minimum interference. It made building and testing her own electronic bugging devices so much easier.

She looked around. It was a gorgeous house in a nice neighborhood, but its silence suddenly struck her as empty. Lonely. Cold. Desolate.

Like her life.

Most of the time she was okay being on her own, preferred it even, but sometimes, just sometimes, she yearned for basic human companionship. Matt Lazlo's face flashed through her mind. There had been something in his eyes. Maybe not anything real or lasting, but definite interest, which would have kept the cold loneliness at bay for at least one night.

It had been an illusion, though. He'd been looking at glamorous Sarah LeMay, not plain boring Scarlett Wilson Stone, daughter of the most notorious spy since the end of the Cold War.

Her cell phone rang. She didn't want to answer, but it was Angel calling. "What's up?"

"If you want to see your friend alive, meet me in the parking lot at Rock Creek Park Trails in thirty minutes, north end of Virginia Avenue. Come alone." The accent was thick Russian. "Do not contact the police."

The phone went dead. *No*. She stood there swaying as the world shifted off its axis. *They had Angel*. The Russians had figured out what she'd tried to do tonight, and her friend was paying the price.



RAMINSKI SAT IN the car in a parking lot on New Hampshire Ave. He dialed Dorokhov on an encrypted phone.

“Did you get her?”

“She wasn’t at the house so I took the other girl who was with her earlier. I found out something interesting.” He stared at the contact list on Angel LeMay’s smartphone, complete with profile photographs. “The girl who broke into your office is not who she said she was. She isn’t LeMay’s other daughter.”

“Who is she?” Dorokhov demanded.

He waited a second. “Richard Stone’s daughter.”

Malevolence seeped through the night air, thick and pervasive.

“What do you want me to do about her?” More silence. Raminski waited for orders.

“Kill her.” Soft. Quiet.

Interesting. “And the congressman’s daughter?”

There was another hesitation, this one rife with calculation. “Keep her somewhere safe. I want to talk to her.”

“That could prove risky.” In too many ways to mention.

“Do it.” Dorokhov hung up.

The man started his engine. He called a second number and told the other man the same thing he’d told the ambassador. Interestingly the orders were identical. Richard Stone’s daughter died tonight.

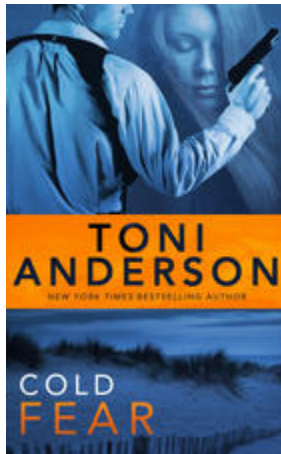


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COLD FEAR

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

A relentless FBI profiler hunts a vicious killer.

When old evidence turns up on a fresh corpse, ASAC Lincoln Frazer is determined it won't delay the execution of a convicted serial killer. But when more young women are brutally slain, it becomes clear—this new killer is intimately familiar with the old murders.

A dedicated emergency physician hides a dark secret.

Former Army Captain Dr. Isadora Campbell helped her mother hide a terrible crime. After her mother's death, Izzy resigned her commission and returned to the Outer Banks to raise her rebellious teenage sister. But it doesn't take long for Izzy to suspect that someone knows exactly what she did, all those years ago.

If they work together, maybe no one else will die.

With pressure mounting to reopen the old case, Frazer will use any means possible to catch the killer. Thrust together during the investigation, he and Izzy find themselves reluctantly attracted to one another, and begin an affair. Meanwhile, the killer is much closer than they think. Izzy's confession of her secret drives Frazer away as he struggles with her deception. By the time he realizes he's fallen in love with the stubborn woman, the killer has her. Now the race is on to save Izzy, and any chance of a future they might have together.

CHAPTER ONE

HELENA CROMWELL ALLOWED herself to be dragged toward the top of the tallest dune that edged the northern tip of Crane Island.

“Where are we going?” she demanded.

“You’ll see. Come on, scaredy cat.” Jesse Tyson, high school quarterback and her crush of the last six months, had to shout to be heard over the noise of the storm.

“It’s too dark to *see* anything.” That was a lie. It was pitch black but her eyes had adjusted to the night and the full moon provided short blasts of silvery light that lit up the world whenever the clouds parted for more than a few seconds.

A shadow moved in the periphery of her vision and she whipped her head around, jerking to a stop.

“Did you see something?” she yelled.

Jesse tried to pull her forward, but she dug in her heels. Was someone out there? A shiver tip-tapped down her spine. She peered hard into the night, but when the moon reappeared there was only blowing sand and violently lashing grass.

“There’s no one there. Come on, Helena,” Jesse insisted.

Of course there was no one there. It must have been a trick of the light, or the storm making her nerves dance like Mexican jumping beans. She let Jesse drag her another few steps. No one else would be crazy enough to be out here in this weather, especially on New Year’s Eve—she rolled her eyes. This was a stupid idea, and if her dad found out she was here, or that she’d lied about being at Kit’s tonight, he’d kill her.

“Where’s your sense of adventure?” Jesse taunted.

“Same place yours is gonna be if our parents find out where we are and what we’re doing,” she grumbled.

“We haven’t done anything, yet.” Jesse’s dark eyes glistened in the darkness.

Her heart gave a little flutter and she swallowed hard. *Oh, my.* And that was why she was out on the dunes even though she knew better.

The fact they’d both been drinking alcohol wouldn’t go over well, either. Not that her dad was ever going to find out. He’d ground her for a year and it wasn’t just because she’d lied about where she was going, or was out with a boy. No one was supposed to be on the dunes at Parson’s Point. Her dad worked for Land Management at the Department of Natural Resources and took this kind of trespassing very seriously. The area was part of a stabilization experiment they were conducting to try and protect the Outer Banks from further erosion.

She knew the spiel by heart. If he found out it wouldn’t matter that she was his daughter, in fact, that would make the punishment worse.

The hand that pulled her along was confident and strong, not allowing her to balk or change her mind. She started to slip backward in the loose sand, but Jesse grasped her tighter and hauled her with him. She couldn’t help but be impressed by all those gorgeous muscles.

Together they staggered over the top of the beach ridge and slid down the other side, sand flying in every direction. She squealed with fright when they stumbled to their knees in the valley between dunes. Then she started giggling hysterically.

“Idiot.” She shoved his arm.

Jesse took both her hands in his and she could feel him staring at her in the darkness. For a moment she thought he was going to kiss her but instead he flashed her a grin—the one that had all the girls in high school swooning—and pulled her to her feet. They climbed up the next, shorter dune and landed near the top, lying side-by-side in the sand. Something dug into her thigh and she shifted away from it, closer to Jesse.

The wind howled and she shivered.

“You cold?”

It was now officially January and blowing a frickin’ gale. “A little.”

Jesse shrugged out of his down jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders.

“What about you?” she asked, even though she was grateful for the body heat still trapped inside the fabric.

“I’m fine.” Wide shoulders brushed hers as he shrugged. Eighteen years old and a star athlete, he wore a red plaid shirt over a bright white t-shirt and jeans. “I dragged you out here. I don’t want you to die of exposure before I even steal a kiss.”

Helena shot him a sideways look. Over the last few months she’d caught him staring at her a few times, but he’d been dating someone from the mainland. The girl had finally broken it off with him on social media—*beotch*—and just before Christmas, he’d asked Helena to go with him to the New Year’s Eve party his friend was hosting. She’d been both thrilled and nervous the entire Christmas break. Now she was here. Squeezed up tight against him and him talking about kisses. Her cheeks bloomed with heat and she wanted to fan herself, but didn’t dare lest he think she was a total dork.

She was a total dork.

Jesse reached out in front of them and parted the sharp blades of grass that blocked their view, revealing an endless swath of beach, and miles and miles of crashing waves.

God, it was beautiful. And so was he.

The ocean merged with the sky in a black abyss. The occasional flash of a lighthouse beacon cut through the otherwise impenetrable gloom. Jesse wrapped his right arm across her back, his hand hooking her waist and pulling her closer. Helena’s mouth went as dry as the sand she lay in. Attraction mixed with the two tequila shots she’d downed at the party before he’d dragged her out here. Her nerves sizzled. All she could think of was his hand on her waist, his hard body pressed snug against hers.

Would he try to kiss her? Would she let him? How far would she let him go? She squeezed her thighs together, a little shocked that she was even thinking about making out with Jesse Tyson.

She’d never had a boyfriend, unless you counted holding hands in third grade. She wasn’t one of the “popular” girls in school. Jesse made her nervous because she liked him and didn’t want to look like an idiot for going out with the best looking guy in school.

Why had he asked her out? Was it a dare? She wasn't that pretty. Her best friend Kit was way prettier than she was, and smarter. Did Jesse think she was easy? Is that why he'd brought her out here? She frowned.

She pushed the uncertainty away. Kit kept telling her she was beautiful and to relax and enjoy herself, to have a little faith. Maybe she should actually listen to her friend for a change.

Helena's breath caught as a twenty-foot wave smashed onto the beach, and made the gulls cry out stridently as they fled to safety. Storms made her nervous. She'd grown up with them, but feared the sea was going to wash away her house and drown them all in their sleep. That's what happened when your dad spouted environmental doom and gloom at every mealtime.

They'd been lucky this time. The storm had skirted the Carolinas and was headed toward Maine and Newfoundland. There was another one on the horizon but it was that time of year. Jesse's warm hand slipped a little lower on her waist and found the place where her t-shirt met her jeans. His fingers played beneath her waistband as if looking for bare skin.

How had this happened? *Her.* On a date with the high school quarterback?

"What do you think?" He had to shout to be heard over the howling gale and the fierce roar of the ocean. Hardly romantic, but his laughter was so infectious it took a moment to realize he was talking about the storm, not being with him.

"It's terrifying," she admitted with a grin. "But," she watched another wave pile-drive the shore. "It's also thrilling—exhilarating. There's an energy to it..."

"I know, right?" The arm tightened on her waist. "It's as if there's electricity sparking through the air. The sea is so rough you know if it caught you you'd never get out alive."

"And that excites you?" Maybe the guy was nuts. Maybe that's why he asked her out.

"The power of it." He looked at her then. Leaned closer so their lips were only an inch apart. "You know what really excites me?"

She raised an unimpressed brow that he probably couldn't see in the dark. If he gave her a cheesy line she was out of here.

“Kite boarding.” His warm breath brushed against her lips—then he kissed her.

The wind wailed spookily above them but she didn’t notice the weather anymore. Her heart banged her ribs like a hollow drum. Jesse turned her so they were facing one another and took her face gently between his hands. Then he kissed her again, not overly confident, but his lips were firm, warm, not wet or sloppy, feeling their way over her mouth, searching for something.

He tasted very slightly of beer, but also of mint. Curious, tempted, she opened up to him and he took the kiss deeper. Then his tongue touched hers and she jumped.

“Sorry.” She grinned as she pulled back.

A weird huffing noise had her turning. She let out a strangled gasp as a dark figure loomed behind them. Terror squeezed her heart so hard, pain spasmed along her arm.

“What the hell?” Jesse yelled.

Before her frozen limbs could react, the figure lifted something over his head and brought it down with ferocious force. It made a horrific sound as it connected with Jesse’s head.

“Jesse!” she screamed. She grabbed him by the shirt but he lay there, heavy and limp. She tried to shove at the attacker’s legs but he was so much bigger than she was. *Rum!* She scrambled down the dune, trying to scream for aid, but the man swung the object he held sideways, like an axe, and the flat end of it caught her on the side of the head.

A scream rent the air and she realized, almost surreally, that she was the one screaming. Agony exploded through her brain as she flew to the ground, landing facedown. She heard more strikes—oh God, the man was hitting Jesse over and over, even though he just lay there not moving.

She struggled to her feet and faced their attacker. “Leave him alone!”

The figure turned and looked toward her. Oh, hell. Ignoring the splitting pain and disorientation that made her brain feel disconnected from her feet, she took off running, back the way they’d come. She was lithe and nimble. People underestimated her because she was small, but she was fast. The sand shifted and made progress difficult as she clawed her way up the dune, and it suddenly seemed fifty feet tall. She pounded her feet against the slope, clutching at the sharp grass that sliced her fingers. Then a hand manacled her

ankle and she fell flat on her face as she was dragged backwards down the incline. She tried to cry out but sand got in her eyes and mouth. She was suffocating, spluttering, trying to force away particles from her nose, and just breathe.

Blackness whirled in her brain as the need for oxygen eliminated every other concern. The attacker flipped her on her back and she lay there hacking and choking. By the time she finally cleared the grit out of her eyes and mouth, the man had dragged Jesse down the bank, too, and was rifling through his pockets. Was this a robbery? Was Jesse breathing? Or was he pretending to be unconscious so he could take this animal by surprise and save them both?

She tried to climb to her feet and froze when the assailant turned back toward her. He stood, easily over six feet. She couldn't see his face, but his silhouette looked vaguely familiar. It was dark and he wore a hat pulled low. He dropped to his knees beside her. Put one gloved hand on her throat and squeezed. She grabbed his forearm and fought for breath. His grip tightened. After a few moments of panicked flailing she froze and he eased off the pressure.

A message.

She swallowed uneasily. Nodded.

Okay.

His other hand went to her belt and he undid the buckle and jerked open the front of her jeans. Terror made her heart beat faster than she'd ever imagined possible. She lay there in the frigid sand, the storm raging overhead, Jesse lying unconscious, bleeding, maybe even dead, just a few feet away. Her limbs shook. She knew what was going to happen even though her mind screamed 'no'. Her teeth chattered as the man dragged tight denim down her legs. She wanted to struggle, wanted to fight, but instead she lay absolutely frozen as he lifted her hips to remove her clothes. She didn't put up a fight. If she didn't fight, if she lay here, maybe he'd do what he was going to do and then let her go. Because she was a coward. She was weak and scared.

The freezing cold sand hit her bare bottom and thighs, abrading her skin. She'd never been so exposed in her entire life. Never felt so helpless. This is what her parents had been warning her about her entire life—don't go off

alone...but she hadn't been alone. Her eyes drifted to where Jesse lay bleeding.

Please don't die.

Finally the cold began to make her feel numb and she welcomed it. Large fingers touched her. Pressing. Probing. Doing whatever they wanted as he made little grunting noises that made her throat muscles gag.

The moon came out and she found herself staring up into a face she knew. Her mouth opened in surprise, but his fingers encircled her throat and squeezed until all sound stopped coming out. She started to slip into unconsciousness.

“What do you see?” he asked, releasing the bruising pressure.

Horror and revulsion filled her until she blocked it all out. She couldn't think about what was happening. About Jesse. About this man. Or the fact he was touching her like this. She wanted to live through it. She wanted to survive.

He kept asking what she could see, but her mind floated away. Her fingers inched through the sand and found Jesse's leg. He was still warm but she didn't think he was alive. Tears filled her eyes and she made herself think of running on the beach hand-in-hand with the boy she'd been secretly in love with for months. She dreamed about them sneaking innocent kisses and worrying about what their parents might say.

Her vision began to grey and tunnel as the monster peered right into her eyes as if looking for her very soul. All those years being warned about not talking to strangers, about being careful, about being safe...and all along they'd had a monster in their midst.

CHAPTER TWO

IZZY CAMPBELL THREW the ball for her flat-coat retriever and watched it bounce along the hard-packed sand as he raced to catch it. The tide was out. The gusting wind caught the ball and propelled it even faster along the mile long stretch of beach. Barney gave chase at full speed, tongue out, legs straining, breath streaming behind him like smoke. He caught the ball mid-bounce, then without missing a beat, turned and brought it right back to where she stood, silvery strings of drool wrapping around his muzzle.

“Lovely,” she said with a grin.

He dropped the thing at her feet and crouched back, ready to play again.

She kicked the ball this time and he was off, thrilled to be outside, uncaring of the ferocious wind or damp spray that whipped off the wild sea. She watched him catch the ball and then lie down in the surf to cool off. As sad as it might be, Barney was her best friend in the world. Who needed a man when they had a dog?

Izzy yawned widely. Meeting a man was the least of her worries. She had a seventeen-year-old to get through high school and into college. As a former captain in the Army she’d learned to take life one Herculean task at a time, while trying to anticipate any of the things that could possibly go wrong. Having a man in her life would complicate an already complicated situation. Not everyone found true love or the perfect happily-ever-after.

That thought had her turning to look at the undulating dunes at the top of the shore. A wave of regret stole over her. Memories from long ago flashed through her mind like a lightning storm, reminding her of a heartbreaking night of torment and terror. She’d experienced many more since then, too many to dwell on, but this was different. This had been the defining moment of her life and the only person who’d known about it was dead.

Why did she feel compelled to come back to this strip of coast, time and time again? Punishment? Self-flagellation? Her mouth tightened. Maybe. Or were these islands really home?

They didn't feel like it. She felt like an outsider here. An interloper. A goddamned dingbatter.

What she'd done all those years ago was unforgivable, but at the time she hadn't felt as if she'd had a choice. Age had brought a little wisdom, but her mistakes weren't something she could put right with an apology or a twelve-step program. She'd messed up and she didn't know how to make it right without ruining more lives, her own included. She turned away. It was ancient history. No one would ever know.

The wind whipped her hair past her cheeks, blinding her for a moment. She faced the sea and gathered the strands together in a long twist, stuffing it back under her hat. She pulled the hat down tight, ignoring the short, sharp tug on her scalp.

Last night while she'd been working, a big Nor'easter had brushed its fingers against the flanks of the Outer Banks but thankfully hadn't delivered a flat-out punch. Another storm was brewing in the Atlantic and promised even more fun, depending on which direction it decided to take.

Storms and hurricanes were a constant danger to these barrier islands. Locals only worried when they had to and, frankly, right now, she was too tired. She'd been up all night, working the graveyard shift at the local hospital. Once Barney had a good walk she'd crash for a few hours before heading back to the hospital for a split shift that evening. She was covering for a few colleagues who'd gone to visit family over the holidays. She hoped her sister remembered not to make too much noise when she got home from Helena's house later, but she wouldn't put money on it.

She whistled to her wet, sandy dog and headed toward the boardwalk that led through the cordoned-off dune system. Up on the road, a Department of Natural Resources vehicle had pulled up behind a burgundy sedan that had been parked there when she arrived earlier. God help the poor soul when Duncan Cromwell got hold of them. The guy was fanatical in his protection of those dunes. Her SUV was another hundred yards south, near the lighthouse. Barney arrived at her side, complete with rancid ball, and she clipped his leash to his collar and strode along the path.

Barney started to whine a few seconds before she heard the sirens.

“It’s okay, boy.” She rubbed his neck and opened the trunk of her SUV, letting the dog hop in before she turned to see what was going on. An ambulance screeched to a stop behind the DNR rig.

Damn.

As tired as she was, she couldn’t ignore the potential that someone might need her help. She got into her car and drove up to the other vehicles. Parking behind the ambulance, leaving plenty of room for a stretcher.

“Stay, boy.” She got out and clambered through the thin wire fence, following the route the EMTs had taken. Dread skated along her nerves when she realized exactly where she was heading. *Too bad, Izzy.* Her muscles burned as she climbed the steep foredune, but she didn’t slow down. When she got to the top, the scene below made her flinch. Bile hit her throat but she swallowed it. Slipping her way down the bank, she shouted, “What’s the situation?”

Duncan Cromwell had draped his coat over his daughter, Helena, who lay unmoving in the sand at his side. He was attempting mouth-to-mouth.

Izzy pushed him out of the way and probed the girl’s neck for a pulse. Helena’s skin felt like ice. Her eyes were cloudy, her body slightly stiff, but no sign of lividity. Izzy took a clean tissue from her pocket and brushed it across Helena’s cornea. The girl didn’t blink. No corneal reflex. Izzy placed her hands over Helena’s eyes and held them there for long seconds. When she removed them Helena’s pupils showed no reaction to the light.

Dammit.

“Do something!” Cromwell grabbed her upper arm so hard she winced. She twisted out of his grip.

“She’s gone, Duncan.” Cold fear raced through her mind as she looked at the dead girl. Her sister had been staying with the Cromwells last night. Frantically, she scanned the surrounding area. “Where’s Kit?”

“I was going to ask you the same question,” Duncan said grimly. “Help me do CPR.”

Izzy forced away the tears that wanted to form and found her professional armor. “Helena’s gone, Duncan. There’s nothing you can do.”

“No.” He brushed her away and started once again to try to resuscitate his daughter. She met the gaze of the EMT who she recognized from the

hospital, and silent communication passed between them. The guy had lost it and who could blame him. She moved to assess the other victim on the ground, a young man she recognized as Jesse Tyson, the police chief's son. Blood matted his scalp, and his nose looked like it had been smashed. Unlike Helena, he was fully clothed. Beneath the trickles of blood, his skin was the blinding white of alabaster. She touched his neck but couldn't find a pulse. His skin was soft, no sign of rigor. She frowned and pulled back his eyelids. His pupils were clear and responsive. She checked his airway, ripped open his shirt and palpated his chest. No penetrating injuries or bruising. Without her stethoscope it was hard to check for pneumothorax and haemothorax, but she did what she could. She undid his jeans and pressed her fingers into his groin, searching for a femoral pulse. All the time, she watched his chest for any sign that he was breathing.

Did it move? Or was that the wind tugging his shirt?

It was so cold out here, even she was shivering. Then his chest did move, just a fraction, evenly on both sides, she was certain of it. And the faintest pulse of blood stirred against her fingertips. She signaled the EMTs to bring over a stretcher. "He's alive. Make sure his spine is stabilized before you move him. Cover him with all the blankets you've got in the rig." Her brain buzzed as she recalled procedure and treatments for severe hypothermia. "Move him *very* gently because you can induce cardiac dysrhythmia if you jar him—go the long way around the dune." She checked for fractures, but with this level of hypothermia the most important thing was getting the patient to the hospital as quickly and smoothly as possible. She dialed the ER. It was a fifteen-minute drive to the hospital. "You need to prepare for a patient with low GCS, apparent head injuries, and severe hypothermia." They'd treat with warm mattresses, hot air blankets, heated IV fluids—but they had to take things slowly in a highly controlled environment. "He'll need a full CT scan and general blood work. Call Chief Tyson to meet us at the hospital." She hung up.

"What about Helena?" Duncan called out angrily from his knees.

Izzy stared at the guy. Tremors shook his body as he tried to rein in everything he was feeling. His eyes were frantic, skin pulled tight over his features as desperation drove him. Who could blame him?

His daughter was her sister's best friend. Responsibility weighed as heavy as a block of cement around her shoulders. What if she was wrong? What if Helena *could* be saved? She'd heard of miracles happening before, especially when severe hypothermia was involved. People weren't dead until they were warm and dead.

"Let's take her, too." She put her hand on his arm. "But, Duncan, don't get your hopes up."

"Hope is all I've got left." He flung off her touch and snarled before he ran to fetch another stretcher.

She took out her phone and dialed her sister, each unanswered ring feeding her fear like wind stoking a wildfire. The joints in her fingers ached from her tight grip on the phone. Her jaw felt as if someone had wired the bones together.

"S'up?" Kit answered groggily.

The iron fist on Izzy's throat released and she sucked in a proper breath. "Oh my God. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Why?" Kit sounded tired, grumpy, but not upset. She obviously had no idea about Helena.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"Home. I changed my mind and came back here last night. Why?"

She hadn't checked her sister's room when she picked up Barney earlier, but hadn't seen her car. She'd assumed Kit was still out. "I wanted to make sure you were okay." She couldn't tell Kit about Helena over the phone. "Look, I have something to tell you. You need to get dressed. I'll pick you up in ten minutes."

"What? Why?" The grogginess was replaced with wariness.

Izzy couldn't face an argument. "Just do it. I love you." She hung up. She was going to ground her sister until she was eighteen, and possibly for the rest of her life just to keep her safe. Duncan came back over the ridge and began slipping down the banks of his beloved dunes. She shielded her eyes against the spraying sand as he raced toward her. Together they very gently moved Helena onto the stretcher but Izzy didn't hold out much hope for the girl. Her heart wanted to break but she compartmentalized the feeling so she could do her job. They worked their way slowly around the biggest hill. Even though Helena was tiny, Izzy struggled to hold up her end of the stretcher.

“We need to call the cops,” she shouted over the blustery wind. Her stomach churned at the thought of what they might find, but Helena’s death needed to be investigated. Her attacker had to be found.

“I already called them,” said Cromwell.

She nodded, and wished she didn’t want to run and hide. She was a coward. She’d always been a damn coward. The coat covering Helena slipped and Izzy saw the girl’s naked body. There was blood on her thighs and any thoughts Izzy had about her own problems were obliterated. Then her eyes latched onto a piece of jewelry on Helena’s slender wrist. The fine hairs on her arms rose as gooseflesh prickled her skin. “I didn’t know Helena wore a medical alert bracelet.”

“It isn’t hers.” Duncan’s voice was low and guttural. “She was wearing it when I found her.”

Dazed, Izzy marched onward as fast as she could. It couldn’t be the same bracelet. It couldn’t. But deep inside Izzy knew it was. Even though it was impossible, someone knew her secret. A killer knew her secret.



LINCOLN FRAZER SAT at his desk reading yet another request for assistance, this one regarding a series of rapes occurring in Portland, Oregon. He scanned the details and emailed Darsh Singh to take a look at the case file in time for next Monday’s team meeting. It was January 1, but as head of BAU-4, which investigated crimes against adults, there was no time to take a break. A week ago, he’d helped exonerate an innocent man convicted of treason, but between high-level vigilante groups, presidential requests, international terrorism, assassins, agency spies, and miscarriages of justice, he was behind on the day job.

Christmas had been a blur. He hadn’t seen his condo in days. He showered and ate at the academy, grateful for the peace and quiet of an almost empty building. With the turn of the New Year he hoped life would return to normal and he could go back to his nice orderly world tracking down serial offenders.

His landline rang. “Frazer.”

“How’d I know you’d be in the office?” Agent Mallory Rooney’s voice held a touch of sarcasm.

“It’s that razor-sharp intelligence of yours.” That and the fact Alex Parker had probably tracked his cell phone. “No wonder I plucked you from obscurity to work for me.”

“Sure, boss, *you* plucked me from obscurity.” The eye roll that accompanied her droll statement came through loud and clear. He grinned because she couldn’t see him.

“Did Parker finish running those background checks on Madeleine Florentine?” Frazer asked before she could speak. The Governor of California was President Hague’s first choice as replacement VP and the man was growing impatient for answers.

“Yep, he finished last night. Florentine checks out”—*Thank, God*—“But that’s not why I’m calling. Look,” she continued, cutting him off as he opened his mouth to ask why it had taken them this long to contact him. “I got a phone call from an old friend of mine, Agent Lucas Randall out of Charlotte. He was in charge of the Meacher case?” Frazer checked personnel files online as she spoke. He remembered the guy. “He’s been called in on a case along the Outer Banks. Wanted me to go down there to help him out.”

Frazer searched the Internet for news stories coming out of that region. “A single victim homicide?” He had a stack of unsolved cases on his desk more than a foot high, not to mention trying to help a certain spook surreptitiously track down the assassin who’d murdered the Vice President last month. All of which required a few more skills than investigating a small-town homicide. “The locals can handle it.” He winced at the callousness of his tone. That’s what happened when reports of unbelievable depravity crossed your desk every single day.

Rooney ignored him. “Two teens making out on the beach last night were subject to a vicious assault. Both were left for dead, but one miraculously survived. But that’s *not* why Randall called me.”

Frazer’s spine tingled and he knew he wasn’t going to like whatever she said next.

“The female victim was wearing a medical alert bracelet.”

“And?” Tension coiled inside him.

“It wasn’t hers.” He heard the murmur of voices, probably Alex Parker telling Mallory to get off the phone and take a break on a federal holiday. “It belonged to a woman called Beverley Sandal.”

“Why do I recognize that name?” He typed it into the Internet. “Damn.”

“Yeah. Exactly.”

His brain catalogued some of the factors in play. “Ferris Denker is due to be executed this month.”

“I know.”

“It could be a copycat trying to get him a last minute reprieve.”

“I know.”

“This was Hanrahan’s first big case—did you know that?” He squeezed his eyes shut. Of course she did. Rooney was as big a workaholic as he was. Goddammit. The conviction was solid. Denker had been transporting the body of a young woman he’d killed when the cops pulled him over on a traffic violation. He’d confessed to a series of murders, though some of the bodies had never been recovered. The conviction was good, but the last thing he or Rooney or Parker needed was investigators digging into his former boss’s cases. “I need you to get down there ASAP—”

“I can’t.”

His spine stiffened. Something was wrong.

Another voice came on the line. “What she failed to mention was she’s in the hospital.” Alex Parker had taken the phone from Rooney. “She, hmm...” He cleared his throat. “Mal had some minor bleeding last night and the docs want to keep her in and run more tests. Maybe put her on bed rest for a couple of weeks. You’re going to have to do this without us.”

Fear jackknifed through Frazer. Rooney was in the first trimester of her pregnancy with the couple’s baby. Frazer was usually more cautious with his affection, but his friendship with the rookie agent and damaged assassin had begun under extraordinary circumstances. The connection was strong as tungsten steel, the only thing that would break it was death—a real possibility if anyone discovered their secrets. “Is she all right?” he asked carefully.

“She will be.”

Mallory Rooney was the best of them. If anyone could keep her safe it would be Alex Parker, but not even Parker could control a medical emergency. Frazer knew the thoughts going through the man’s head. Guilt. Fear, that this was somehow *his* fault. Desperation and panic that he couldn’t fix it no matter how badly he wanted to.

Frazer understood because he was feeling them, too. He let out a long breath. "Tell her to take all the time she needs."

"I already did," Parker said tightly.

"Yeah, but tell her *I* said so. She listens to me." He shut down his desktop computer. "I want her fit and healthy for work, even if she has to spend the next nine months in bed. I have some personal leave she can use." And there'd be other agents who'd do the same for a colleague going through a tough time. The FBI was a family. They took care of their own.

Frazer put his arm through his jacket sleeve, closed his laptop and put it in its case. The thought of Rooney and Parker losing the baby put a rock in his throat and reminded him why it was always best to keep his distance. Too late now. "You should name him after me, you know, considering the circumstances." Circumstances that traced back to a remote woods in the heart of West Virginia and facing down another serial killer.

"Mal wants to name him after my grandfather if he's a boy and after my mother if she's a girl." The controlled tension in Parker's voice told him the guy was terrified.

Frazer felt that lump in his throat grow bigger. Shit. "Keep her safe, Alex. I'll take care of the situation in North Carolina."

"Call me if you need anything. I can work the case from here." Amongst other things, Parker was an expert in cyber security and could run traces in his sleep.

"I intend to."

"Happy New Year, Linc."

"Not yet it isn't."

"No shit." Parker sounded pissed off.

"This is my fault, you know. For wishing things would get back to normal."

"You were hankering after serial killers?"

"Yeah. I must be as aberrant as they are."

"Nah," Parker drawled. "You're way crazier than those fuckers."

A reluctant smile tugged Frazer's lips. "Take care of her for us, Alex." Then he hung up and strode out of his office.

Happy New Year.



FERRIS DENKER WATCHED the cockroach idle its way across the floor. He planted one of his feet and the bug switched direction. He did it again and the roach tried to burrow under the rubber heel of his canvas shoe. Poor misunderstood creature. He picked it up and let it run over his hands. The creature's legs felt sturdy but brittle, its feet grasping the whorls and ridges of his palm.

He turned his hand over and the bug fell to the floor, its thin carapace making a dull clicking noise as it hit. The bug popped back up, and they started their game over. Handel's *Concerti Grossi Op. 6* played on his sound system—a pleasant change from the constant din of Christmas carols that had bounced around the Death Row facility over the last few weeks. He tried not to complain. The guys needed a little enjoyment in this sinkhole of despair.

“Hey, Ferris.” A familiar voice hissed from the next cell. Billy Painter. The guy had raped and murdered a young woman and then done the same to her eighty-year-old grandmother.

How the jury had wept.

The kid had been here for the last five years and was on his second appeal.

Ferris walked over to the door. The top half was made of steel bars. “What is it, Billy?”

“You heard from your lawyer yet?”

Billy would have seen if Ferris had received any news, but the fact he asked the question was grounds for his new appeal. Billy's IQ and shoe size were almost exactly the same. The guy might have big feet, but he was still dumb as a rock.

“Nothing yet, Billy.” The warrant for his execution sat on his poor excuse for a desk. The warden had served it on Christmas Eve, which he'd thought was a nice touch for a closet sadist. Despite having had years to prepare, knowing he was scheduled to die on January 25 made his knees shake—not that he'd ever admit it. They'd transfer him to Columbia for the execution itself but the last thing he wanted was make that final hundred mile journey.

“I’m sorry, man.” Billy slouched, leaning on the bars. His expression was pained. “I thought you’d-a heard something by now.”

“Thanks, man.” Ferris twisted his lips. He had brought this day on himself. He’d confessed too much before his lawyer had turned up. Bragging like a child before he’d gotten a signed deal. The woman in the trunk wasn’t even cold when he’d been pulled over for a lousy broken taillight, which he could have talked his way out of if he hadn’t been high as a kite. No, the cops had caught him fair and square, and he’d sung like a fucking canary.

But he wasn’t planning on dying yet.

Living on Death Row was a miserable existence. Even those who deserved to die didn’t deserve to be tortured this way. He’d treated his victims better than the state treated inmates. Sure they begged and screamed for a few hours, but after that he’d put his victims out of their misery fast. He might have delivered cruel and unusual punishment, but it had been swift, unlike the justice system.

Justice?

This was *justice*?

He looked around the unit. Vets suffering PTSD. Men who’d been little more than children when committing crimes. Goaded into it by bad influences and life circumstances. All of them victims in their own right. Men like Billy who barely knew right from wrong and didn’t stand a chance if you added drugs or alcohol into the mix.

Death penalty laws were flawed in every which way—the cost, the fact it wasn’t a deterrent, the fact innocent men were still being exonerated from Death Rows across the country as old evidence was reexamined.

No.

It was a stupid system. And Ferris detested stupid.

He’d never claimed he was innocent, and he had no chance of pleading a low IQ because last time he’d tested he’d measured one-forty. But he didn’t want to die and he didn’t want to spend the rest of his life in this miserable hellhole. “Pray for me, Billy.”

The younger man nodded furiously. “We had one miracle this year. I can pray for another.”

Ferris grinned. He'd always been faintly amused by the camaraderie of the men inside this unit and yet he felt it too. Ferris felt like he was accepted for who he truly was, not for whom people expected him to be.

That was a gift. He'd had it once before and he was hoping the power of that relationship held true now.

One of the guards entered the cellblock, probably to take someone out for their hour of fresh air and exercise. Ferris sneered. From one cage to another, and yet every one of them looked forward to getting out of their damned cells. He took a step back and heard a crunch, looked down at the black and green smear of dead cockroach on the concrete floor. Dammit.

He bent over and used a tissue to wipe up the mess. Then he tipped the jar and pulled out another roach. The game was just starting.

CHAPTER THREE

A LIGHTHOUSE PERCHED on the headland, sea oats whipping the air at its base. White sand met the gunmetal sea with a serrated edge of angry surf. A wooden fence ran parallel to the road, theoretically keeping people out but doing a piss-poor job of it. Frazer easily climbed over the obstacle. This area was cordoned off because National Parks Service, in conjunction with Department of Natural Resources, were trying to stabilize the area with mitigation strategies, but considering they were up against the Atlantic Ocean, they had their work cut out for them.

A bit like trying to stem the tide of evil that crept through humanity with only a few dedicated law enforcement professionals.

A cheery thought.

Frazer took in the barren landscape of this remote barrier island as he climbed the dunes to the crime scene. He'd taken a commercial flight to Norfolk and managed to get a chopper to Elizabeth City and hired a car from there. It was getting late now. Less than a couple of hours left until sunset.

He topped the ridge and scanned the area. It was the perfect location for those who needed privacy to feed a twisted appetite—especially at night during a storm. Screams would be swallowed by the wind; shouts for help snatched away and consumed by the landscape.

It was the perfect place to kill. The perfect place to get rid of a body.

This region was generally considered safe. Low crime rate. Low density of permanent residents over the winter months. Was it a local? He didn't know yet. People imagined a killer would stick out, but they rarely did, unless they were psychotic. Then they were usually easy to track from the wild eyes and blood trails.

He raised the collar of his FBI windbreaker but it did little to keep out the icy breeze. His navy-blue, fine wool three-piece suit might be sufficient for the office but it wasn't designed for facing down a winter squall. When he'd awoken this morning the last thing he'd expected was a road trip to a windswept island.

Life was full of surprises.

The scene below was textbook how-not-to-preserve-a-crime scene and he didn't bother disguising a sigh. From what he understood, they didn't even have photographs. At eight AM that morning an officer from the Department of Natural Resources had seen a car parked illegally on the side of the road and gone to investigate. The guy had found the naked body of his own seventeen-year-old daughter and that of a badly beaten young man. He'd tried unsuccessfully to revive his kid. When EMTs arrived they'd rushed both victims to the ER hoping they could be saved. Miraculously, the young man had been. The girl was DOA.

Frazer pushed away his compassion for the man. What was done was done, and nothing he could say would ease his burden. Doing his job might, but that job included viewing the father as a potential suspect.

The father, the EMTs, the cops, and not to mention the weather, had degraded the integrity of the scene, making his job infinitely harder. What remained was churned up sand, a pair of jeans turned inside out, underwear, a t-shirt, socks, a wallet lying open, a down jacket, and a spade. The items had likely been shifted from their original position, but they all needed to be catalogued and entered into the chain of evidence so they could at least be analyzed by forensics and used in court should it come to that.

Frazer's job was to make sure it came to that.

A pewter sky stretched overhead, ominous clouds boiling with suppressed energy. Rain might destroy even more evidence and they had precious little to start with. Crime scene techs were photographing the area inch by inch. The clothing and the autopsy would hopefully reveal who'd done this to the teens, but it was certainly not Ferris Denker. He sat rotting on Death Row in Ridgeville, South Carolina, four hundred miles away.

Maybe, when Jesse Tyson woke up, he'd name the attacker or attackers, and fast-forward the investigation, getting the perpetrator off the streets

before anyone else was hurt. Assuming the kid wasn't in a coma or brain damaged.

Even without seeing the bodies, Frazer could imagine the sort of harrowing experience the teenagers had probably endured. He eyed the girl's clothes. He'd been told there were indications she'd been raped, but he'd know more later, after the autopsy. The kids had been treated like garbage, vessels for the unsub's personal gratification and pleasure. The elements should have killed them and the bastard had known it.

People called these perpetrators monsters but they were just humans, humans who did inhuman things. Psychopaths who knew better, and did it anyway.

What would having a live victim do to this unsub?

Frazer narrowed his eyes. They'd need security on the boy until they figured out exactly how, but they could use that. He needed to talk to the teen as soon as he woke up. The attack would leave a mark. What kind of mark depended on the young man himself. At the age of fifteen, Frazer's own world had shattered when his parents had been murdered during a home invasion. He'd never gone back to being the boy he'd been before the incident. If Jesse Tyson were anything like Frazer, the events of last night would shape the entire course of his life.

Was that destiny?

If so, destiny sucked. Frazer relished his job but he'd swap it in a heartbeat to change the past. He thrust the thoughts away. He rarely thought about his parents' murder. He honored their memory by remembering how they lived not how they died, by catching killers and making sure they couldn't hurt anyone else again.

The sight of the CSU tech picking up a young woman's panties scratched at something small and scarred inside his mind. He pushed it away. Sentiment didn't solve crimes. Logic and meticulous investigation did. The fact dangerous predators often operated in the same passionless state as he did, wasn't lost on him. It wasn't that he didn't feel the emotions; he just tucked them off to one side while he did his job—and did his best never to revisit them.

Emotional objectivity was something he tried to drum into the other agents who worked in his unit, especially his friend, fellow agent Jed Brennan

who'd helped him catch his first serial killer amongst the chaos of war in Afghanistan. Bottom line was if they got emotionally involved in all their cases, they'd have to swap their suit jackets for something in white with much longer sleeves.

The faces of victims already kept him awake at night. It was a short trip to burnout and he didn't intend to take that road. He could live with nightmares, he just couldn't deal with heartache.

The cry of a gull jerked him back to the present. Isolated beach. Outer Banks. Day One of a murder investigation. Check.

Another agent approached and Frazer went down to meet him.

FBI Agent Lucas Randall was based out of the Charlotte Field Office and Frazer had met him during the Meacher case. He was ex-military, eyes both sharp and weary. If he was surprised to see the head of BAU-4 standing here he hid it well.

"ASAC Frazer." Randall held out his hand. "Glad you could make it."

"Agent Randall." Frazer nodded as they shook. "Is the bracelet genuine?" The bracelet was the game changer. The reason he was here.

"Looks it." Randall pulled the bag from his pocket and handed it over.

Frazer examined the chain through the clear plastic. Thick stainless steel links and a solid looking tag with a phone number stamped on it. A list of alerts. Sand was encrusted in some of the overlapping links, the hint of rust and decay discoloring the metal. It looked as if it had been in the sand for a long time, but the girl had been killed less than twelve hours ago.

Convicted serial killer Ferris Denker had confessed to murdering Beverley Sandal seventeen years ago. So how the hell had her bracelet ended up on a fresh corpse?

"It was the only thing the victim, Helena Cromwell, had on when they found her. Her father knew it wasn't hers, and the local Chief of Police bagged it. But his son is the kid in intensive care, so he had uniforms secure the scene and CSU work it, then he called me. Girl's body is in the morgue of the local hospital awaiting transportation to the nearest Medical Examiner's Office."

"You know the chief personally?"

Randall squinted against the slicing wind. "We served together in the Army years ago and stayed in touch." Randall had a reputation for being

good at his job and being easy to work with. Whatever people said about Frazer, it wouldn't be that he was easy to work with.

But with Randall's involvement and his connection to Rooney, they'd caught a break in keeping a lid on this situation. Frazer intended to use it.

"I want the ME to come here to conduct the preliminary exam." He frowned. "Actually, tell them I want Simon Pearl to do this personally. Call them. Persuade them. He can call me if he wants to. Also I want blood and tissue taken from the vic, ASAP. Toxicology can look for date rape drugs and alcohol levels."

Randall's brows rose in surprise.

If it weren't for the bracelet, he'd be thinking Helena had probably been killed by someone she knew, or during some sort of drunken gang rape gone horribly wrong—not that gang rape ever went *right*. He pinched the bridge of his nose trying to relieve the tension headache building. Gang rape would make his life easier compared to the alternative, and that realization made him shut down his feelings and concentrate on the facts. It was twisted. Deal with it. "Any evidence suggesting Ferris Denker ever made it out this way?"

Randall shook his head. "Not as far as I can tell."

At Frazer's questioning look he added. "I asked a friend who works in Columbia to send me a copy of Denker's files. I told him I had a personal interest in the case. The agents working it always assumed Denker never left the mainland."

Assumptions were dangerous. "I'll need a copy of that file." He could go through official channels, hell, he could probably ask Hanrahan for his personal notes on the case, but he wasn't ready to take that step yet. Denker had a date with a hypodermic, and Frazer was going to do everything in his power to get him there on time. "Did you mention Sandal or Denker to the police chief?"

Randall shook his head. "As soon as I ran the numbers on the bracelet I recognized the name and significance. I called Rooney because I knew the BAU would want to be involved."

"You talk to your own boss, yet?"

Randall shook his head, eyes narrowing. "Nope, but I'll have to tell her something soon."

SSA Petra Danbridge was easy on the eyes and hard on everything else. “You opened a case file?”

Randall shook his head. BAU only consulted on cases. They didn’t run the show, which put Frazer in a difficult position.

“Hold off as long as you can. Afterward you can tell Danbridge I pulled rank.”

Randall’s lips twisted. “Isn’t that what you’re doing?”

“Yes.” He stared hard at the other man to see if he had an issue with that.

“Okay, then.” Randall nodded and looked relieved. Maybe he had a better idea what was going on than Frazer gave him credit for. Controlling the flow of information and, therefore, controlling the press was vital in this investigation. Randall continued, “Chief Tyson’s only been on the Outer Banks for a few years so he wouldn’t know if Denker was ever rumored to be here or not. Former chief retired to Roanoke.”

“We need to talk to that retired police chief. We need to know if anyone ever reported sightings of Ferris Denker in the Outer Banks.”

“What are you thinking?” Randall asked.

Frazer swept his gaze over the area. Remote. Quiet. Undisturbed. The perfect dumping ground. “Denker confessed to killing Beverley Sandal, but her body was never found.”

“You think he buried her around here?”

Frazer shrugged. “It might account for her bracelet being found on a fresh victim.”

“So where’s Beverley’s body?” Randall’s eyes scanned the dunes, as did Frazer’s. Frazer knew where he’d hide a body he didn’t want found.

Randall shoved his hands deeper into his jacket pockets and swore. “Someone might have discovered Denker’s souvenirs and decided to mess with law enforcement. Denker could be orchestrating this from the inside. Maybe hoping to get the execution stayed while casting doubt on his conviction?”

Frazer nodded. He had no doubt the sadistic psychopath was involved. “But the fact remains, Denker is in prison and a young woman is dead, so regardless of motive, we have a new killer to catch.” And not an

inexperienced one. Taking two victims at once? Both young and fit? That was not the work of a novice just finding his feet.

The myriad of indentations in the sand, the snaking trails of footprints trampled in every direction meant the chances of finding anything useful out here was unlikely. Except maybe the shovel.

Frazer started working the case out loud. “Whoever put the bracelet on the girl committed the same sort of murder Denker was convicted of, blitz assault, probably rape, followed by strangulation. But he—or she—left the bodies for us to find, whereas Denker always tried to conceal his victims.” It wasn’t all Denker had done to the victims.

“Maybe he was interrupted?”

“Maybe,” Frazer agreed reluctantly. “Regardless, this unsub wanted to send a message and that message involves Beverley Sandal and Ferris Denker. The timing is too precise to be a coincidence. The crimes are too similar.” Frazer handed the evidence back to Randall. “Send this and that shovel to Quantico to be analyzed ASAP. Put my name on the request and tell them it’s urgent.”

Frazer took photographs of the spade with his cell phone.

“You don’t think Denker is innocent, do you?” asked Randall.

“That guy is guiltier than sin.”

“You think he had a partner?” Randall’s gaze sharpened.

“Or a disciple. We’ll know more after the autopsy.” Seventeen years ago, Ferris Denker had been convicted of murdering seven young prostitutes and three other young women who hadn’t been in high-risk professions. Frazer had no doubt the man had concealed the full extent of his crimes and, having exhausted every appeal, was now orchestrating a game of show-and-tell to eke out more time on this planet. Frazer did not intend to let the man weasel out of his punishment.

His old mentor, SSA Hanrahan, had written the profile that had nailed Denker to the wall, getting details right from his being the eldest child, down to the small size of his boots. Frazer had no doubt the conviction was solid but, after what happened in the West Virginia woods at the beginning of December, the last thing he needed was anyone looking too deeply at Hanrahan’s cases.

His former boss had made the mistake of feeding information to a powerful vigilante organization called The Gateway Project that tracked and eliminated pedophiles and serial killers before they entered the justice system. Hanrahan's complicity had been revealed in the presence of a vicious serial killer who'd threatened to bring down not only the vigilante group, but also the BAU. Frazer had killed the man, saving the FBI's reputation, the lives of those involved in The Gateway Project and, not to mention, millions of dollars of taxpayers' money. Since then, he, Rooney, and Alex Parker, had worked hard to make sure The Gateway Project was truly finished, but there was one last loose thread remaining.

Frazer had become a federal agent to protect those who couldn't protect themselves. Legally, what he'd done was wrong—ethically he had few qualms. The serial killer he'd shot had stolen a nine-year-old girl from her bedroom and kept her captive for nearly eighteen years. When she'd died, the killer had gone on a murder spree, looking for the perfect replacement. Frazer still saw those women's battered faces in his dreams.

Killing that man had done the world a favor. Under the circumstances Frazer had had no real choice, but the price had been a dark stain on his soul, and the knowledge he wasn't as righteous as he'd once been. The justice system wasn't always "just". Maybe that's why Hanrahan had fallen off the path of right and wrong, and placed Frazer in an untenable situation.

Art Hanrahan was the reason Frazer had joined the FBI in the first place. To say the older man had disappointed him was an understatement.

With Denker's execution only a few weeks away, the window for this new killer to make an impact was narrow. If this murderer went on a spree to cast doubt on Denker's conviction, then there would be more victims. Frazer pushed it out of his mind. He'd deal with this one victim at a time until he had something solid to work with.

Crime scene investigators were bagging the clothes. He and Randall shielded their eyes from the sand that caught on the wind. Trace evidence was going to be impossible. If the young man in the hospital didn't know anything, their best bet was contact DNA, blood, or semen. Maybe a stray fingerprint on the shovel or the girl's body—assuming they could match a sample.

The sand-sharpened breeze grazed his skin. “Rooney told me you guys were friends as kids. You must be disappointed to see me here instead of her.”

“The politically correct answer to that is ‘no, sir’ ‘it’s an honor to work with you, sir.’” Randall’s eyes assessed Frazer’s ability to handle the truth. “But honestly, I’ve known Rooney a long time, and we worked well together in Charlotte. She’s a damn good agent.” He scanned the horizon. A fishing boat out in Pamlico Sound rode the rocky waters. “I haven’t spoken to her in a few weeks. Parker’s keeping her on a short leash nowadays.”

“Leash?” Frazer queried sharply.

Randall grunted.

Despite supposedly being friends, the guy didn’t know she was in the hospital, and it wasn’t Frazer’s secret to spill. “We’ve been pretty busy,” Frazer’s mouth twisted wryly. Serial killers, terrorists, Russian spies. Rooney and Parker had earned their Christmas vacation but being in the hospital didn’t seem to count. Worry for his agent curled through him like secondhand cigarette smoke. “I thought you were friends with Alex Parker, too?” He tucked his face into his collar.

Randall checked his watch as if he had somewhere else to be. Definitely not comfortable with the turn the conversation had taken. “We served together in the Army, and I ask for his assistance on cybercrime issues. Guy’s a frickin’ genius, but you already know that or you wouldn’t have seconded him to your unit.”

The true circumstances under which Frazer had transferred the former assassin to his unit were known to only a handful of people, none of whom would be sharing. A gull landed close by and eyed him like a mark. “It sounds like you have issues with the guy,” Frazer said carefully.

Randall shrugged and turned in a circle, maybe trying to keep the chill out by moving. Or maybe avoiding the question.

“What happened?” Frazer pressed.

Randall eyed him like he wanted to tell him to mind his own business. “Agent Rooney is like a sister to me.”

“You don’t think he’s good enough for her?” Oddly, despite everything he knew about Alex Parker, Frazer thought they were perfectly suited.

“She went through hell.” Randall let out a ragged sigh. “Parker’s got money but...”

“She’s not interested in his money.” Frazer stared hard at the other man. “You sure your interest isn’t a little less *brotherly*?”

“What? Hell, no.” Randall shook his head in denial. He paused for a moment and shrugged. “I guess their relationship took me by surprise. Rooney and I were partners for over a year. A month after she leaves Charlotte she’s desperately in love and living with a man she barely knows? A guy I introduced her to?”

“They’re a solid team.” Alex would die to keep her safe, and sacrifice his soul if she asked him to. “You don’t have anything to worry about...” He’d been about to say he’d never seen two people more in love but over the last two months there had been an outbreak of romance in Frazer’s unit. The condition seemed contagious and potentially terminal, but so far not deadly.

Frazer had no intention of catching it. Been there, had the divorce papers to prove it.

He eyed a figure on top of a dune about three hundred yards away taking photographs with a zoom lens. He shook his head in disgust and signaled the uniform to get rid of him. Vultures.

“Did the kids bring the shovel, or does it belong to the unsub? If the unsub brought it, was it a weapon or a tool? Was this attack premeditated or were they victims of opportunity?” Frazer asked the question that had been bothering him since he first arrived. “Is this the work of a single killer—or not?” The scene showed conflicting evidence. “Could the bracelet be an attempt to throw us off the real reason for the rape and murder of Helena Cromwell?”

He couldn’t afford to ignore any avenues of investigation.

Randall remained silent. Letting him think it out.

Frazer glanced over the vast expanse of the dunes. “Something tells me the unsub came out here to dig for something, hence the shovel.” Which suggested an organized offender.

Randall’s pupils flared. The obvious clue was Beverley Sandal’s bracelet, which meant maybe Beverley Sandal herself was out here somewhere.

“I think we need to expand our crime scene,” said Frazer. “Maybe the unsub was disturbed, or maybe he spotted the teens when he was finished

digging, and started watching them. Then his lust or lack of control got the better of him and he couldn't stop himself from taking what he wanted." Helena Cromwell.

"Which could suggest a disorganized offender," said Randall.

Frazer frowned. "Maybe, but he knew enough to take out the biggest threat first"—Jesse—"mixed signals, which is common in most murders." But his gut was telling him they were dealing with an experienced sexual psychopath who was highly skilled and organized when it came to murder.

"So what now?" asked Randall.

"We investigate. Quietly." Frazer softened the order. "I don't want the media connecting this thing to Denker. We'll let the local Police Department take the lead and organize a search through the dune system, looking for recently disturbed sites, and any evidence at all. If there's nothing obvious to the eye I'll call in ground penetrating radar."

"Looking for bodies?"

Frazer stared at the soft valley between the dunes where a young woman had met her death. "Yes."

Randall swore under his breath.

"Local cops know the area, they know the people. I want them invested and involved in the case. I want you to track the victims' final few hours." Detailed victimology was the cornerstone of writing a useful profile. The feeling like they didn't have much time sat on his shoulder like the devil. This killer was one step ahead of them and Frazer needed desperately to catch him before anyone else died.



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COLD IN THE SHADOWS

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

CIA Officer Patrick Killion is on a secret mission to hunt down the ruthless female assassin hired to kill the Vice President of the United States. The trail leads him to the Colombian rainforest and an earnest biologist, Audrey Lockhart, whose work on poison dart frogs gives her access to one of the deadliest substances on earth—the same substance used to murder the VP.

When Audrey is attacked by the local drug cartel, Killion steps in and hustles her out of harm's way, determined to find out what she knows. His interrogation skills falter somewhere between saving her life and nursing her back to health as he realizes she's innocent, and he ends up falling for her. Audrey has a hard time overlooking the fact that Killion kidnapped her, but if she wants to get her life back and track down the bad guys, she has to trust him. Then someone changes the rules of their cat and mouse game and now

they're the ones being hunted—by a cold-blooded killer who is much closer than they think.

CHAPTER ONE

THE OLD TRUCK Audrey Lockhart had borrowed from the research station pinged noisily as she turned off the ignition and stared at the tropical surroundings of the Colombian rainforest. It was only five PM, but this close to the equator the sun set early, and it was already getting dark. She jumped out and dragged her heavy rolling suitcase from the bed of the truck before hefting two large bags of groceries, her laptop case, and a light rain jacket into her arms.

The Amazon Research Institute where she did her fieldwork was associated with local universities, who ran field courses and rented space to visiting scientists. Audrey had been coming out here on and off for the last five years and loved Colombia—the lush green forests, abundant wildlife, the salsa dancing, even the crazy road system and general lack of amenities. Life was simpler. The pressures of her academic life fell away like broken fetters. The only downside was that the little cabin provided by the institute squatted at the top of a steep hill, with no road access. She started slogging upward.

After a series of early morning flights from Miami to Bogota to Leticia, she'd driven straight to the research station to check on her frogs. She'd rushed home to Kentucky a few weeks earlier when her sister's life had hung in the balance. Thankfully her sister had recovered. In Audrey's absence, her grad student Mario had looked after her animals and had done such a good job she'd given him a few days off in reward.

Plastic from the heavy shopping bags cut into her fingers, and they doubled in their pain-in-the-assedness by hitting her shins with every step. Orff's distinctive "*Carmina Burana*" chime sounded on her phone. She huffed out a frustrated breath and set down the shopping bags to dig her cell out of her pocket. If she didn't answer her mother would panic.

“You didn’t call to say you arrived safely,” Sandra Lockhart said in a querulous voice.

“I was gonna call as soon as I got to my cabin.” She looked longingly up the hill.

“Considering all the other things I have to worry about I’d have thought you’d at least have the courtesy to call as soon as you landed.”

“Sorry, Mom.” Audrey rubbed her forehead. Back home in Kentucky, Audrey could go weeks without seeing her parents, but as soon as she headed south of the equator her mom freaked, and needed daily reports. It got old fast. “Everything’s okay with you guys, right?” She deflected. “No emergencies?”

“Your dad is putting Redford to bed.” Redford was her two-year-old nephew, father unknown. “Sienna went out on another date with Devon.”

And wasn’t *that* awkward—her drug addicted sister dating Audrey’s ex-boyfriend.

“I think he’s smitten.” Her mom sounded thrilled. Probably because Devon was heir to a billion dollar pharmaceutical fortune. She’d certainly been pissed when Audrey had stopped seeing him.

Audrey didn’t want to deal with the drama anymore. Except she was stuck with this new reality for the foreseeable future.

“Let’s just hope she can stay clean, huh?” Audrey winced at the cynicism of the words, but past experience had taught her to expect the worst. Sienna’s accidental OD in December had been the third in five years. Audrey had resigned herself long ago to it only being a matter of time before they buried her sweet, beautiful sister. But until her sister was ready to kick her drug habit nothing was gonna change, and Audrey only made it worse by pushing too hard.

Although, really, what was worse than dying and leaving your precious child an orphan?

It wasn’t Audrey’s problem—not right now. Her problem was catching up with her research after a month-long absence. “I gotta go, Mom. I need to unpack my groceries.”

“Be careful down there.”

Audrey refrained from telling her she’d experienced more violent crime in the States than she’d ever experienced here. It wouldn’t help. She said

goodbye and hung up. Then picked up her heavy bags and struggled up the hill.

The noise of insects grew increasingly loud as if they were working their way up to a rousing crescendo. The sweat and grime of the day clung to her skin even as the cool breeze stirred the hairs on her nape. She couldn't wait to have a shower, crawl into bed, and sleep for eight hours straight.

A wave of unease stole over her as she became aware of how dark it was. In the five minutes since she'd parked, dusk had eased into the velvet blackness of night. The porch light on the cabin hadn't come on the way it was supposed to—the bulb must have burned out.

The snap of a twig made her startle and glance around.

Oh, no, you don't. No running from shadows.

She pushed aside the fear that wanted to rear up and forced herself to keep moving, one awkward step at a time. One tragedy was not going to define her life. *She* was the lucky one.

Living through violent crime made her sister's choices all the more frustrating, but that was the beauty and burden of freedom and personal choice. Not everyone got it right. Audrey dragged her load the final few steps to her front door and searched her pockets for the key. It was so dark she could barely see her hand in front of her face. Behind her, the scream of a howler monkey filled the air.

Her heart virtually stopped. Then she laughed and the tension eased. She loved the wildlife here—except for the cockroaches. She could definitely live without the cockroaches.

Using touch alone, her fingers scraped over the smooth wood and found the cool metal of the lock. She inserted her key and stepped inside, flipping the light switch. Nothing happened. Dammit. She was going to have to head back down the hill and talk to the caretaker.

An arm snaked around her middle, pulling her roughly against an unyielding body. Terror flooded her mind as a gloved hand clamped over her mouth.

No, no, no!

Her assailant hauled her off her feet, and she dropped the groceries. Eggs smashed against the tile floor. The scent of sweat, the power in his arms, the rigid muscles of his chest told her the attacker was large, physically fit, and

male. She drove her heel backward, connecting with his shin, but her sandals made little impact. Adrenaline flooded her body, reminding her of another time, another pulse-pounding moment of terror when she'd thought she was going to die. Reaching behind her, she dug her nails into the flesh of his waist. He hissed as she scratched him, then shook off her grip like she was an annoying fly. He carried her to the kitchen and maneuvered her until she lay face-first on the unforgiving floor.

He grabbed one of her arms, wrenching it behind her back. Pain shot to her shoulder blade and she yelped as he looped something thin and stiff over her wrist, roughly jerking her other hand to meet the first. He tightened the plastic zip ties and her arms were securely bound.

Oh, God!

He was going to rape her. She was going to die.

Panic detonated like a nuclear device inside her brain. She scrambled like a mad thing, twisting and squirming, then found her voice and screamed. His weight crashed full-force onto her chest and stole the air from her lungs. Her cry was smothered and she could barely move. This couldn't be happening.

“No te voy a hacer daño.” The voice was a hoarse whisper of Spanish. A local? *I'm not going to hurt you.* Sure. That's what murderers and rapists said so people didn't give them any trouble while they destroyed your life. “I have a message for you.” English this time.

She wheezed. “Most people use email, asshole—”

The pressure on her back increased as he gave her his full weight. God, why hadn't she kept her stupid mouth shut? Tears pricked her eyes. Her wrists strained against the tight plastic as he straddled her back then swiveled toward her feet. She kicked at his face, but he captured her legs one at a time, and wrapped another tie around her ankles, cinching it tight. Less than twenty-seconds and she was trussed up like a Sunday frickin' roast. He rested on top of her for a moment, breathing heavily. She grabbed his testicles and squeezed.

He swore and shifted quickly out of reach, turning to face forward again, putting even more of his weight on her back as he lay down on top of her. Her skin crawled.

Then he chuckled. *“Luchadora.”*

Feisty? She wasn't feisty, she was furious.

Nausea threatened. “Please, I-I can’t breathe.” Terror made her voice thin, and she tried to force herself to calm down even as her heart raced. It was impossible. She wasn’t too proud to beg. She didn’t want to die.

Her vision wavered. The walls pressed in on her. The sound of her heartbeat thrashed in her ears. The floor was unrelentingly hard against her cheek, the tile digging painfully into her hipbones and breasts. She went inside herself, concentrated on trying to expand her ribs. After five long seconds of silence, the man eased up the pressure on her back, enough that she could suck in a little oxygen. He moved warily, even though it was hideously obvious she wasn’t the threat. She twisted her head to look at him, but it was too dark to make out any distinguishing features. He wore black clothes and possibly even a mask.

Maybe he wouldn’t kill her if she couldn’t identify him?

She tried to swallow, but there was no saliva left in her mouth. The last time she’d been this scared her best friend had died in her arms.

“*Tengo un mensaje para ti,*” the man repeated in deep rough Spanish.

“I don’t understand what you’re saying!”

He leaned closer. His warm breath brushed her ear. “*Yo se cuando estas mintiendo, chica. Para que sepas.*” *I can tell when you’re lying, chica. Good to know.*

She was obviously an American, so how did he know she spoke Spanish?

“I will say this only once. You need to pay attention.” He spoke English now with a thick guttural accent.

Pain shot along her arms whenever she tried to move. Escalating, paralyzing fear held her immobile.

“It is over.”

What! What did that even mean? Was he going to kill her? She drew in a breath to scream, but a gloved hand clamped over her mouth, the supple leather cool against her skin.

“The Gateway Project is finished.” The voice turned menacing. “Whoever is giving you orders is acting on his own. We will find this person, and we will shut them down. You do not want to be around when we do.”

He released her mouth.

“I don’t understand.” She twisted around to try and look up at him. “Is this some kind of joke?”

He ran a gloved finger over her cheek. “No joke. This is your only warning, *chica*. Do not make me regret not killing you.”

She had no idea what he was talking about, but anger replaced fear, and she glared at him in the darkness.

“Eyes on the floor,” he ordered.

She did as he said. The pressure eased on her chest as he climbed to his feet and she inhaled a much-needed full breath. She braced herself. For a couple of seconds there was nothing but silence. She looked around, but the man had disappeared as silently as he’d come.

Relief hit her like a two-by-four.

What the hell just happened?

More importantly, had he gone for good, or was he coming back?

Alarm propelled her into action. She used her elbow to push herself into a sitting position. She shuffled over to the unit next to the kitchen sink and put her back to the cupboard, leveraging herself up against the smooth wood until she was on her feet. Awkwardly she jerked open the cutlery drawer, holding onto the edge, almost falling over. Her fingers scrambled through the silverware until she found a serrated blade. Trying to keep her balance, she leaned over the countertop and sawed at the stiff plastic that bound her hands behind her back. It took time because of the crappy angle. She sucked in a hiss of pain when she scratched herself on the arm. Finally, the tie came loose with a jerk and she set to work on her ankles.

If he came back... *Oh, God.*

She sawed faster and her legs sprang apart. She kept hold of the knife as she skirted her scattered belongings and smashed groceries, pausing when she reached the wide-open doorway. She peered out into the night, but could see no one. A howler monkey shrieked in the jungle, but her assailant had disappeared. She hoped the bastard was bitten by a snake, or broke his leg tripping over a tree root.

Asshole.

She eased gingerly down the first set of steps, uncertain of her footing in the dark. As soon as she found the paved path she ran, heart pounding from rage and relief, chest tight from being scared out of her mind. Her wobbly legs carried her toward the caretaker’s cabin.

Please be here.

The sound of insects pierced her eardrums like tiny screams. The shadows teemed with a million unseen eyes. Sweat ran down her sides, and the scent of her own slick fear rose up to choke her. She reached the caretaker's home and hammered on his door. "Open up! Let me in."

It seemed to take forever, but finally she heard footsteps. The man pulled open the door, and she dipped under his arm.

"Help. Help me. Someone attacked me in my cabin. They threatened to kill me. Call the police."

He followed her inside, dark eyes wide with alarm. "*¿Estás herida? ¿Viste quién era?*" *Are you hurt? Did you see who it was?*

Her throat was raw from the effort of holding down emotions that now threatened to choke her. "I didn't see his face. He was talking about some Gateway thing. I have no idea what he wanted from me."

The man's eyes flared as they ran over her and rested on her bloody wrists, and on the knife. "Did he rape you?" He switched to English.

She shook her head, grateful to have come away from this encounter without any real physical harm—although she knew from experience how damaging the psychological aspect could be. "He tied me up and threatened me, but he didn't actually touch me."

The man's eyes narrowed as he spoke to her. "There are some bad people around here. Some very bad men. Are you sure you want to talk to the police?"

Because sometimes the local cops cared more about the bad men than the victims—that's what the caretaker was trying to tell her. Audrey was an American. She knew the difference between right and wrong, and just because the asshole hadn't raped or beaten her didn't mean he hadn't done those things to someone else. If reporting this saved one person, it was worth it.

"Call the cops." She shivered as she remembered his strange warning. "I want this bastard locked up."



THE CALL CAME at two AM.

His hand groped on the side table before he found the receiver. "What is it?"

At first the words didn't make sense, the accent thick and hurried, making it difficult to understand. Audrey Lockhart. Attack. Masked man. He stared groggily at the ceiling of his bedroom.

"Tell me exactly what she said in the report," he mumbled.

Two words had him wide-awake in an instant. He swung his legs out of bed and padded across the room.

"Read it again," he demanded. He could almost hear Audrey snapping irritably at the local cops. Someone had attacked her and warned her that The Gateway Project was finished, but she had no idea what that was.

He went to the window, his pale reflection staring back at him. He reached out to touch the cold glass and connected with his fingertip.

This was what he'd wanted, he reminded himself. This was the culmination of a game he'd been playing for so many years he'd almost forgotten it had to end. He was hit by an unexpected pang of grief and regret. However, he couldn't risk anyone finding out the truth behind his carefully constructed lies.

"What should I do, *amigo*?" asked the Colombian on the other end of the phone.

A network of frost crept between the windowpanes and a shiver worked its way over his naked skin. Time to finish this. Time for the endgame.

"Get rid of the report. Kill the woman."

CHAPTER TWO

ACCORDING TO PATRICK Killion's favorite data analyst at the Agency, he was a half-inch short of being the perfect romance hero. As long as the inch she was talking about was his height and not his dick, he didn't give a rat's ass.

Today, at a measly five foot eleven and a half inches, he towered above the locals. His height, combined with his sun-bleached blond hair, meant he definitely did not blend in with the Colombian population. He didn't bother to try.

The CIA dealt in threat assessment and probability levels, manipulation and human intel. Lockhart's appearance, expertise, hidden Cayman Island bank account, and the fact she was in the right place at the right time for Vice President Ted Burger's murder, made her his number one suspect. So, despite FBI ASAC Lincoln Frazer telling him to back off yesterday, he was still following her. He couldn't walk away.

Last night he'd shaken the tree to see what fell out.

He ignored the twinge to his conscience. He'd been a little rough. He hadn't wanted to risk her getting the drop on him. He had given her a get-out-of-jail-free pass and probably saved her life—that should count for something.

Except she hadn't behaved as she should have. She hadn't called her employer. She hadn't grabbed a bag and run. Instead she'd reported the assault to the local cops and had gone in to work today. Maybe she'd been busy destroying evidence or delaying until the last possible moment before she made a mad dash for some small private airfield. Maybe she was overconfident about her abilities. Or maybe she was innocent.

It was the last "maybe" that bothered him.

As he stood in line for a ticket to the ecological park, a pretty redhead in a strappy top and high-heels eyed his neon orange T-shirt and red plaid shorts with a distasteful grimace. He'd committed a class-A felony and the fashion police were about to convict.

"Airline lost my luggage." Killion raised his palms in a pitiful shrug, putting enough misery into his travel-worn appearance that the woman's expression immediately shifted from disgust to empathy.

"That blows. How long ago?"

"Two days now. They swear they'll get it to me sometime today—"

She gave a disbelieving snort. "Yeah, they once lost my luggage on a trip to Mexico and by the time it arrived I was getting on the plane home. Worse, they refused to reimburse all the clothes I needed to buy..."

Off she went, and he was in. Phase one of this mission accomplished. He walked into the conservatory as part of a group of American tourists, rather than as a single white guy traveling alone. They milled loosely about, looking at Lepidoptera specimens that fluttered about like giant-sized pieces of confetti.

A family of seven—five women who all looked like they'd rather be at the mall, an older man, and a teen who read every piece of information like he was cramming for a test. Killion stayed close to the stacked redhead because he looked like the kind of guy who'd stay close to a stacked redhead, but he also chatted to the others in the group, gleaning information. They were down from Florida, visiting family over Christmas. The Americans had arrived in a large minivan with an armed driver, but the driver stayed with the vehicle so they weren't too worried about security. In this country, staying in one spot for any length of time meant you attracted attention—and not the, "Oh my, don't you have pretty eyes" kind of attention.

It wasn't a good thing.

Hot sun bore down on the forest canopy that shaded the ecological park. The small interpretive center affiliated with the Amazon Research Institute attracted local schools as well as the occasional tourist, but it was Monday, January 5 and schools were closed until after Epiphany. The place was deserted except for this little band of intrepid explorers. The ground steamed and sweat beaded on his skin as his adopted people wandered slowly from enclosure to enclosure. A rivulet of perspiration soaked into his shirt.

A huge yellow butterfly drifted over his head and landed on a piece of cut fruit on the feeder tray. The redhead barely contained her squeal of excitement and took twenty pictures with her little point-and-shoot. Killion's point-and-shoot dug into his spine and held fourteen rounds. Their group finally headed into the amphibian enclosure where decaying damp earth mixed with traces of ammonia, and the musk of rotten leaves.

Welcome to the jungle.

His new friend grabbed his arm, pointed. "Aren't they cute!" A minuscule, neon-yellow frog was stuck on the side of a glass tank.

"They may look cute"—said a familiar voice with just the barest hint of a Kentucky twang—"but one golden poison dart frog contains enough toxin to kill ten-to-twenty grown men." Dr. Lockhart wore spectacles on a string around her neck and reminded him of the class nerd—the one all the guys had secretly lusted after but had been too intimidated to ask out on a date. The professor had unusual violet-blue eyes that showed clear signs of a sleepless night. He would have felt guilty, but more than one person had told him he was a heartless bastard who didn't have a conscience. A sociopath by any other name.

He didn't give a shit, so they were probably right. Hell, she should be thanking him. Being tied up and threatened sure beat the hell out of a trip to a Black Camp or a lifetime in prison—and those were the more civilized options.

Audrey Lockhart wore ubiquitous jeans over Birkenstocks and a tight white tank top that molded her breasts in a way that left little to Killion's undeniably vivid imagination, all topped off with a thin purple shirt that she left open. She wasn't carrying a weapon—unless she had a frog in her pocket. "I'm Dr. Lockhart, I study anurans and my specialty is the family *Dendrobatidae*—poison dart frogs."

For all intents and purposes she appeared to be exactly what she said. A scientist, dedicated to her research. He rarely trusted appearances. That's what data analysts, surveillance, and background checks were for—not to mention interrogation.

"I thought captive ones weren't poisonous?" Killion pointed to a little guy about an inch long that was sitting at a precarious angle on a large green leaf. The creatures didn't look real—they looked like miniature plastic toys.

They certainly didn't look like the deadliest creatures on the planet. He placed his hand lightly on the redhead's back, and she sank against him, proving her taste in men was as terrible as his taste in clothes.

The professor's eyes ran over him and his new squeeze, then away, dismissing him as just another tourist.

She didn't recognize him from last night. There was no obvious guile in her gaze. No deception.

"You're right in that individuals bred in captivity have no toxicity, but *these* specimens were pulled straight from the nearby rainforest where they are endemic and, trust me, you wouldn't survive a close encounter." Her voice was husky, sexy enough to raise his awareness of her as a female rather than a target.

He'd always had a thing for voices. And nerds.

She continued, growing more serious, "It takes years for them to lose their toxicity, and even touching a paper-towel that has been in contact with the skin of these particular individuals can kill you. They are *extremely* dangerous."

"Death by frog." His smirk didn't reach his eyes. "Bet that ain't pretty."

The redhead laughed. The professor did not.

"We're very careful how we handle them." She looked stern now, like she was the teacher and he was the naughty schoolboy. And there was his vivid imagination going nuts again.

"Have you ever seen someone die after touching one?" asked his new friend.

"Thankfully, no." The professor's gaze was open and sincere.

What did he expect? Skull and crossbones instead of pupils? He'd been with the Company long enough to spot an operative with one quick glance, but this woman was an enigma. Either she was an incredible actress, or he was way off base in his assessment of the facts. Hell, maybe she was just another enviro-nut trying to save the planet—or, in this case, frogs.

"Do they taste like chicken?" he joked.

Those violet-blue eyes flashed. "I don't know," she bit out. "Would you like to try one?"

Ouch.

Her fiery response was hot as hell, but obviously she didn't appreciate his sense of humor—he'd been told it was an acquired taste. He didn't look away, instead used the opportunity to study her carefully. Her gaze was determined, but he could see fear at the edges—from the scare he gave her last night? Or did she live in constant fear, waiting for her time between the crosshairs? He didn't figure being an assassin was particularly good for your long-term health. Someone, somewhere was always trying to tie up loose ends.

The information he had on Lockhart was solid, but facts didn't necessarily add up to truth—something he'd learned during his time in Iraq. He needed to dig deeper, get closer. But didn't dare tip her off. Hence his little tourist trip today. Like Lockhart with her frogs, he wanted to study her in her natural environment.

“Aren't you scared, working with them?” His new friend asked in a voice that was as thin and high as her heels. “I mean, what if one hopped on you?”

“I'm more scared of people than I am of frogs.” Sadness touched one side of the biologist's stern mouth.

Join the club, sister.

“I'd be terrified.” The woman shuddered beneath his palm and relaxed back into him. He removed his hand. God, he hated using people, and yet he was so fucking good at it.

“What d'you feed 'em?” He searched for questions a normal tourist would ask, rather than “do you stay and watch your targets die, or do you take off early to avoid traffic?”

“Ants, beetles, some plant material. We go out and forage in the jungle for fresh food every few days,” the professor told him.

“You go into the rainforest alone? Aren't you scared of being kidnapped?” he asked.

K&R was a lucrative business throughout South and Central America, as well as many Middle-Eastern countries. One of his best friends was a former SAS soldier who worked full-time as a negotiator for the families of kidnap victims. This was prime territory for those who liked to extort a little extra pocket money with relatively low investment, so why was Dr. Lockhart immune? Were the local bad guys more scared of her than she was of them?

Was she connected in some way? None of his sources had any information on the professor that he hadn't already gleaned for himself.

"I don't go into the jungle *alone*." Lockhart's gaze skewered him, seriously questioning his intellect—he got that a lot. "I'm extremely careful, obviously, but it's no more dangerous here than in some parts of the States. I've never had any trouble in the rainforest."

She'd experienced trouble somewhere though and not just his visit last night—he could see the echo of experience in her eyes. Men like him exploited weakness like that.

"You studied these things for long?" He sought to distract her from her memories.

She made direct eye contact this time in a way that told him she didn't like him very much. Ignoring his question, she checked her watch and called out to the others to begin her demonstration. Four o'clock on the dot.

Killion moved closer, close enough to catch the scent of lavender on her skin and to see her gaze flick warily over him. Her complexion was pale, skin fine-grained. Lips soft and deliciously pink.

She was delicately-boned, petite, but not skinny. Even so, he'd had a hell of a time holding onto her last night and had almost got his balls twisted off. He wouldn't underestimate her again.

He brought his attention back to the talk.

The teen asked a lot of questions. Maybe the kid was a wannabe frog geek. Or maybe he liked listening to the doc's voice as much as Killion did. She had a wicked chuckle that seemed to affect a certain part of his anatomy that should know better. He shifted uncomfortably.

If her career in science fell through, she'd make a fortune doing phone sex.

The fact he was thinking about phone sex when she was talking earnestly about chytrid fungus and climate change being the biggest global threat to frog populations, combined with habitat loss and over-harvesting by the pet trade, suggested he was long overdue in the getting laid department. He now knew far more than he'd ever wanted about frogs and the effect of Audrey Lockhart's voice on his libido.

Talk about torture.

She knew her stuff, but then this was her field. His was finding people who didn't want to be found and extracting information they didn't want to reveal. His expertise usually garnered those he captured some quality time in a US institution. The really lucky ones got to travel the world, although it was hard to be a tourist with a bag over your head.

Audrey Lockhart, Ph.D., looked squeaky clean, but she'd been in Kentucky the day Ted Burger had been murdered with batrachotoxin—a deadly alkaloid secreted in the skin of *Phylllobates terribilis*, the golden poison dart frog. Murdered by a woman pretending to be the maid, of the same general height and weight as the good professor. Eye and hair color were easily altered, but how many women knew how to handle these suckers without dropping dead on the spot? Not many.

Coincidence?

Not likely.

Problem was Audrey Lockhart wasn't throwing off operator vibes, and that bothered him. It bothered him a lot. Whoever killed the VP had waltzed past security into his fancy house, served high tea, and then walked calmly away as the guy lay frothing at the mouth on his study floor. It took either balls or a sociopathic coolness under pressure. And he wasn't seeing it. Not last night, not today.

Lockhart looked innocent. Actually she looked almost too innocent, all perky frog geek, which automatically raised red flags for him. How could anyone be that innocent after the last fourteen years? Or maybe he was getting soft. The current shit-storm in the Middle East had him questioning what all those years in the sandbox had been for. Bin Laden was dead, but the situation was more fucked up than ever with extremists trying to initiate Armageddon—and not figuratively. They were literally trying to instigate the end of times, as if the world wasn't fucked up enough.

What was wrong with these assholes?

People in the US had no idea how lucky they were, and it was his job to make sure they continued to thrive in blessed ignorance. He should be out there, figuring out a way to help moderate people regain control of their countries and reduce the threat to his homeland. That's what he should be doing.

Instead he eased to the back of the crowd, pulled out his cell phone and snapped a photo of the group. He'd seen enough, but he waited until the professor finished her spiel and he drifted away with the others. No drawing attention to himself. No standing out. He even bought a frog T-shirt from the gift store, and said a warm goodbye to his new friend from Miami and her family.

It was late afternoon and the sun went down fast in this part of the world. It was already getting dark. He started the engine of his rental, but hesitated as a small sedan pulled up in front of the ecological center. Killion took a photograph of a man getting out of the car before he headed quickly through the entrance—a definite player judging from the bulge near his left shoulder. The guy left the engine running, and if that didn't scream "quick getaway" Killion didn't know what did. Was this Audrey Lockhart's ride? Maybe the guy had her new identity tucked into the pockets of his bad boy leather jacket.

Killion dialed a number he knew by heart. "Crista. I need an ID on the photograph I just sent."

There was a pause. "Running it through facial recognition programs. How you doing, babe?"

"Been better. How's the new boyfriend?"

"A jerk. Ex-boyfriend."

"Give me his number; we can start a club."

"Oh, please. You are so *not* an ex-boyfriend."

"I seem to remember doing some very girlfriend-boyfriend activities with you a few years back." He rubbed his chin, only half concentrating on the conversation.

"The fact you think sex is the same as dating just proves my point. Have you ever actually been intimate with a woman?"

"Don't tell me you slept through some of the best experiences of my life?"

"*Intimate*, jackass. Not *inside*. We all know you're an expert on what to do with a woman's body, but do you ever dare to try and figure out their minds?"

"Hell, no. And what do you mean 'we all know'?" He was still watching the gate. "Did you go and start your own club?"

“Not yet, but I’m thinking about it.”

He turned his mind back to the conversation. “This guy really did a number on you, huh?”

“I guess.”

“Bastard.”

“Kill him for me?”

“As soon as I get back,” Killion promised.

“Sorry I was bitchy—but I kind of meant it about your inability to do more than connect physically when you’re in a relationship.”

“I don’t do relationships.”

“Exactly. Hey, before I forget, Maclean was looking for you.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Nothing.”

The last thing he needed was his boss suddenly poking his nose into his business while working this particular mission. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, darlin’. Okay, I have a name for you. Hector Sanchez. Listed as a known associate of *El cartel de Mano de Dios*.”

Killion’s eyes widened. He’d heard of good old Hector. The guy was an aficionado of the art of tying the Colombian necktie. Audrey Lockhart sure had friends in low places. She’d fooled the hell out of him.

It wasn’t the first time, but he didn’t like being conned by a pretty face.

“Thanks, Crista. Gotta go.”

“Be careful,” she told him.

“Always am.”

“Liar.”

He grinned as he hung up, then stared thoughtfully at the entrance to the park. What was taking Lockhart and Sanchez so long?



AUDREY WALKED BACK to the lab wishing she could shake the low-grade anxiety that had plagued her since the attack last night. All she wanted was sleep, but the idea of going home to bed filled her with dread. Her PTSD had reduced over the years, but being assaulted last night had brought back the symptoms in huge crashing waves and she knew she had weeks of flashbacks and nightmares to look forward to.

She hated living in fear.

The detectives who'd come to take the report last night had been more interested in her body than in the threats her assailant had made. They'd taken her statement, but made no effort to look for evidence and hadn't even bagged the plastic ties that had cuffed her wrists and ankles. She hadn't been raped, robbed or beaten and they didn't seem to know why she'd called them. When she had the energy she'd get in touch with the embassy in Bogota, but right now there was nothing to do except jump at shadows and scream like a weenie whenever something moved in her peripheral vision.

The Gateway Project. What the hell was the Gateway Project? She'd googled it and got nothing but computers.

Her phone rang. She checked the caller ID—Devon Brightman. If he were just her ex or her sister's new boyfriend she'd blow him off. But he was also Rebecca's younger brother and because of the grief they'd shared, no matter how she was feeling on any particular day, she would always pick up.

"Hi."

"Hey, how's my favorite nerd?"

"Said the techno-geek."

"Techno-geeks are way cooler than nerds."

"Only they and their toys think so." She laughed. When Devon wasn't being over-demanding and possessive, he was actually a good guy.

"You back in Colombia?" he asked.

"Yep." She removed glassware from an autoclave and stored it on a rack.

"You cool with me dating your sister?"

"Sure." She stopped for a moment and realized she was cool with it. Devon and Sienna were closer in age, both being a few years younger than she was, and had a lot more in common. "Just don't screw it up."

He laughed. "Everything going okay down there?"

She opened her mouth to tell him about her attack last night, but stopped. He might tell Sienna and her sister would definitely rat. The thought of giving her mother something real to worry about was enough for a vow of silence. "Everything's great, but I have work to do. Gotta go." Not wanting to linger, she hung up.

Pleased with how maturely she'd handled that transition, she got down to work. Shakira played loudly on her music system and her hips were swaying

as she measured out Ringer solution. Her work revolved around examining how high levels of batrachotoxin in the indigenous frog's skin affected the fungus that was wiping out their brethren worldwide. It might give the wild poison dart frogs an advantage in an ever more challenging environment. Or not. She tried to be optimistic, but it was hard to protect the environment in the face of big business. She often argued with Rebecca and Devon's father, Gabriel Brightman, about how he ran his massive pharmaceutical company. He occasionally listened to her, but he listened harder to his shareholders.

Even though the fungus was naturally present in the environment, she didn't keep it on site. She wouldn't risk it escaping into the wild and being responsible for more deaths. Instead she used a level three laboratory in the city and at her home university in Louisville, Kentucky to conduct the exposure experiments under controlled conditions. Here she collected eggs and samples of the toxin.

The public displays and guided talks at the Amazon Research Institute were a way of educating and inspiring locals and tourists to engage with their environment and support conservation efforts. It was also a way of giving back to the community. She usually enjoyed sharing her knowledge and enthusiasm with people, but not today. After last night she just wanted to fade into the background.

She pushed her reading glasses up her nose. Maybe she could scrounge up some company to go to a bar for a few drinks tonight. Then she thought of her sister and decided relying on a chemical depressant to numb herself into oblivion might not be the smartest idea.

She doubled up on latex gloves and pulled her lab coat sleeves down over her wrists before putting her hands inside the terrarium. Using a sterile cotton bud she swiped the tip over the back of the nearest frog. She was gentle and he didn't seem to mind too much, but she did have to prod him a little to secrete more toxin. It beat shoving a stick through his body and out his hind leg the way the Embera tribe did when they wanted poison for their arrows. Still that was their culture—who was she to judge? Their environmental impact was minimal. She didn't want to think about the damage her culture had inflicted upon the world or she'd spend all her time running in circles screaming, "We're all going to die."

Having collected a bunch of swabs from several different individuals she placed the Q-tips in pre-labeled sterile containers and secured them. Then she noted a fatality in the corner of the tank. The lifeless body was a reminder of all the things she couldn't control, like her sister's drug addiction and a stranger attacking her in the dark. She picked up the limp body of the dead frog. The sound of the main door opening and closing had her glancing around. She hadn't realized anyone else was still here. A man she didn't recognize walked into the lab and turned his head this way and that as if looking for someone. He had jet-black hair and bullish shoulders beneath a tight T-shirt and heavy leather jacket. His eyes were black as coal and when their gazes met, his locked onto her. He gave her a smile that drove stakes into her spine.

Was this the man from last night?

“¿Quién es usted?” she asked. *Who are you?*

He didn't answer, nor did he stop walking toward her.

“Can I help you?” she asked, her voice rising in panic. No response. He just kept coming. *Oh, God.* Considering the look on his face and lack of greeting she wasn't hanging around to find out what he wanted. She took off running. When he started chasing her she knew she was in serious trouble.

She darted through the door that led into the park and screamed for help, but there was no one to hear her. The receptionist who also sold the tickets in the kiosk always left at five sharp. Audrey had given her student the day off, and most of the local scientists were still on vacation. The place was deserted. Darkness had fallen. *Good.* Plenty of places to hide. Her white coat made her an easy target but the man was so close on her heels she didn't have time to take it off—and she was still wearing her gloves and clutching the little dead frog in her hand. She needed to remember what she touched so she could clean up later. She almost laughed. Stupid what went through people's minds during moments of extreme duress—Rebecca had lain dying in her arms pleading over and over to make sure her cat, Marley, was taken care of.

The memory ripped through Audrey's mind like a machete.

She was *not* going to die.

Her feet pounded the concrete. If she could get to the area where they hatched the butterfly chrysalises, she could lock and barricade the doors,

then use the landline to call for help. Her cell was in her purse back in the lab.

She dashed nimbly down a small path that wound between different enclosures. There were no lights because they didn't want to disturb the natural rhythms of the animals, but she knew the way. She heard the man stumble and swear, falling farther and farther behind. Good. Exhilaration filled her. She was going to make it.

Her sandal caught on a piece of hosepipe and she flew through the air, losing her glasses a split second before she smacked her head on a post. Pain and disorientation exploded inside her skull. The sound of labored breathing brought her back to the present. A dark shadow dropped to his knees beside her. The smell of cigarettes on hot rancid breath turned her stomach.

"What do you want?" she asked weakly.

Something sharp pressed against her side, and she tried to pull away, but it didn't stop coming. Pain was all consuming, and shock crashed through her as a knife slid deep. Her mouth went wide in astonishment and she grabbed the man's wrists, nausea rolling through her body. She struggled frantically to push against his arm.

"W-why are you doing this to me?" she panted. Agony streaked along her side. She could barely breathe, let alone think. "Help," she begged someone, no one. "Help me."

He said something indistinguishable in Spanish, but after a few seconds he loosened his grip on the knife and fell backward to the ground. All she could think about was the fact this man had *stabbed* her and it *hurt*. Then she understood what had happened. The neurotoxic steroidal alkaloid from the frog's skin had transferred from her gloves and was now making her attacker's heart beat too fast as the poison irreversibly opened the voltage-gated sodium channels of his body's cells. She dragged herself to her knees, tugging off the lab coat in case she'd got batrachotoxin on that too. The man needed immediate medical attention if he was going to live. Ignoring him and her own wound, she carefully peeled off her gloves, balling them inside out before tossing them aside. Blood ran down her hip in a hot, slick trickle that streamed down her leg.

Holding onto the fence she dragged herself to her feet and staggered along the path. She knew she shouldn't remove the knife, but it cut into her

with every step. Blood soaked her jeans, making the denim feel wet and heavy against her leg. She swayed unsteadily, clinging desperately to the fence. Her assailant thrashed on the ground behind her, having a seizure.

The equivalent of two grains of salt could kill a man. She doubted he'd last until she called the ambulance, but she had to try.

The sound of footsteps made her freeze in fresh horror. He had a partner. She wanted to scream with frustration at the unfairness of it all. She couldn't run. She could barely walk. The beam of a flashlight hit her full in the face, and she tried to shrink back into the shadows.

"Come to finish the job?" she bit out. The pain in her side was so intense she couldn't concentrate, but the lightheaded feeling from losing too much blood was more worrying. The beam of light swung from her to the ground where her would-be killer lay prone on his back with his mouth wide open, eyes staring fixedly into the sky. If he weren't already dead, he soon would be. The newcomer bent to check his radial pulse.

"Don't," she warned sharply. "Poison on gloves." Her words came out in short gasps. "Transferred to skin." A throbbing wave of hurt pulsed through her. "I-I didn't mean to hurt him." Why was she warning the guy? So he could finish the job his buddy had started? But avoiding the inherent danger of the frogs was so ingrained she couldn't keep her mouth shut. "If you touch him you might die, too." She spoke in English because her brain wasn't up to translating into another language, but he seemed to understand. Her thought processes were dulled from blood loss and shock. Her entire left side was hot, sticky, and numb. She stumbled away along the path.

She didn't get far. At first she thought she'd fainted. Then she realized the dizzy sensation was her being scooped up in strong arms and carried along the path. Her cheek nestled against a hard male chest and she could feel his heart beating against his ribs. Something about his scent teased her senses, but its significance drifted away as she slipped into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER THREE

KILLION DIDN'T KNOW what the hell was going on, but he hadn't expected to find a known enforcer for *El cartel de Mano de Dios* in convulsive death-throes after trying to take out Dr. Audrey Lockhart. Any doubts as to her involvement vanished along with Hector Sanchez's ability to breathe.

Did she work for the cartel? They'd assumed the murder was something to do with the now disbanded Gateway Project as a couple of known murderers had been poisoned in a similar fashion and it fit their MO. But could *Mano de Dios* have ordered Ted Burger's assassination in retaliation for their leader being locked up in a US maximum-security prison? And were the cartel now cleaning house so no one else figured it out?

He rolled the idea over in his mind. It could fit. The vice president had been relentless in going after the illegal drug trade after his son had died of a cocaine overdose. It made a pragmatic kind of sense. Use a hired assassin unassociated with their group to get rid of the problem without anyone suspecting they were involved and bringing down the wrath of the American military on their organization—not to mention getting their faces on their own personal deck of cards.

He hefted the professor higher in his arms, careful of the jutting knife. She wasn't very big. She wasn't very heavy.

At the entrance of the park he glanced about to make sure there was no one around. It was full dark now. Streetlights were few and far between in this non-residential area. He strode up the hill, past Hector Sanchez's idling sedan, and placed Lockhart awkwardly in the backseat of his rental. Her eyes were closed.

"Hey, wake up!"

She opened her eyes.

“Keep pressure on the wound,” he told her sternly.

He headed back to the parking lot, leaned inside the enforcer’s sedan, and turned off the ignition, pocketing the keys. He closed the door, making sure he didn’t touch anything with his bare skin. Langley wouldn’t appreciate having one of their operatives linked to a messy murder. Confident no one had seen him, he got back in his car and started the engine. Lockhart was lying in the darkness, panting to control the pain. The handle of the blade protruded just above her hipbone on her left side. At least it wasn’t in the gut or the chest, but knife wounds hurt like a bitch. Hector Sanchez had a sadistic reputation, and probably intended to play with Dr. Lockhart for as long as possible, to make her bleed and scream.

The world was a better place without Sanchez in it.

Killion put the car in drive and headed slowly down the hill and through town, past local bars, and the darkened police station. He dragged his orange T-shirt over his head and tossed it to her. “Use that to try and stem the bleeding.” He drove calmly, doing the speed limit in a part of the country that generally didn’t bother. He adjusted the rearview, saw that her eyes were now closed and she appeared to have passed out.

“Hey, Lockhart! Wake up,” he yelled.

Her eyes flicked open. “H-hospital.”

Their gazes met briefly. “You know I can’t do that.”

She didn’t have many choices—not in this town, not with a cartel knife sticking out of her side. It wouldn’t be long before *Mano de Dios* started looking for their pet killer, and when he turned up dead they’d scour the entire country for this woman. If they found her, they’d make her pray for a swift end.

“Why not?” she croaked.

Jesus. “You know why not.” Was she really gonna continue the charade?

Her features twisted as she pressed the T-shirt against her side. Her face looked clammy, her skin pale. “If you don’t take me to the hospital, I’ll bleed to death.”

“If I take you to the hospital you’ll be dead before sun up.”

“They’re not that bad.”

He frowned and concentrated on the road ahead of him. Did she mean the cartel? Or the doctors? His fingers tightened on the steering wheel. Was

she so confident in her ability to handle the drug smugglers even after an attempted hit? Did she have dirt on them? Maybe she was fucking one of them—she was attractive enough, but Hector Sanchez didn't freelance. If he'd tried to kill Audrey Lockhart it was at his lord and master's bidding. Raoul Gómez—the brother of Manuel Gómez who was serving life in a California federal prison—was an evil sonofabitch and had no qualms about murdering women and children to maintain his iron grip on his organization. Killion wasn't getting on that rat-bastard's radar until he'd figured out who'd ordered the hit on the VP because *that* was his mission. And his mission was paramount, even if his methods were a little unorthodox, if not downright illegal. Nothing was going to sidetrack him from his purpose.

Audrey Lockhart could help him. In fact, she was probably the only one who could help him figure out the truth. He needed her alive.

She cried out as he rumbled over a pothole, but things were going to get a hell of a lot bumpier from here on out. He had few options. He could take her to the embassy in Bogota, but then this fracas became official. Considering cartels owned half the cops and politicians in South America, the diplomats might decide that releasing Lockhart into the custody of local authorities to face the justice system here was more expedient than protecting her rights as an American citizen. And no way could he reveal classified information about the importance of this mission even to other CIA agents, hell, not even to his boss. In theory, he was due to head back to HQ in a couple of weeks to receive his next assignment, which in all likelihood would be a temporary duty overseas—TDY. In reality, his current mission was going to take a while.

Aside from himself, the president, and a handful of Lincoln Frazer's FBI BAU-4 team, no one knew Burger had been murdered. Official reports were the guy had suffered a heart attack and the nation had grieved for the elder statesman. Killion didn't know how many bad guys knew about the assassination plot, but at least one person did and he'd bet his government pension she was bleeding out in his backseat.

He gritted his jaw as he realized something else. Lockhart could not be allowed to talk. Ever. If the world discovered Burger's murder had been covered up, the man's life and actions would be put under the microscope. Burger had been up to his eyeballs in dirty deals and international terror

plots. The fact they'd deceived the public about his murder would be the least of their problems. World War III was likely if the truth got out.

Thoughts raced through his mind as he assessed options. Plan A had been making sure the assassin knew the vigilante organization—The Gateway Project—was now defunct. Frazer's people had been monitoring Audrey's communications to see who she contacted and where she went, hoping to backtrack to the mastermind behind Burger's murder. Killion glanced at the woman in the backseat who was panting heavily while gripping the knife in her side.

Time for Plan B.

He drove a few more miles and then swung west. Over the last twenty years the drug situation in Colombia had changed. Nowadays it operated on the same principles as a terror network with small groups only knowing about their piece of the operation. That way, if they were arrested, they couldn't sink the entire cartel. Farmers cultivated small plots of coca in dense forest regions, easier to hide from spotter planes and government officials. Marxist rebels still controlled large swathes of land that were no-go areas. Colombia might be opening up to the tourist trade, but so was Mexico, and anyone who didn't think that was a dangerous place to visit outside the hotel resorts had their head up their ass.

He pulled down a quiet dirt road surrounded by plantations on both sides and parked up on the side of the road. There were no streetlights here. It was all dense vegetation and thick darkness. Locals barely had electricity. He climbed into the backseat and made room for himself by shifting Lockhart's legs to the side. She cried out, but he didn't have time to be gentle. He flicked on the overhead light. "I'm going to remove the knife and bandage the wound."

"No! That could increase the bleeding." Her voice was a hoarse whisper that was too pained-filled to be even remotely sexy.

"Lady, we don't have a choice." She'd already lost a lot of blood, but there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. "I need to get the knife out so I can get you away from this area before every member of *Mano de Dios* comes looking for us."

"The cartel is after you?"

Time to cut the crap. “The clown you took out with your poison glove routine was Hector Sanchez—chief enforcer for Raoul Gómez, head of *Mano de Dios*.” Like she didn’t know. “And he was after *you*. Now that *I* rescued you, he’ll be after me, too.” Basic psychology. Reminding her she owed him for saving her life. “If you want to live you’re gonna have to do what I say.”

Her brows drew together. “I don’t understand.”

Jesus. “Sure you don’t.”

“You’re the tourist from earlier.”

Tourist? Like he didn’t have “Spook” tattooed across his forehead?

“You were with a family. Girlfriend.”

“I don’t have a girlfriend.” He had hookups, contacts, assets, and coworkers, all helping him fight the seemingly endless Global War on Terror, whether they knew it or not.

He reached into the rear compartment, dragged his bag over and dumped it in the front passenger seat. A professional assassin could pull the knife and fillet him like a damn fish if she wanted to. But she must have understood the implications of the man she’d killed being *Mano de Dios*. She was fucked if she stayed around here. She was pretty much fucked if she went with him too, but she didn’t know that yet. Right now she needed him. He was her only hope. Just call him Obi-Wan Kenobi. He grabbed the emergency first aid kit out of his duffel and another shirt. The orange T-shirt was dark and heavy with blood. He tossed it to the floor.

He grabbed a package of QuikClot out of the medical kit and ripped it open, then pushed her hair back from her face. The fear and vulnerability in her eyes caught at him unexpectedly. A surge of sympathy shot through him. No one wanted to die.

“This is going to hurt.” Even as he said it he eased the blade out of her flesh and then poured powder onto her wound. “The good news is the knife didn’t sever any arteries.” If it had, she’d already be dead.

“I don’t think I want to know the bad news.” Sweat gleamed on her skin.

That the knife might have nicked an organ and you might already be bleeding out internally? Going into sepsis or shock? “Probably not,” he agreed.

He pressed the fabric of the clean T-shirt hard against her side and watched her eyes bug with pain. Then she squeezed them shut and finally went lax—all without uttering a sound.

Out cold. Good.

Fifteen years ago, during his first TDY, he'd spent time north of the Darien Gap in Panama, figuring out the Colombian cartels' distribution networks. Small, unregistered airfields had played a major role in getting the farmers' product to the factories where it was refined into crack cocaine. Those airfields were everywhere, but he'd used one around here, many years ago, with a bunch of DEA agents and Navy SEALs who'd been actively hunting narcos.

Monkeys howled in the trees around him, warning him that this wasn't his territory. He changed into a black, long-sleeved T-shirt and BDU pants, slipping his SIG in a shoulder holster and extra clips in his pocket. There wasn't a lot of space but he'd changed in worse places. He got back in the driver's seat and rumbled down unpaved roads half washed away by the monsoon rains. He crossed a river, hoping to hell it wasn't too deep for the rental. He gunned the engine and water streamed up the side of the windows. They made it across—just. Audrey cried out from the back seat. He gritted his teeth to silence any reassuring platitudes that wanted to spring loose from his lips. Everything was not all right, and the whole situation was her own damn fault.

Ten minutes later, he killed the lights and drove wearing a pair of night vision goggles. Another four miles and he cut the engine, coasted down a small hill, and then pulled over onto the side of the road before tugging on his leather gloves. The airfield was still there. A small turboprop plane sat just inside the open doors of a new looking hangar. Whoever ran the place wasn't worried about thieves—probably because no one was crazy enough to steal from the cartel.

No visible activity in the hangar, but he didn't kid himself the airfield was empty. He climbed into the back seat to check Audrey's wound again. The bleeding had stopped. For now. He unbuttoned her jeans and dragged them low enough to bandage her up. It was impossible not to notice her body, but the fact she was covered in blood meant he was more concerned about keeping her alive than admiring the view.

Emotional detachment was his thing.

Mind fucking was his thing.

Ogling unconscious women was not his thing.

He grabbed gauze and a bandage from his kit, wrapped it carefully around her, lifting her hips and pulling the dressing as tight as possible before securing it into place. Finished, he sat back and took a breath, finding his focus.

Good intelligence officers thrived on ambiguity, on devotion to mission and on ideals greater than themselves. Good intelligence officers had to figure out what decision to make when all decisions contradicted their values and obligations—and when no decision was right. Intelligence officers often failed. Thankfully failure was a better teacher than success. Killion was a damn good intelligence officer because he'd failed a lot. He didn't intend to fail tonight.

He eased out the door, having disabled the interior light—tradecraft 101. Plan B wasn't going to be very popular with the CIA, but if he played his cards right the CIA would never know. He took his duffel bag with him, easing the car door silently shut because noise carried in this part of the world. The NVGs made it easy to make his way, but flattened the landscape so he had to be careful to not scuff his boots on the dirt. He kept to the edge of the field, hugging the darkness until he reached the hangar. A quick inventory revealed two small aircraft and a jeep inside. Light came from a small room at the back of the hangar—probably an office of some sort. It was eerily quiet. He raised his NVGs and tried the door of the plane—unlocked—keys in the ignition. He silently placed his bag in the passenger seat. The rear seats had been removed but the cargo space was empty, which meant they probably weren't doing a drug run tonight. Good news. He took out his SIG P229 and crept noiselessly through the darkened building with its cavernous corrugated metal roof that would make even the slightest noise reverberate like a drum. A cockroach scuttled beneath his feet. He checked the second aircraft, reached inside, and quietly pocketed the keys.

The sound of a chair scraping against the floor had him freezing in place. After a minute of silence he crept closer to the office until he could peer through a crack between the door and the jamb. A man was bent over a computer, pecking away at a keyboard, muttering under his breath in Spanish. Silently Killion moved in and tapped him on the temple with the butt of his pistol. The man slumped forward and Killion grabbed duct tape off a shelf and bound his wrists together behind his back then taped his

ankles to the chair legs. He wrapped tape around the man's eyes and mouth, making sure he could still breathe.

He searched the rest of the building, but it was empty of people. A beat-up truck sat out back that probably belonged to the man in the office. Killion jogged to the SUV where Lockhart was still unconscious inside. He drove them closer, parking in the shadows beside the hangar.

He popped the fuel cap and put papers from the glove compartment into the pipe. He opened the rear door and dragged Lockhart across the seat.

"Ow." She woke up protesting.

"Quiet," he ordered. Although he hadn't seen anyone else guarding the area he didn't want to announce his presence until he had to. She swayed on her feet and he caught her against him. Soft and female. He turned her away from him, hitched up her pants and closed the zipper and button. The pants helped keep pressure on the bandages but doing them up probably hurt. He propped her against the hood while he checked to make sure there wasn't any damning evidence left behind.

She raised a hand to her face and left a streak of blood on her cheek. "I've never had a nightmare this convincing before."

"Keep the noise down, Dorothy. We're not in Kansas anymore."

"Am I dead? Because if I were going to be stuck in purgatory I'd rather be with someone hot and funny like Dean Winchester. No offense," she whispered, proving she hadn't totally lost her mind.

"I'm saving your ass, in case you didn't notice," he muttered quietly, watching the airfield for any signs of activity. "Think I could get a little gratitude?"

"It feels more like an abduction than a rescue," she muttered.

He'd rather she didn't think too much about being abducted in case she implemented her own Plan B. "Hey, some women think I'm hot."

"No one is as hot as Jensen Ackles."

He looped an arm over her shoulders, and she surprised him by grabbing his waist with firm, strong fingers. "What happened to Dean?"

"Jensen, Dean, whatever." She grimaced and her fingers tightened on his shirt as she took a step.

"Fickle. My favorite kind of woman." He was almost certain this conversation was the only reason she hadn't collapsed in a heap. "I'm hotter

than both of them.” He’d never had any complaints in the hotness department. It was “emotional availability” and sticking around that he sucked at.

“Men always think they’re hot. It’s like an inheritable trait attached to the Y-chromosome.” She switched to lecture mode, which was a definite weakness of his. “Even fat, ugly guys think they’re hot, whereas amazingly gorgeous women worry about not being perfect or having stomachs that aren’t taut as drums.”

He shrugged. “So I’m fat, ugly, *and* hot.”

“And my stomach is taut as a drum.”

He grinned. She was funnier than he’d expected. Definitely sexier. He could use that and hated himself for thinking that way. But his job wasn’t all bullshit and bullets. Sometimes the sacrifices didn’t have to feel like sacrifices at all, and they beat the hell out of the days when it felt like his heart was being ripped out with pliers.

She hissed in a breath as they took a step.

“Hang on a moment.” He propped her against the side of the hangar and took a lighter from his pocket. Walked back to the SUV and lit the papers in the gas tank. He went back to where he’d left her, gripped her high around her waist to avoid her injury, holding his gun in his other hand. “Okay, let’s book it.”

He couldn’t afford to drop his guard. She could be playing him with her apparent cooperation, waiting for the best opportunity to betray him to those inside—which would be right about now. A CIA operative might be valuable enough to exchange for her life but he doubted it. No one crossed *Mano de Dios* and lived to tell the tale.

They shuffled awkwardly through the door. The place was quieter than a cemetery but that was about to change. Killion opened the rear door of the Cessna and pulled down the steps, bundling the professor quietly inside. He turned on the floodlights outside so he could see the runway, and then climbed in the pilot’s seat, running a quick pre-flight check. The gas tank on the plane was full—always a bonus.

A loud *whoosh* came from one side of the building as the rental car caught fire. Hopefully there’d be little left by the time someone got around to dousing the flames. They’d easily track it to the rental company and a useful

alias he'd used for years was now burned. He started the engine, watching the propellers catch and speed up. Keeping an eye on the mirror he began taxiing forward. Orange flames glowed on one side of the hangar and licked at the timber frame. His SIG rested in his lap. Lockhart was trying not to make a sound as she writhed in pain on the floor behind him.

Headlights appeared along the road in the distance. Shit. Somebody new was arriving at the party. The plane gathered speed as they bumped across the dirt toward the makeshift runway. A jeep screeched around the corner and gave chase.

Killion accelerated faster, hoping he had enough speed and enough airstrip left to get this baby off the ground. There had to be. He eyed the distance to the trees, knew it'd be close, and knew they'd only get one chance.

"Come on." He pulled back on the throttle and suddenly they were airborne, but with nowhere near the altitude they needed to clear the trees. He held his breath as the forest loomed closer. Shit. He was going to die from his own ineptitude and take Audrey Lockhart with him. He wrestled the controls and pulled back harder, banking to the right. Finally, the aircraft responded and they cleared the rainforest, scraping the leaves of the upper canopy with the wheels.

"Woohoo!" Adrenaline raced through him as he checked the airfield below. Tiny figures ran about frantically, trying to put out the fire, hopefully delaying them long enough for him to make his escape. He tossed the SUV and other plane keys out the window, the sharp breeze making his eyes water before he closed it again.

"We made it," he said cheerfully to his companion. But Audrey Lockhart had passed out on the floor of the cargo space and only the steady rise and fall of her chest told him she wasn't dead.

He pulled out his NVGs. Her being unconscious was a good thing. Now he could concentrate on navigating nearly a thousand miles over the Amazon rainforest at night and hopefully, when he got where he was going, he'd remember how to land one of these suckers. After that he had a decision to make. Assuming Audrey survived the journey, what the hell was he going to do with her?



VIBRATIONS FROM THE aircraft buzzed through her bones and made her teeth rattle. Audrey didn't know what was going on except someone had stabbed her, and the blond tourist had come to her rescue. Tears pricked the corners of her eyes, not just from the searing pain that streaked through her whenever she moved, but from the shock of everything that had happened. She was grateful to still be alive. Another wave of agony crashed through her and a moan escaped.

"You okay back there?" asked her unlikely rescuer.

Stupid question. "Where did you learn to fly a plane?" Her voice was like a metal rasp in her throat. There were a million things she wanted to know, but she didn't have the energy to figure out which was the most important. This whole episode seemed like some surreal nightmare.

"Here and there."

Who was this guy? Why had he helped her? Her mind jumped around the idea of some Special Forces soldier on vacation—Jason Bourne does South America. Maybe the guy had been on holiday and heard her scream back at the research station and run to her rescue? Frankly, he could be anything from a serial killer to an Indiana Jones wannabe. Until she could take a breath without being cut in half with pain, she was at his mercy. And if he was correct about her attacker being a member of the local cartel then they had to find a hospital out of the region.

She was powerless. She had to trust him. "Do you have any water?"

He fiddled with something in the front seat and took a long swallow from a plastic bottle, then recapped the lid and tossed it back toward her. It rolled across the floor. She reached out and grabbed it as the bottle moved closer. Shaking as she twisted off the cap, she couldn't believe how weak she was. She took a swig of the lukewarm water and carefully replaced the cap. "Thank you," she whispered.

"You're welcome." His eyes held a glint as he turned toward her. "Try to get some sleep. I'll wake you when we land."

She nodded and her eyes drifted shut. The craziness and confusion of the last few hours slowly slipped away. The last thing she heard before she fell

asleep was the sound of whistling coming from the pilot's seat. At least one of them was having fun.



“YOU'RE TELLING ME a woman barely five-foot-two inches tall took out your best hit man with her bare hands?” And *Mano de Dios* were supposed to instill terror in the local population?

“Hector stabbed her before she killed him. She bled like a stuck pig—she might already be dead. Her accomplice took her. You never told me she was working with someone.” The tone was accusing.

“Audrey isn't working with anyone.” Audrey was clueless.

“Then who was the man who stole my aircraft and flew her away? You owe me a new plane, *amigo*.”

He didn't owe Gómez a damned thing.

But what were the chances this was a coincidence? Someone warning her about The Gateway Project one night and then snatching her out of Hector's grasp the next?

Not likely.

Mano de Dios had been too slow to get rid of the problem. Now, presumably someone from the CIA—or whoever was secretly investigating Burger's death—had intervened and spirited Audrey away.

Why hadn't they let Hector finish the job? He'd have thought getting rid of Audrey would have worked to their advantage. In fact, why warn her at all? The answer was blinding in its simplicity. They didn't want the assassin—they wanted whoever hired her. Thankfully Audrey didn't have a damned clue.

Would they torture her? Lock her up? The idea was enticing. Would her obvious ineptitude persuade them she was a patsy, or would they just work harder to break her? He wished he could afford to wait; to let her suffer, but there was too much riding on this.

“Once Lockhart is confirmed dead you'll get your money, Raoul, but I want proof. Not hearsay. And if you kill whoever took her I'll double the reward.”

Raoul's tone turned sly. “They won't get out of the country. Everyone is looking for them now.”

So the Colombian had orchestrated some sort of plan. Hopefully it was more effective than his last one.

“Thank you, my friend. This won’t affect the shipments?”

Raoul’s tone grew menacing. “The shipments go on as planned. No delay.”

“Good.”

They said goodbye and he dialed another number.

“I need to see you in my office.” He could no longer afford to trust the Colombians to get the job done.

A few minutes later there was a knock on his door and a woman entered. Attractive, mid-thirties, blonde. Tracey Williams, Head of Security. Tracey Williams wasn’t her real name.

“We have a problem,” he said before she mistook this summons for pleasure rather than urgent business. “The Colombians screwed up. They say they can fix the problem, but I’d like you to go down there and check it out for me.”

Her red painted lips parted in surprise. “She got away?”

“She had help.”

Her brows rose.

“I need you to give it your *immediate* attention,” he said when she still didn’t move.

Her expression tightened, but she nodded. “I’ll be on the next flight out.”

Some of the tension eased from his chest. Unlike the Colombians she’d never let him down.

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COLD HEARTED

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Hunting For A Killer...

Detective Erin Donovan expects life to quiet down after the arrest and conviction of a serial rapist who terrified her university town last summer. Then two young women are brutally slain and the murders bear all the hallmarks of the campus rapist. Did Erin arrest an innocent man? Now her job is at stake and tensions are high and just when it looks like things can't get worse, her department gets the help it needs to solve the double homicide—in the form of a man Erin has never been able to forget.

Who Doesn't Play By The Rules.

FBI Agent Darsh Singh has no interest in reliving the past. Three years ago, his feelings for Erin Donovan had him breaking all his rules about getting

involved. Now his only interest in the former NYPD detective is figuring out if she screwed up a rape investigation and helped send an innocent man to prison. But being forced to work together rekindles their old attraction, and as Darsh and Erin fall for each other, the campus predator fixates on Erin. The race is on to identify the ruthless killer before he makes Erin his final victim.

CHAPTER ONE

HE SPOTTED HER across the street, blonde hair shining like polished gold in the sunlight, her lithe body tormenting every Y-chromosome in a hundred yard radius. He pulled out his cell and took a snapshot to immortalize the moment. He'd thought she said she was returning later in the week. Obviously he'd been mistaken. He dialed her number and watched her pull out her phone. He waited for the matching smile to form on her lips, for her eyes to light up. Instead, she checked caller ID, grimaced, and let the call go to voicemail.

Horror rushed through him as she re-pocketed the phone and turned back to her companion. *What the fuck?* He killed the connection and collapsed to a nearby bench, hidden from sight by a mass of tangled bushes.

He'd thought she loved him. That she wanted to *be* with him...

God! He'd given her everything she needed, laid it out like a feast on a platter with a fucking apple stuffed in its mouth. *She played you, dumbass.*

Fury flayed his skin. Rage so hot and pure that the blood coursing his body burned his bones. She thought she could dismiss him? Like he was nothing? Like he hadn't risked everything for her? His hand strangled his phone as he imagined it squeezing her alabaster neck.

A noise brought him back to himself, and he drew in a long breath.

A laugh.

A giggle.

His head jerked up. Students milled around. They were relaxed and happy after winter break. The monster had been caught. They were safe. Life could go back to normal.

Sheep.

How could they think they were *safe* when the person they were having coffee with might be a predator dreaming about ripping into their soft, white

underbelly? Why were they so willing to swallow bullshit as long as it was confidently labeled “truth”?

The system was broken. Bad guys walked free every single day. Good guys rotted. Innocents died.

Idiots.

A cute freshman smiled shyly at him from the bench opposite. He stretched his mouth into an answering curve that revealed nothing of the shock and disappointment that still rippled through him. Women liked him. So why the fuck did she think it was okay to ignore him?

A plan formed in his brain—a plan that buzzed along his nerves with the blistering speed of electricity.

Should he do it?

It might mess up things, and he didn’t want to go to prison, but it would certainly get her attention. His brain raced over the possibilities. He knew how to do this. He knew how not to get caught. And it might keep things interesting. Life had been pretty fucking boring lately and, as he’d found out last year, there was nothing quite as satisfying as revenge.

The student hiked her bag on her shoulder and got up to leave. He eyed the flirty plaid skirt she wore over opaque black tights and tall black boots, then jogged to catch up with her. Made a joke. Made her blush.

It was almost too easy.

He laughed and realized he was enjoying himself again. The excitement resurrected something inside him that was both heady and familiar. Something that scared him enough to keep it tightly leashed and under control. Something he’d denied himself for ten long months.

He reined in the thrill that fizzed through his bloodstream. He needed to be careful. The memory of the disgraced former quarterback reminded him he couldn’t afford to get cocky. No way in hell did he intend to share the asshole’s shame and degradation. But he knew the system. Knew the flaws. She was going to regret not taking that goddamned phone call for the rest of her life.

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CASSIE BRESSINGER SMOOTHED out the single sheet of paper and read Drew’s small, cramped handwriting for the seventh time that day.

Cass,

I was trying to figure out something interesting to tell you, but after only a month I'm already running out of material. I mean, there are only so many adjectives I can invent to describe the three shades of gray that make up the decor here—snot, Minnesota, and dead rabbit are my newest favorites. I probably wouldn't win any prizes in English class, but as I got kicked out I guess it doesn't matter.

Three shades of gray—hmm, there might be a book in there somewhere...

Fifty Shades this place is not. Not to say there isn't plenty of banging going on from the grunts and groans I hear at night. Someone somewhere is enjoying the fuck out of somebody else.

I think it's consensual...

An ironic concern for a convicted rapist but, hey, who wants to be predictable?

Honestly, Babe, I'm at the stage where protecting my own ass has become my #1 priority. Luckily, I'm a big motherfucker and spent years on the gridiron, staring down people desperate to drill me into the ground. I could do with my offensive line in here though...

Crap.

I didn't mean to talk about this shit and I'm running out of writing paper so I don't want to start over. Plus, my fingers are getting cramps from holding a pen. Yeah, me, former star athlete whose hands were supposed to be his golden meal ticket. Getting cramps from writing a freaking letter! More irony ☺

Enough about me. How are you? What's happening with your courses this semester? You said you were going to try and get into law school. Please don't do that because of me!!! The last thing I want is for you to be stuck in a stuffy courtroom listening to god-awful testimony and watching people's lives disintegrate. Run away and join the circus. Take a year off and travel the world.

Seriously.

And make sure you write and tell me all about your adventures, okay? I'm living vicariously. And if you want to have sex with other girls—that's okay. Feel free to write and tell me all about that, too. Kidding! Well...kind of kidding and now kind of horny, which is a pain in the ass. Obviously the DA was right to classify me as a dangerous sex fiend.

Fucker.

Okay, gotta go. Time for me to go line up for sloppy mashed potatoes and sausages that look like severed fingers... Ugh, okay, just grossed myself out.

Don't worry about me—I got this.

Love you. Miss you.

Drew. X

Someone knocked on the door and Cassie jumped. Tanya Whitehouse sauntered in before Cassie had a chance to hide the letter.

“That from Drew?” Tanya was wearing skinny jeans, her favorite strappy black top, and sparkly earrings. Her lips glowed in glittering magenta. Going out. Doing normal things like a normal person.

Cassie popped a shoulder and nodded.

“He okay?” asked Tanya.

“He’s incarcerated with rapists and murderers for crimes he didn’t commit,” she bit out. “What do you think?”

Tanya placed her perfectly manicured hand along Cassie’s forearm. “You know what I meant.”

Always patient. Always reasonable.

Cassie swallowed the anger. She wasn’t patient, and she wasn’t reasonable. But Tanya was only trying to help. All her friends had been nothing but supportive throughout this entire nightmare.

“He says he’s okay.” Cassie swallowed the knotted lump of grief that had taken up residence in her throat and tried to find her rationality. “I think he just says that to make me feel better.”

“You going to visit him?” Tanya asked gently.

Cassie nodded. “I’m driving over with his dad at the end of the month. Drew doesn’t want me to come, but I—”

“Maybe he’s right.”

Cassie sat up on the messy bed. She knew where this was going. “Please don’t tell me I’m wasting my life. Drew *is* my life.”

Tanya grabbed Cassie’s hand and squeezed hard enough to hurt. “I just don’t want you to be sad for the next thirty years.”

Her vision blurred, but they both pretended Cassie wasn’t crying. Even she was sick of the incessant tears. “I won’t be.” She was lying. “Anyway, he can still appeal.”

There was an awkward silence when Tanya didn't say anything. Cassie's gaze shifted to the image on the front of a magazine. Easier to look at some movie star complaining about her messed up childhood than dealing with the sort of truth that dug holes in your soul.

"Hey," Tanya said brightly, "there's a party over at Riddell Hall. Wanna come with?"

Cassie shook her head.

"Come on. It'll be fun," her friend urged.

Going to a party would remind her of all the times she and Drew had hung out. She didn't want to acknowledge the aching void of his absence—especially not in public.

"I have an assignment due tomorrow. I really need to finish it." She crawled over to her bedside table in search of a tissue.

Tanya lightly flicked the magazine, mockingly. "Well, you better get on with it then."

Cassie slumped back to the bed, ashamed of how piteous she'd become. "I can't face seeing people," she admitted. "Not yet. Maybe coming back to school was a mistake."

"You did great. Take it slowly. You'll get there, and we'll all be waiting for you on the other side of this."

Cassie nodded. The problem was there was no 'other side.' Drew's loss was like a rip in her chest that got bigger every day. "The world thinks he's a monster."

Tanya wrapped her arms around Cassie in a quick hug. "We love him. We know he's a good guy and would never touch those lying bitches."

"I don't know how this could have happened."

"You can't lock yourself away forever, Cass."

But she wanted to.

She didn't know why she'd come back this term, but hanging around her parents' house with nothing to do was worse. Christmas had sucked balls. Now she needed to figure out a way to move on without giving up on the man she loved.

She gripped her friend. "I love you, Tan. I'm sorry I'm such a bitch."

"I love you, too, baby."

She forced herself to pull away and wiped her eyes. “I really do have an assignment to finish.”

“Then get to it, slacker.” Tanya gave her arm a noogie.

Cassie forced a smile. She’d blown off cheerleading practice earlier today, and if she did it again, the coach would throw her off the squad. She didn’t care, except it would screw with her scholarship, and her parents weren’t wealthy. She couldn’t afford to get thrown out of the program, and she needed a good GPA to have a hope of getting into law school. But every time the football players ran onto the field in their black and gold jerseys, it was like someone was pouring acid in her eyes. Knowing everyone’s life went on while Drew sat locked up in a cell. Her throat constricted. Some days it felt like the pain would consume her whole.

She stood and pushed her friend toward the door. “Go. Have fun. Kiss some hot guys for me.”

“If I can find someone worthy enough, I intend to do a lot more than kiss him. So don’t worry if I don’t come home tonight. I’ll text you.” Tanya grinned. “Mandy’s studying in her room. Alicia is still at the library but said she’d be back just after ten as per usual. She might come to the party later, so if you change your mind...”

“Maybe,” Cassie lied. “You be careful out there. Guard your drink,” she warned. Because if those women had been raped, there was still a dangerous criminal on the loose, and no one knew it.

“I will, honey. Jillian’s going to be here any minute to give me a ride.”

“Go. Have fun.”

Tanya turned and smiled at her sadly, touching her arm. Cassie felt the punch of it near her heart. “You’ll get through this, Cass. You don’t have to forget Drew, but you need to keep living your life. He’d want you to do that.”

Cassie’s lip wobbled as she remembered what he’d said in his letter. She crossed her arms over her chest as she watched her friend jog down the stairs, grab her coat, and race out the front door. She had to believe a miracle was going to happen and that Drew would be freed, but it seemed futile. The judicial process was so slow it took months to even schedule a court hearing. In the meantime Drew was forced to live amongst killers and thieves.

Getting raped in the showers wasn't something anyone should have to worry about. Who could live like that?

That bitch Donovan had a lot to answer for. The blonde detective probably thought this was over.

It wasn't. It would never be over.

Anger grounded her. Without it she'd be so damn lost.

Across the hall, Mandy turned her music on full blast. Cassie slipped on her noise-canceling headphones and stared at her computer and thought about the paper she needed to finish. Instead she pulled out a pen and notepad and started to write back to the man she loved, stopping only once to wipe away the tears that insisted on falling.

CHAPTER TWO

DETEKTIVE ERIN DONOVAN got into her Ford F-150 truck, slammed the door, and turned the key in the ignition. The five-liter V8 engine roared to life. Today was her first day back after a Hawaiian vacation, and she was reeling from the ferocious drop in temperature combined with jet-lag that battered her senses.

She blasted the heater, giving it time to defrost the thin skim of ice that coated the interior of the windshield. She should check job vacancies on the islands—they needed cops in Hawaii, too, right? Living in Upstate New York was like living in a frickin' refrigerator.

The town of Forbes Pines in St. Lawrence County was less than fifty miles from the border. They were so close to Canada they could practically smell the polar bears. She snorted at her own joke. Forbes Pines was a highbrow college town of about fifteen-thousand people and, up until about seven months ago, the natives had been friendly. The southern outskirts of town bordered the Adirondacks, and the whole area was spectacular, especially in fall when the trees changed color.

No matter how beautiful, it still didn't feel like home. After the sensational trial that had ripped the town apart last December, she doubted it ever would.

She jammed the edges of her down parka together and rubbed her chapped hands. As a police officer, she prioritized access to her sidearm over comfort, but there was a fine line between safety and stupidity. Tonight she was seriously questioning which was more likely to kill her first—the cold or a perp. The mercury was in the low teens and sidewalks were piled with dirty ice and slush. It hadn't snowed since Christmas Eve nearly two weeks ago. Not that she'd cared—she'd been too busy soaking up the sun on the white sand beach.

It had been her first vacation in years, and she hadn't wanted to come back. She frowned, trying to remember the vacation before that. Her stomach lurched like a drunk on the subway when she did. Her honeymoon. God. The reminder was like a blow to the kidneys that robbed breath and made her insides bleed. She closed her eyes and was immediately assaulted by the image of Graham putting his off duty SIG Sauer P239 to his head. Her limbs twitched in a never-ending battle, torn between running toward him and running away.

She jerked her eyes open, heart pounding, sweat clammy on her skin. Her breath formed a cloud of vapor. Damn. She'd thought she was over the flashbacks. A tap on the glass had her heart exploding in her chest. She swiveled in her seat. *Shit.*

Ully Mason, a patrol officer from the Forbes Pines Police Department, stood on the tarmac, stamping his size twelve boots on the unyielding ground. Trying to get her breathing under control, she moved her hand away from her sidearm and buzzed down the window.

"Got a call about a possible intruder at Cassie Bressinger's place." He eyed her steadily from under thick dark brows.

"Again? I thought things had calmed down over there?" Erin's head hurt. Dispatch had been getting almost nightly calls for months now. She'd thought the fun and games had ended with the trial. Obviously not.

A small smile curved Ully's mouth. He was a good-looking guy, and he knew it. "Guess they heard you were back."

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph." The college kids had a better grapevine than Crimestoppers. Officially she was off duty, but if these bogus calls didn't stop, the chief was going to have a coronary. "I'll meet you there. If we don't find any evidence of an intruder this time, we'll arrest the caller for wasting police resources." She checked her watch. Ten PM. "Let's see if we can figure out a way to put an end to this bullshit."

"I need to gas up on the way over." Ully wrapped his fingers over the top of her window. "Don't go in without me. I can just see the head of the cheer squad swearing under oath that she shot you in self-defense."

"She'd enjoy it, too," Erin agreed.

Ully let go of the glass and walked away to his black and white cruiser. Erin buzzed her window back up. As far as Cassie Bressinger was concerned,

Erin was the devil incarnate. Maybe she'd give Cassie something to bitch about this time.

The frost finally cleared and warmth filled the cab. The Forbes Pines PD shared the large rambling red brick monstrosity of City Hall with the courthouse, DA's office, and city offices. Politicians and lawyers liked to grandstand on the marble front steps. Cops and criminals skulked in the back entrance.

Erin pulled out of the police station and took Roosevelt Road, then turned right along Main Street past the beautiful park that gave the town a natural elegance. Tall elms and wrought-iron benches lined the central walkway. On the other side of the park, the old sandstone edifice of Blackcombe College gave Forbes Pines a dignified, moneyed air. The college dominated every aspect of the town with at least half the population being students, or former students who couldn't bring themselves to move on. Faculty and staff made up a large proportion of the rest of the town, and most of the local businesses depended on the university for survival.

She often kidded with the other cops that they were more like campus cops than real police officers. That was before the trial made international headlines and cemented her position as Most Hated Woman in the county. Erin drove onwards, intending to do a big loop around the southern perimeter of university grounds to where the sorority and frat houses were located on the far eastern edge. She wanted to get a feel for the mood of the place in the wake of Drew Hawke's conviction. It would take Ully at least ten minutes to fill up, so she had time. Term had started today and, despite the hour, there were plenty of students milling around in small groups. They eyed her truck suspiciously as she drove slowly by. Outside one of the large frat houses she locked gazes with Jason Brady, wide receiver for the Blackcombe Ravens. Wearing track pants and a Raven's long-sleeved tee, he stood on the curb next to his jeep with his hands on his hips. He spat on the ground and mouthed the word "cunt" as she drove past.

Good times.

She carried on, past the gym complex, the faculty of science. Another half mile, and she cruised up and down the streets either side of Cassie Bressinger's house. No sign of anyone lurking. She stopped the truck a few houses down from the small clapboard building. Many of the houses in this

neighborhood were rented to students. A few belonged to low income families—research assistants, sessional instructors. Cassie Bressinger’s neighbor had a small plastic swing-set on a postage stamp-sized front lawn.

Last time Erin had visited this address, she’d arrested Cassie’s boyfriend. No wonder the girl was about as friendly as an injured boar. There was a light on deep inside the belly of the house but nothing outside or downstairs. She tried Uly on his cell but couldn’t raise him. There were several reception dead zones, and the gas station was in one of them. She didn’t have a police radio in her truck tonight.

She sat for a moment with the engine running, then felt ridiculous. She’d spent five years as an NYPD beat cop, and one year as an NYPD detective. She wasn’t some rookie who needed her hand held. Unlike most TV shows depicted, detectives didn’t normally work in pairs. Especially not in small rural departments. They worked alone, and they got the job done without a trusty sidekick.

Cassie and her friends were probably sitting in the dark watching her and laughing their asses off, planning to repeat the routine, *ad infinitum*. Erin turned off the engine and killed the lights. She grabbed her flashlight from under the seat and got out of the truck.

Last year had been the most grueling of her professional career, but it had ended with a conviction of the serial rapist who’d terrified campus. She should feel safer, they all should, but this was a football town, and the players ranked right up there with Holy Trinity. By arresting the star quarterback she’d brought herself nothing but trouble, and right now, she was about as popular as Pilate after the crucifixion.

A siren went off in the distance, the sound echoing for miles across the stark winter landscape. A dog barked a few houses down, but the street itself was deserted, everyone tucked up warm and cozy in their homes—like she should be.

Dammit.

She crossed the road, then climbed the three steps of the sagging front porch. There was a moth-eaten couch to the right. Standing to the left of the door she knocked and waited. An eerie silence greeted her.

“Forbes Pines PD.” She knocked harder. “Cassie Bressinger, you reported an intruder. Open up, please.” No one wanted cops in their

neighborhood so she'd make sure the locals knew exactly who was responsible for this late night visit. She knocked again.

Where the hell was Ullly?

If she'd really thought there was an intruder inside the house she'd kick down the door, but she doubted the chief of police wanted that sort of heavy-handed police work. He wanted the incidents to die down naturally without escalating the drama.

A plan that currently wasn't working.

There was a narrow path between the fenced yards of this house and the next. She made her way through, the edges of her coat brushing the wood on either side. At the back of the property she stood on tiptoe and swung the flashlight over the top board. She shone her beam into the shadowy recesses, revealing overflowing trashcans and several boxes of empty bottles stacked outside the back door. No sign of a break-in.

Something launched itself against the fence beside her, and the whole thing shook violently. Her heart ricocheted between her ribs and her spine. A frenzy of barking told her it was just a dog—*Jesus H. Christ*. The damn thing was lucky she hadn't shot it.

The jolt of adrenaline ramped up the tension and dialed her mood up to pissed. She strode back to the front of the house, intending to hammer on the door, but saw one of Cassie's roommates walking toward her along the sidewalk.

"What are you doing here?" Alicia Drummond demanded loudly. She carried a pile of books, and a hostile attitude. The feeling was mutual.

"Police received a call about an intruder from this address," Erin told her with a smile that could rip flesh from bone.

"Sure they weren't talking about you?" Alicia scoffed. She was a snotty law student on the fast-track to becoming a snotty defense attorney.

Erin kept her retort to herself. Her mother always said, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." Of course, her mother was one of the few members of the family who wasn't a cop. Her father's response was always, "You have the right to remain silent. Use it." Erin lived by his maxim.

Alicia balanced the heavy books under one arm while she dug for her keys. “We don’t want you here. You need to leave before I make a complaint.”

“Nice try, Alicia.” Erin leaned against the siding. After only a few hours’ sleep and a five-hour time difference, she had zero tolerance for bullshit. She just wanted to go home to bed. “I need to talk to Cassie, because she’s the one who reported the intruder. I’m going to need her to come down to the police station and make a full report. Anyone else in the house at the time of the call also needs to come in.” The more inconvenient she made the consequences of this prank, the sooner they’d get the message that this was not okay. Cops had better things to do with their time.

Alicia threw her a look of utter loathing. Then she went inside and flicked on the hall light. She went to slam the door in Erin’s face, but Erin stuck her boot in the gap.

“Alicia,” she warned with enough of an edge that the girl met her gaze. “Cassie needs to stop making false reports before she gets herself into serious trouble.”

Alicia’s gaze narrowed. “Fine. I’ll tell her to stop being so resentful just because the cops locked up her boyfriend for thirty years. I mean, what’s thirty years?”

“Tell it to the judge and jury. I’m not the one who convicted him.” Erin removed her foot, and Alicia slammed the door shut in her face. Erin dragged a hand through her hair. These young women were so full of righteous indignation she actually admired them. Pity the guy they believed in was a violent scumbag.

She headed back to her truck, wondering where Uly was and whether she should wait for him to turn up or just call him on her drive home. A scream rent the air and raised every hair on her body. She turned and ran back toward the house and collided with Alicia on the garden path. The woman who hated her guts threw herself into Erin’s arms and sobbed loudly. “Oh, my God. Oh, my God!”

“What is it?” asked Erin.

“They’re dead!”

Erin’s heart raced even as she braced herself for some dumb practical joke. “Who? Who’s dead?” She took a step away from the hysterical girl and

made Alicia sit on the curbstone. “Who is dead?” she repeated sharply, trying to penetrate the fog of hysteria that encased the usually unflappable law student.

“C-Cassie and M-Mandy.” Alicia’s skin was gray, her expression shell-shocked.

If this was a joke, Erin was going to make them all go before the judge. A black and white cruiser pulled up in the street behind them. Ully. Finally.

He joined her. “Sorry, someone ran a red, and I pulled them over.”

“We have a report of two fatalities inside the house,” she told him.

Ully’s eyes widened as he radioed for backup. They’d both assumed this was another false alarm. Her pulse thumped heavily in her veins. Had she screwed up? Had she been outside feeling sorry for herself as someone slaughtered two girls inside?

She pulled her Glock from its holster and climbed the steps. Ully did the same, and they entered the front door fast, clearing the downstairs room by room—the living room and kitchen, downstairs bathroom. A door off the kitchen had probably once been a dining room but had been converted into another bedroom. Alicia’s books and bag were strewn carelessly on the bed.

It was quiet inside, the ominous feeling of dread moving sullenly through the air.

Erin jerked her chin toward the stairs and up they went. The door to the first room on the left was wide open. A girl lay on the bed staring unseeingly up at the ceiling. Erin recognized her from the trial last year, but didn’t know her name. There was bruising on her neck, and the whites of her eyes were spotted red.

Erin ignored the way her heart jerked in her chest and moved to the center of the room as she and Ully finished searching the space. Once they were sure no one was hiding in the closet or under the bed, she pressed her fingers to the girl’s carotid.

The skin was warm, but there was no pulse.

Erin caught Ully’s gaze and shook her head, and they moved to the next room, checking under the bed, behind the door, and in the attached bath. Empty.

Horror spiked as they entered the last bedroom. Signs of a scuffle were obvious. Papers and bedding lay strewn across the floor. Jagged shards of a

broken mug were scattered on the carpet. Cassandra Bressinger lay naked, spread-eagle, wrists and ankles bound to the four corners of the bed. The same MO Drew Hawke had reportedly used to rape his victims, except she was face up, and battered until she was almost unrecognizable.

Erin and Ully exchanged a glance. Had they been wrong? About Drew? About Cassie's crank call? Shock and horror and an awful sense of culpability ripped through Erin. If she'd broken down the door earlier, would she have saved the lives of these two young women?

To ground herself, Erin focused on the ritual of the job. Secure the scene. Assess the victim. She and Ully cleared the room, made sure there was no threat to life before Erin pressed her fingers to the side of this girl's throat. No pulse. She hadn't been dead long, but long enough for her lips to turn blue and eyes to glaze over.

Careful of where they stepped and what they touched, she and Ully cleared the rest of the house. Sirens screamed as more uniforms started to arrive.

"Secure the perimeter," she told the senior patrolman. She didn't want every cop in the town trudging through the crime scene or seeing the bodies. "I'll make the calls." Crime scene techs, the coroner, their boss. "And get someone to take Alicia Drummond to the police station to get a statement before she talks to anyone else."

Ully nodded and was already speaking into his radio.

The first call Erin made was to Harry Compton.

"What the hell do you want?" he answered groggily. There were only two detectives on the small Forbes Pines PD, and only one of them had recently taken a Hawaiian vacation.

"Double homicide on Fairfax Road."

"Fuck," Harry said and hung up.

A man of few words.

Then she called Chief Strassen and told him the case they thought they'd won last month was far from over. And the town that hated her guts was about to crucify her.



A BITTER NORTH-WIND funneled down the street, an omen for the hostility Darsh Singh was bound to encounter in the next few minutes. It was still dark out. Snow lay in dirty patches on the barren ground. He'd thrown on the clothes he'd been wearing earlier that day, grabbed his belongings, and hightailed it to the airport. Now a thin navy windbreaker with "FBI" stenciled across the back in acid yellow was all that stood between him and a polar vortex determined to suck New England into the cold depths of hell.

He'd been on a job in Boston when he'd gotten an urgent call from Acting Supervisory Special Agent Jed Brennan. On medical leave since before Christmas when Brennan had taken a bullet during an assassination attempt on the president, the agent had stepped in as temporary head of BAU-4 after ASAC Lincoln Frazer snapped his Achilles tendon during a criminal apprehension on the Outer Banks the day before yesterday. Considering Frazer had bagged a serial killer who'd been active for nearly twenty years, Darsh figured it was a small price to pay.

Darsh's own desk was overflowing with active case files. A series of rapes in Portland. A cluster of homicides in DC, not to mention the white slave ring he'd been working in Boston. But within twelve hours of coming back to work, Jed Brennan had received an anxious phone call from the Department of Justice about a potential goat-ropes—a double homicide at Blackcombe College, Forbes Pines, Upstate New York.

Blackcombe was renowned both as an undergraduate teaching institution and a world-class research facility, but that wasn't the reason for its more recent brush with fame. The media spotlight had been focused sharply on the town following the high-profile trial and conviction of the star quarterback for a series of rapes last year. The trial had ripped the town apart with opposing camps coming to blows on the courthouse steps and a near riot occurring when the verdict was read.

Brennan had pulled Darsh off his other cases and told him to make *this* his priority.

It was a delicate situation. Darsh had been tasked with not only examining the latest murders, but profiling the other crimes as well. To figure out if these new killings were a coincidence, a copycat, someone deliberately trying to make the Hawke conviction look shaky, or if the local PD had messed up and doomed an innocent man to prison. And he had to do it

without pissing off the locals when they knew they were gonna be put under the microscope.

Darsh pushed through the crowd of spectators who lingered despite the lateness of the hour and the sub-zero temps. He hoped someone here had the smarts to photograph the onlookers in addition to the crime scene. Killers often came back to observe the chaos they wrought. It was all part of the thrill. Unlike most fictional killers and rapists, the real life versions were generally as smart as a thumbtack. He flashed his creds at the police officer manning the outer perimeter and ducked under the tape. “Agent Singh. FBI. I need to speak to whoever’s in charge.”

“*You’re* FBI?”

He ignored the skepticism. “That’s what they told me when I graduated the academy.” He pocketed his gold shield as the officer shouted to one of her colleagues before leading him to the two-story clapboard house surrounded by yellow crime scene tape.

“Sorry.” The rookie was flustered. A dark blush worked its way into her cheeks and matched her cold-looking nose. “I wasn’t expecting a fed to show up.”

Darsh signed his name on the log, put paper covers over his boots, latex gloves on his hands, and walked into the house. It was just as cold inside—front and back doors were wide open. At least it would slow decomposition.

The rookie button-hooked a right and walked up to a blonde who wore a gray pantsuit beneath a black parka with a fur-lined hood. The blonde had her head down but seemed vaguely familiar.

She looked up, and a pair of smoky blue eyes collided with his. Every neuron in his body sparked to life as recognition slammed into his gut. Her pupils dilated, but apart from that, she betrayed no visible reaction.

Fuck.

There was no smile. No “Hey, how’re ya doin’?” But then their last encounter had been conducted under very different circumstances. Horizontal. Naked. Panting.

She’d turned him inside out in a way no one else ever had, and that was *before* he’d found out she was married.

He glanced at her left hand. Bare.

His pulse sped up, as if he hadn't learned his lesson the first time. She tucked her fingers up her sleeve, perhaps sensing his gaze.

The rookie spoke into the blonde's ear, and the woman narrowed her eyes, clearly weighing the professional implications of his presence rather than the personal ones. Darsh stared right back. Under his jacket, he wore black tactical pants, a black T-shirt, ATAC boots—much the same as he'd been the first time he'd bumped into her in a bar after spending an intense, sweaty day training with the FBI's HRT. She'd been at Quantico doing a training course for law enforcement. He'd been about to go undercover and was supposed to be keeping a low profile. He hadn't told her he was part of the FBI's BAU—but his omission didn't come close to hers. And it still burned that he'd slept with a married woman.

Her mouth turned down at the edges, and he tried to forget the fact he'd spent hours kissing those lips—and every other inch of her body. As if reading the direction of his thoughts she glared at him and turned to the evidence tech she'd been talking to, dismissing Darsh like he was a nobody.

He shoved down a grin. If it hadn't been the scene of a double homicide he'd have laughed. He was used to working with women who busted balls for breakfast. He actually enjoyed the challenge of them. He stood waiting patiently until she deigned to speak to him. Forty-six seconds later, she walked across the room to where he'd planted himself beside the door.

"You're FBI?" She held out her hand for his creds. Took them and examined them carefully. "Not a Marine then?" she muttered under her breath, proving she definitely remembered their night together three years ago.

"Once a Marine always a Marine," he told her truthfully.

"*Semper Fi*," she muttered sarcastically.

Always faithful.

"Well, that's *my* motto." He plucked his creds out of her grip, and she flinched.

Up close, those unusual eyes stood out against creamy skin and thick dark lashes like a wash of color in an otherwise pale complexion. There were shadows beneath them, bruises of fatigue dappling tender skin, speaking of a double shift dealing with brutal reality. He told himself it didn't matter. All

that mattered was helping catch this killer and making sure the local cops weren't incompetent hicks.

"This isn't a federal case." Irritation frosted her tone.

Hell, snowmen were warmer than this woman appeared on the surface—except he knew that beneath the icy exterior was a core of molten fire. "No, ma'am."

"Detective," she corrected, those sharp eyes of hers apparently tracking his thoughts. "Detective Erin Donovan."

"Detective." He inclined his head, inexplicably relieved she hadn't lied about her first name. He'd taken one look at the sexy blonde and been smitten. At first they hadn't exchanged surnames or life histories, both wanting a no-strings hook up. But by the end of the night he'd wanted to know everything about her—except the one thing he'd discovered. He cleared his throat. "Your chief requested assistance from the BAU. I'm it."

Her boss, at the urging of the governor, had indeed called the FBI for assistance. None of the local cops needed to know the DOJ was also involved.

"BAU? You're BAU?" Her expression became less antagonistic now that she knew he wasn't a field officer who might try to wrest the case from her. But the question remained in her eyes—why lie about being a Marine all those years ago? A spark of apparent understanding lit her eyes, but he couldn't begin to guess what she was thinking.

"I guess we both lied to get what we wanted," she said in barely a whisper.

A night of burning-hot sex. The memory of it seared the air between them, and that pissed him off. As a trained sniper, he never made the same mistake twice—that went double for his personal life. He kept his voice to the same low whisper. "Only I didn't have a spouse back home waiting for me."

"Gold star for Agent Singh." She looked him in the eye, raised that stubborn chin of hers, and got back to the job at hand. "Serial crimes generally involve more than two bodies, and have a cooling off period between crimes. Why is BAU involved here?"

"Because after the rape trial last year this town doesn't need a killer on the loose." A little truth went a long way. "The faster you solve this thing, the

better.” They held each other’s gaze, but he didn’t back down. Neither did she. “You have anyone photographing the crowd outside?” Divert her attention. Give her a reason to value his input.

Her eyes widened, and she swore. “Geoff,” she spoke to a man packing up his photography gear. “Get some more exterior shots and make sure you get plenty of the crowd in case the perp came back.”

“Right, boss.” The photographer unzipped his camera with the resigned air of a man not getting any sleep that night.

“We did it earlier, but I should have thought of doing it again a few hours later. The perp might have gotten curious as to what was going on. Thanks.” She nodded curtly.

“The bodies are still here, correct?” He got a much better sense of the killer’s mindset when he saw victims *in situ*. And this was a volatile situation and a sensitive case. The quicker they figured out who’d killed these girls, the better for everyone. He took a step toward the stairs, but she side-stepped, blocked him, and they collided hard. He grabbed her upper arms so she didn’t fall on her ass and tried to ignore the fact her soft breasts were pressed up against the hard wall of his chest. The dilation of her pupils and flaring of her nostrils told their own tales, even as her jaw flexed and eyes narrowed. They stood glaring at one another like angry lovers—or a couple of wary dogs going head-to-head over territory.

CHAPTER THREE

DARSH WAS AMUSED. Was the detective really going to try to stop him from doing his job? Considering the top of her blonde head came to his chin, and he outweighed her by seventy pounds, it wasn't the smartest move. Although she did have a gun.

Evidence techs and other cops were watching with keen interest, and Darsh wasn't about to give them a show. He let her go and took a step away from her. Touching her made his blood heat, and he couldn't afford to get distracted.

"You have a problem with me being here, Detective?"

Something faltered in her gaze. She papered the cracks in her composure with a smile that said not only did she not trust him, she didn't like him very much either. But she'd liked him well enough in Virginia.

"I need to talk to my chief before I'll allow anyone near those bodies. I need to check you're not some reporter or whacko off the street with really good forged credentials. I owe it to the victims and their families not to take things at face value."

He regarded her quizzically. Technically he didn't need her permission, but he appreciated the thoroughness in checking with her boss, and he appreciated the fact she seemed to care about the victims—although that could cloud judgment when an investigator got too close.

"I'll wait," he said patiently.

She stepped away, already pulling out her cell. He wandered into the kitchen and looked around. A stack of washed dishes drained next to the sink. The place was clean if a little tatty and worn. Typical female student accommodation, except for the picture of Erin Donovan stuck to a dartboard, riddled with holes, and two darts carefully piercing each eyeball, the third sticking out of her mouth.

The woman in question followed him into the small room with its rickety table piled high with bills. She spotted his raised brows as he looked at the dartboard, and grunted. She put her hand over the microphone. “Cassie Bressinger wasn’t exactly a fan of mine. I assume you know she was Drew Hawke’s girlfriend?”

He hadn’t. That put a whole new perspective on the case.

Conflict of interest, anyone?

The problem was the police department here was so small they probably didn’t have anyone who hadn’t been involved in the serial rape case last year.

He walked to the back door and surveyed the yard. A concrete path led to a gate in the back fence. The lawn consisted of a couple of strips of brown grass and some empty plant pots stacked to one side. It looked like someone might actually make an effort to cultivate a garden in summertime. Empty wine bottles sat in plastic recycling containers. A five-foot tall wooden fence enclosed the property.

A dog started barking next door.

Donovan came up beside him. “Okay. Chief Strassen vouched for you. Come on.”

“Any sign of forced entry?” He bent down to examine the lock closely but saw no scuff marks, no jimmying of the wood, no scratches on the metal. He straightened.

She shook her head, and a lock of pale blonde hair caught on his sleeve. The sight of it paralyzed him for a moment as the sensation of it drifting over his bare skin came back like an erotic tease.

Impatiently she caught her errant hair and tugged it into a ponytail away from her face. “Not that we’ve been able to tell.” He had no clue what she was talking about. “Front and back doors were both locked when we arrived.”

How the killer had gained entry. Locks. *Right.*

Not silky hair, or soft skin, or hot mouths. Not walls and floors and tables.

Darsh kept his expression stern and nodded. *Fucking hell.*

“Let’s go.” His voice was gruff from holding in his reaction to her. He wasn’t here for this. He wasn’t here for her.

He followed her through the house away from the murmur of other people working the crime scene. And as he trailed her up the stairs, he became aware of another undeniable truth that was neither professional nor appropriate. It was a God-given fact that some views had a way of distracting a man regardless of circumstance—Detective Donovan’s ass turned out to be one of them.

He shook his head. He was working. Even if he wasn’t working, he did not sleep with married women. What if he met her husband during this case? The idea made a cold sweat break out on his back. Damn Erin Donovan for putting him in this position and for making the experience so goddamn unforgettable.

He got to the top of the stairs and was plunged back into the here and now. In the room on the left, a female victim lay on the bed. The sight of her inert form snapped his focus back to the job.

She was a young adult, eighteen to twenty. Dark hair loose around her face. Fully clothed in a ruby red sweater and blue jeans. Her socks had Santa hats on them. Darsh flinched. He knew without a doubt she’d gotten them for Christmas—the same way he’d received Christmas socks from one of his sisters every year for as long as he could remember. The thought stirred his anger, and that was something he couldn’t afford. He pulled himself into the zone where his family and feelings didn’t exist. A place where red-hot sex with Erin Donovan had never happened.

During Operation Iraqi Freedom, getting in the zone had allowed him to stare through the scope of his M40A1 bolt-action sniper rifle and neutralize threats to his fellow Marines without a shred of remorse. He’d pulled the trigger and smoke-checked a target, time after time, without hesitation. Ghosts might visit him occasionally in a deadly roll call, revealing their humanity and his, but he didn’t regret his actions. The lessons of dissociation had served him well in the past, and he drew on them now, trying to become the machine and leave the weakness and distraction of sentiment behind.

“Mandy Wochikowski. Twenty years old in her junior year at Blackcombe. Majored in criminology,” Donovan informed him.

“What about registered sex offenders in the area?”

“I have an officer tracking down their movements. A lot of them moved away last year, when their addresses were posted on a student blog.” She looked uncomfortable.

“Vigilantism?” he asked.

“There were no official complaints, but name someone who wants to live next to a pedophile?”

“Good point.”

He looked back at Mandy Wochikowski. The young woman appeared to have been strangled, but there were no obvious signs of sexual assault. It would be impossible to know for sure until the Medical Examiner performed an autopsy, and even then it might not be conclusive. The girl stared up at the ceiling with vacant eyes dotted with petechiae—a clear sign she’d suffocated, and her nail beds showed definite signs of cyanosis. Her limbs had been carefully aligned, arms laid close to her sides, legs straight and parallel. Feet together. Neat. Tidy. Coffin-ready.

He turned away and checked the pictures on the yellow-painted walls. There were some band posters: Nirvana. Cold Play. Fall Out Boy. A corkboard with her printed schedule mounted on it, surrounded by what he assumed were family photographs and a few photographs of friends. He recognized Drew Hawke in one of the pictures. The quarterback was a good-looking young man who’d had an NFL career waiting for him when college finished.

Blown.

Textbooks lay open on the desk. He recognized some from his own studies. A laptop sat there, the battery humming away loudly to itself. Older model. He tapped the touchpad with the tip of a latex-clad finger. Donovan began to make a sound of protest then stopped. Maybe she’d decided they were both on the same side. Or maybe she was picking her battles.

The computer screen opened to an unfinished essay. The girl had stopped halfway through a sentence about serial harassment and bullying.

“Her music is paused,” Donovan noted. “Press play,” she instructed over his shoulder.

“Did Evidence dust this for prints?” He indicated the computer. Useable fingerprints were a lot harder to find than most people realized.

She nodded. “They examined it, but didn’t see any. Didn’t dust because of the risk to the computer itself. We’ll bag it to check for contact DNA before the computer boys get their hands on it.”

The detective rested her hands on her hips, and he forced himself not to notice the way the cotton of her shirt clung to the curves of her body. So much for the zone. He pressed play, and they both flinched at the volume. He recognized the band and the song—Halestorm’s “In your room.” A little too close to the bone.

He flicked it back off, and he and Donovan looked at one another in the sudden silence. “Was this music turned on or off when the first responders arrived?”

“Off.”

“You sure?” he asked.

“I was the first responder, along with Officer Mason. We were called out on an intruder alert. The music wasn’t playing then. You think the perp turned it off?”

“Someone called in an intruder alert?” This was news to him. He’d received the barest of details before he’d jumped into some tiny turboprop aircraft that had dumped him at the closest airfield.

Erin shifted uncomfortably. “Since Drew Hawke’s arrest we’ve had a spate of false reports from this address. We responded as we always do, but we didn’t take it too seriously. A third housemate arrived home when I was on the doorstep. She let herself inside. Found the bodies.” And Donovan was beating herself up over not breaking down the door the moment she arrived.

“You thought they were prank calling?”

“Not prank.” The expression on her face wasn’t bitterness, but it was a close cousin—regret. “They were deliberately provoking the police, but my chief wanted us to go easy on them.”

“Because their parents are loaded?”

Her blue eyes flashed. “Because I’d arrested one of their friends, and they seemed genuinely distressed by events. They were going through a bad time.” She released an unsteady breath. “And their parents are loaded.”

He looked at the body on the bed. She’d definitely gone through a bad time tonight. Had the fact they’d made a habit out of crying wolf gotten

them killed? Or had the killer chosen them for some other reason—like being Drew Hawke’s girlfriend?

“You think the Hawke conviction is solid?” he asked, testing the waters.

If Erin’s teeth clenched any tighter together, her jaw would break. “It isn’t up to me to decide. I just provide evidence—”

“Cut the bullshit, Erin. Do you think Hawke did it or not?”

Her eyes flashed blue mercury. “Yes. Yes, I think he was guilty of raping those two women, and probably two other cases that weren’t prosecuted last year. But not because I have some vendetta against football players, which is what the papers keep spouting. It’s what the victims and the evidence told me.”

DNA in the form of a hair, witness testimony, even polygraphs. The case had seemed solid, but he needed to look at every detail. Darsh turned away and played the music again. He lowered himself into Mandy’s rickety chair, ignoring the way it creaked under his weight. Then he turned to face the monitor with his fingers hovering over the keyboard. Would Mandy have heard someone coming through her bedroom door with her music this loud? Would she have seen his reflection in her screen?

Or had the UNSUB burst in and quickly overpowered her, and then turned the music up to cover her screams? That didn’t make sense given there was another girl in the house—unless the other girl was already dead.

He pressed “pause” again. “Walk up behind me,” he instructed Donovan.

She did as he asked, but he didn’t see much of a reflection against the white background of Mandy’s Word file.

He glanced around the girl’s room, taking it all in, trying to imagine her sitting here just a few hours ago, more worried about an essay than the predator who had her in his sights. There was no sign of a struggle. The room was neat. Clothes folded. Darsh got up and checked the clothes hamper. Almost empty after the Christmas break. The way the UNSUB had arranged the body suggested remorse, but he hadn’t covered the face, which would have suggested the killer knew the victim.

“He caught her by surprise, didn’t he? She was listening to music, working on a paper, and he crept up behind her.” For one unguarded moment, anguish ravaged Erin’s features. She thought she’d misjudged the

situation, and now she had two dead girls on her conscience. “She never stood a chance.”

Darsh forced himself to ignore her. “I’d like copies of Mandy’s schedule and all her social media accounts and email. You have her cell phone?”

“Cell was on the desk. Harry Compton, the other detective in Forbes Pines”—*wow, two whole detectives*—“took it when he went to find contact information to inform both sets of parents.”

Darsh didn’t envy Harry that task on any level. Working with dead people had its merits.

Erin’s lips pressed together as if keeping her emotions tightly under control.

Did she ever smile anymore? The way she’d smiled at him in that bar? The memory of it blazed through his brain until he shut it down. The fact that she was attractive and good in bed was not in question here. The question was, was she a good cop? He’d ask Brennan to do a little digging into her background and performance evaluations. See if she had a history of making mistakes.

“I’ll make sure you’re sent copies of everything we find,” she told him as if he was going anywhere soon.

He ignored the supposition. Frankly he had no idea how long he was going to be stuck here, but he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t praying for an emergency situation that needed his immediate attention anywhere other than Upstate New York. “Tell me about the other victim.”

“Cassie was a junior majoring in sports psychology. Head of the cheerleading squad. Twenty years old.” She grimaced. “She thought I was Satan’s bitch.”

“But you still think it’s appropriate to work her murder?” he asked quietly.

The straightness of her spine was matched only by the sternness of her expression. “Unless I’ve become a suspect, Agent Singh, I’m the best hope she has of finding justice.” Her gaze met his in a direct challenge. “She annoyed me because she wasted police time, and we’re all busy enough without that bullshit. But I understood her position. I never felt any animosity towards her.”

“The chance of this being a random murder is pretty slim, which means someone targeted Cassandra Bressinger because of the Hawke connection. There’s no way this isn’t a conflict of interest,” he argued.

“Not true,” she said vehemently.

“You don’t think you’re too close?” he suggested.

“Too close?” If he hadn’t been watching her lips so intently he wouldn’t have noticed the subtle way they tightened. “We’re talking about facts and witness statements. The Hawke case was never personal to me. I know it better than anyone.”

“You must have gotten pretty friendly with the victims.”

Pain flickered in her gaze. She rested her hands on her hips, revealing her nipped-in waist and a Glock-22 strapped to her side, and he stopped looking at her eyes. Lord have mercy. He was a sucker for a woman with a sidearm.

Had she done it on purpose? Distracted him away from a moment of vulnerability.

“There was never any doubt the women were raped, Agent Singh, so naturally I felt sympathy for them. It was the identity of the attacker that was in question. We found hair that linked back to Hawke, and the women reported it was Drew Hawke who raped them. They each took polygraphs when challenged by the defense and passed with flying colors. Excuse me if that doesn’t sound like a slam-dunk.”

They stared at one another for a few seconds. He couldn’t afford to be distracted by Donovan’s passion for her cause—he knew exactly how that passion translated into other areas of her life, and that wasn’t good for his objectivity. He turned his gaze back to the bed and then stretched out his stiff neck. Maybe he shouldn’t be thinking about Donovan’s capacity to do her job. He should just concentrate on doing his own.

They headed across the hall to another bedroom with blue-painted walls and flowery drapes closed against prying eyes. The whole house was quiet now, not even the murmur of ghosts.

The victim was stretched out in a way that exposed her genitalia. Had the UNSUB imagined the cops seeing her like this? Had he thought about shocking Detective Donovan when she walked in the door and saw the degradation? Darsh ignored the part of his brain that wanted to hurt for the

victim and concentrated on what he was here for. Getting into the mind of a killer.

Mandy Wochikowski's death had been clean and sanitary, whereas this one was violent, demeaning, and graphic. She'd been beaten. There was a definite sexual component to this assault. The lack of clothes, the overt sexual display. The mattress was bare. He peered closer at her blue jeans on top of the pile of bedding in the middle of the floor. The denim was ragged where they'd been cut with what looked like scissors. The fact her clothes had been cut off her body suggested the killer needed to subdue and restrain her before stripping her—hence the beating to the face? Would Mandy have heard the struggle in here if the doors were closed, and she was listening to loud music?

Probably not.

He looked around. "Did you find any scissors?"

Donovan shook her head; her silence speaking volumes.

Mandy's murder had seemed almost like an apology. This one...the UNSUB had clearly been punishing Cassandra Bressinger, and had fun doing it. Darsh eyed the knots and blue climbing rope that tied her limbs to each corner of the double bed. It had been a long time since he was a boy scout, but some of the knots looked familiar. "Is the rope from the house, do you know?"

"I didn't see it anywhere, but I haven't talked to the other roommates yet."

He had a feeling the killer had carefully planned this murder, so he'd probably brought the rope and scissors with him. The rope might be the best physical link they had to this guy. Had Cassandra been the original target and Mandy collateral damage? Or had he planned to tie up both girls, maybe even all four of them, but had been interrupted by the cops before he could do his sadistic shit to Mandy?

Had he lost his nerve? His arousal? Maybe killing someone hadn't felt how he'd expected it to feel. Too messy. Too ugly? Maybe he hadn't meant to kill the woman at all. Maybe the UNSUB had pushed the strangulation factor too far and cracked the hyoid bone. Cassie's attack had been intentional, but maybe her death had been an accident.

"Who made the call about the intruder?" he asked.

“I haven’t listened to it yet. It’s first on my to-do list as soon as I get back to the station.” Donovan showed clear signs of exhaustion, but there was no way she’d leave until he did.

“Make sure those knots are preserved when the ropes are removed.” Knots could be very specific to offenders. “You have photographs of everything?”

She nodded.

“I want the rope and knots sent to Quantico for analysis.”

Cassandra’s wrists were bloody and raw where she’d fought her bindings. She’d been alive long enough to struggle. Then again, why tie her up at all if he didn’t want her alive for the main event? Darsh peered closely at the victim’s unpainted nails. Then he leaned closer, drawn by a hint of a scent that didn’t fit.

“Smell her hands,” he told Donovan.

The detective leaned closer and sniffed. Her brow crumpled. “Bleach?” She swore.

Bleach destroyed DNA. Cassandra had probably scratched the guy.

“I’ll go tell the techs to check the Clorox bottle for prints.”

When she came back, he asked, “How similar is this to the method that Drew Hawke was convicted of using?”

Donovan cleared her throat. “No bleach was recorded as being used to clean the bodies. He used a yellow nylon rope to tie up his victims, but we never saw the knots because the victims were either untied or managed to free themselves after he left.”

It was a difference possibly tied to the escalation, but still the crimes were remarkably similar. “The victims reported they were tied to the legs of the bed, correct?”

“Spread-eagled. Yes,” Donovan said quietly. “He crept into their bedrooms in the middle of the night. Injected them with ketamine, gagged them and then tied them to the four corners of the bed where he raped them repeatedly. I haven’t seen any injection sites on these victims, but we’re waiting on the medical examiner.”

“Ketamine *and* rope restraints?”

She nodded.

“Isn’t that a little excessive for a large male athlete who probably outweighed them by a hundred pounds?”

Her lips pinched. “I’m just telling you the facts. I didn’t get inside his head.”

No, that was his job, as she’d meant to remind him. He checked his watch. It was nearly five AM. “Does it usually take this long for the ME to arrive?”

“The chief wanted the State Medical Examiner involved in this investigation from the start, and they’re based in Massena about an hour away. There was a snowmobile accident last night and three people died—two children and their father. ME’s been tied up with that case, otherwise you’d have missed your chance to see the bodies in place.”

“As least the temperature here is the same as the morgue.” If not colder. “Any other similarities between the other cases?”

If she knew he was testing her, she didn’t show it.

“The pattern of bruising around the throat on Cassie is similar, although the other girls obviously survived. The fact it looks like she was violently raped? Yup, that’s the same.” Her gaze was sharp and penetrating. “And the bottom sheet is missing.”

He looked at the pile of bedclothes tossed on the floor. “You’re sure?”

She nodded. “That information came out at Drew Hawke’s trial. No one knows what happened to the sheets, but it seemed likely Hawke took the bed linen to try to reduce physical evidence tying him to the crime.”

Rather than as a trophy. The fact this killer had done the same thing...

“So this UNSUB arrived with a murder kit and took even more stuff when he left.” Prepared. Experienced. Disciplined.

“So why not take the rope, especially if the girls were dead?” Donovan voiced one of the things he thought was inconsistent.

“You have people searching nearby dumpsters for physical evidence?”

“Yeah.” She didn’t sound optimistic. “Every dumpster in town. I called the garbage company and had them halt collections until we’re done. But I don’t think he’ll dump the sheet anywhere obvious. He’s probably already burned it.” She stuffed her hands in her coat pockets and huddled into its warm depths. Darsh wished he’d thrown on something more substantial than

a T-shirt and windbreaker before he'd started out. There was no snow on the ground in Boston.

“Did he know there were only two girls here?” she asked suddenly. “And if so, how? Was he stalking them? Does he know their routine? Is he a friend? Was he watching the house, maybe from a vehicle? Or does he live nearby?”

Darsh liked the way her brain worked. His thoughts had been traveling the same direction.

She continued. “Maybe he didn't care that the others could have come home at any moment. Maybe he was waiting for them to turn up until he saw me roll up? Did he have a gun or a knife that he used to control them? Is that how he subdued two smart women, then killed them both?” She started to say something else, then closed her mouth.

“What?” He wanted to know how she thought, and how she acted on those thoughts.

“He's not a novice. He's done this before.”

Darsh agreed. The million-dollar question was, had he gained his experience on the woman Drew Hawke was convicted of raping, or was he using that case to raise the stakes and increase his own notoriety? Or had Hawke had a partner? No one had ever mentioned the possibility, but Special-K was renowned for leaving users confused and disorientated. If the victim was conscious, ketamine could produce hallucinations, but didn't actually erase short-term memory the way some date rape drugs did.

Darsh glanced at the girl's walls. No posters. Just a shrine to the Hawke kid.

Cassandra's lamp was on. Computer off. A mug lay overturned and broken on the rug, a brown coffee stain on the carpet. Crumpled papers were strewn across the mat. He leafed through a few boxes that sat on a shelf—receipts, university administration type stuff. Then studied the contents of the desk. Laptop. Headphones. Printer. Textbooks. Writing paper. Envelopes. And stamps. He opened a drawer. No letters.

“Did she correspond with Hawke?”

Donovan watched him move around the room. She seemed reluctant to let him out of her sight, and he doubted that was because of his irresistible good looks.

“I don’t know. We didn’t find any letters from him to her, but after her declarations of undying love? I’d be shocked if they hadn’t written.”

“We need to find out.” If the killer had taken the letters, it would tell them something about his mindset.

She carefully stepped around the mess in the middle of the floor. “So you’re thinking he takes letters but not computers or cell phones. This isn’t a robbery gone bad.”

“No,” he agreed.

“Is he likely to stop killing if we don’t catch him?” White teeth worried her bottom lip.

Darsh felt them on his skin and shied away from the tactile memory. “The suggestion that serial killers won’t stop unless caught is a myth. Dennis Rader killed ten people between 1974 and 1991. He didn’t kill anyone else before he was arrested in 2005. Sometimes they find a substitution for the buzz they get from killing. Sometimes they get scared and don’t want to get caught. Psychopaths often offend less as they enter their mid-forties—no one knows why. Serial rapists, though?” He stared at the dead girl. “I doubt this guy is done.”

Cassandra Bressinger had fought hard, but it hadn’t mattered in the end. In fact, the more she fought, the more excited the killer had probably become. Rape was a crime of hate and dominance, not uncontrollable lust. This UNSUB had viciously attacked Cassandra Bressinger, using more force than necessary to overpower her and commit the act. It looked like the work of a classic anger rapist who used sex as a weapon. The UNSUB had wanted to humiliate and defile Cassie. Maybe the identity of the victim hadn’t mattered. Maybe the guy hated women in general. But Darsh had a feeling the attacker had chosen Cassie deliberately, and that she was a message—and he needed to figure out what the message was and whom it was directed toward. That smacked more of a power rapist who used sex as a tool to compensate for feelings of inadequacy.

The nature of the sexual assault gave Darsh information on this guy’s twisted psyche, but this attack was sending mixed messages.

“If he’s driven by a desire for notoriety, this might be enough to sate him for now. But if he becomes addicted to the spotlight...”

“He’s about to get the fix of a lifetime.” Donovan nodded. “The media is about to descend on this town and make this guy a worldwide celebrity.” And her a pariah.

“And if he’s trying to make Hawke look innocent, or law enforcement incompetent,” he gave her a pointed look, “he might just be getting started.”

She swore.

“Bottom line is I doubt he’ll stop on his own.” He clenched a fist. “I need to figure out his motive—”

“*We*,” Donovan cut in sharply. “*We* need to figure out motive.”

Her expression dared him to deny her the right to do her job.

“We.” He conceded eventually.

He flicked the curtain to look out at the street. What he was really doing was avoiding the woman he’d never expected to see again. The one who’d lied to him and brought him to his knees. If he discovered she’d screwed up the Hawke investigation and inadvertently gotten these two women killed, she’d be off the case and off the job. Detective Donovan wasn’t going to like that very much. Nope. She wasn’t going to like it at all.



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Toni donates 15% of her royalties from *Edge of Survival* to diabetes research. Find out more on her website at www.toniandersonauthor.com. Sign up for her [Newsletter](#) to hear about new releases and exclusive offers.

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