LENA DIAZ

TAKE THE KEY AND LOCK HER UP

A DEADLY GAMES THRILLER

AVON IMPULSE

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A Deadly Games Thriller

LENA DIAZ

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Dedication

To my long-suffering, patient husband, who spent far too much time alone while I toiled over this manuscript. I love you, babe. Thank you for understanding my dream and for cheering me on.

To three incredible friends—even the in-law (wink)—for beta reading this story and giving me such amazing (and fast!) feedback. This story is stronger because of you—Charlee Allden, Mary Behre, and Denise Morningstar. Thank you, Officer Glenn Morningstar, for answering my procedural questions.

And thank you to my awesome agent, Nalini Akolekar, and my brilliant editor, Chelsey Emmelhainz.

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Chapter One

A CRIMSON FLAKE of peeling paint stubbornly clung to the closed basement door, fluttering in the hot breeze like a red flag, warning Detective Emily O'Malley not to follow the suspect inside the house. Ghostly echoes of the victim's terrified screams still slammed against the inside of Emily's skull, jagged bursts of sound that eroded her courage and shattered her resolve.

The Glock 17 clutched in her right hand was slippery with sweat and shook so hard it dipped precariously toward the ground. She grasped the gun tighter, steadying it. A two-handed hold would have been better, but she was using her left hand to hold her cell phone, keeping the line open between her and the police dispatcher. She'd made the initial call over the police radio in her car, but since she'd left her portable radio at the office, now she was forced to rely on her cell phone.

God help me, I don't know what to do.

And she never had. That was the problem. In her brief stint as a beat cop, she'd fooled most of her peers and her boss—and her family—into thinking she was just as qualified and competent as the rest of the cops she worked with. And most days, she was. But give her a domestic violence situation or a traffic stop where something unexpected happened—like the driver pulling a gun on her—and she froze up.

Tuck, her partner back then and fellow detective now, had been brutally honest, telling her she had slow reaction times, lousy instincts, and poor judgment under pressure. But he'd never shared those opinions with anyone

else. Instead, he had her back, and he'd helped her study for the detective's exam joking that he wanted to get her off the streets to keep the public safe.

His plan had worked. Six months ago, she and Tuck had both aced their exams and been promoted to detective. Since then, she'd solved and closed twice as many cases as any other detective in Georgia. For the first time in her twenty-six years of life, she excelled at something. She'd finally found her niche. And yet, here she was, once again forced to do what she did *not* do best—make life-and-death decisions under pressure.

Of all the highly qualified beat cops in the Savannah-Chatham Metropolitan Police Department the suspect could have driven past, Emily was the anointed one. She was the one on her way home from work who'd recognized the pale, terrified-looking woman in the passenger seat of the white pickup truck as the young mother of two who'd been missing for four days.

Sometimes irony was a bitch.

So Emily had turned around in the middle of the nearly deserted, two-lane rural highway and tailed the suspect to this ramshackle, ivy-choked house with nothing but Spanish moss–dripping oak trees and soybean fields for neighbors.

"Where's my backup?" she whispered into the phone.

"Detectives Tuck and Jones are the closest, about eighteen minutes out, with patrol officers a few minutes behind them."

Eighteen minutes? Virginia Hawley was behind that door, in the hands of a man who was cornered and probably feeling desperate. Hawley didn't have eighteen minutes.

She might not have even *one*.

Assuming Emily could even somehow get through that solid, locked, exterior door, odds were high Hawley might get hurt or killed when Emily busted inside. Those gloomy, well-documented statistics about high casualties in armed entry situations were the main reasons they were always a last resort. But standing around with her phone to her ear wasn't increasing Hawley's odds of survival either. Or at least Emily didn't think so.

Negotiate. She had to get the suspect talking, draw his attention away from his victim. Emily desperately wished she could remember what she'd

learned in the one class she'd taken on hostage negotiation. Three years ago. At the police academy.

She banged her fist on the door.

"Police. Open up. Let Mrs. Hawley go and we won't force our way inside. No one has to get hurt."

Okay, so the "we" bluff sounded pathetic, even to her. Especially since the suspect had seen her—alone, without backup—when she'd chased him to the basement entrance. Not surprisingly, the suspect didn't respond to her bluff.

She banged on the door and repeated her plea. Again, nothing. She checked the digital display on her cell phone. One precious minute had passed. Seventeen more minutes until backup would arrive. What had the captor done to his victim during the last sixty seconds? What would he do to her in the *next* sixty seconds?

A high-pitched scream echoed from inside. Emily's stomach tightened into a hard, cold knot. "Where are Tuck and Jones?" she whispered into the phone again.

"You're a good ways out of town, O'Malley. Hang tight. They'll be there as soon as they can."

The dispatcher's patronizing tone had Emily gritting her teeth. That scream: it had sounded heart-wrenching, full of terror. Cradling her phone between her cheek and her shoulder, she tightened her right hand around the pistol and grabbed the doorknob with her other hand. Probably a waste of time. She already knew it was locked since she'd tried the door when she first got there. But she had to *do* something, even if it meant just going through the motions.

The knob turned. The door popped open several inches. She gasped and snatched her hand back, quickly retreating a good five feet. Wrapping both hands around her gun, she aimed at the intimidating dark sliver of black between the doorjamb and the open door.

"Detective," the dispatcher said, "what's happening?"

A trap. It has to be a trap.

That door had been locked earlier. Or had it? Had she been so nervous that she hadn't turned the knob hard enough and only thought it was locked? No, no. She wasn't so pathetic that she couldn't tell the difference

between a locked door and an unlocked one. Everything about this felt wrong. She *had* to wait for help.

"Detective?"

"I'm okay," she whispered. "I'm—"

Another agonized scream erupted from the basement. The deafening sound of a gunshot, then another, reverberated from somewhere behind the blood-red door.

That was it. She couldn't wait any longer. "Shots fired. Repeat, shots fired. I'm going in. Tell Jones and Tuck to get their asses up here and save *my* ass."

She ended the call and silenced her phone so the suspect wouldn't hear anything if the dispatcher called her back. After shoving the phone into her pants pocket, she drew a deep breath, then flung the door open and ran inside, sweeping her gun out in front of her.

Blinking furiously and crouching down to make herself less of a target, she waited a tense few seconds for her eyes to adjust from the brightness outside to the dark interior. She fully expected a bullet to rip into her and was vaguely shocked when it didn't. If she were still a beat cop, she'd be wearing her Kevlar vest right now, to help protect her from the suspect's bullets. But as a detective, she was rarely in a situation that called for Kevlar, so the vest was gathering dust at the office, leaving her completely vulnerable right now.

Her vision cleared, but it didn't do her much good. Other than the patch of sunlight in the doorway, the rest of the basement was pitch black. Directly in front of her and to her right were concrete walls. There was only one way to go. Left.

A few short feet in, she was forced to turn again, following the wall like a rat in a maze.

Or a police officer heading to her slaughter.

Fear reared its ugly head, pushing her back toward the door. *No.* She stopped. *For once, Em, push past the fear. Hawley doesn't have a chance if you don't at least try. This is why you first became a cop, to help people. So do it!*

She shuffled forward. The fear was still there, dragging her down, making her movements sluggish. But she kept going the only way she knew how—one step at a time.

The darkness was absolute. She trailed her fingers on the winding wall to guide her, listening intently for sounds that might give away the suspect's location. But the only noise she heard was her own breathing, coming in short, choppy pants. She focused on taking deeper, even breaths to make as little noise as possible.

A dim light came into view, about twenty feet away, high up toward the ceiling. Her muscles bunched and cramped, her body in survival mode, trying to slow her progress. But that last scream, and the gunshots, the thought of Hawley lying bleeding somewhere in need of help, spurred her on. If one of her sisters or her mother were in here, Emily would pray someone helped them. She could do no less for Virginia Hawley.

The light turned out to be from a small, grimy window at the top of the wall. It did little to lighten the rest of the space. But even without that window, this part of the basement seemed less dark than the rest, a shade of gray instead of the inky black that consumed everything else. There must be a light up ahead or another basement window, perhaps around a corner.

She crept forward, feeling along the bumpy surface of the wall, edging toward the patch of gray. The wall ended abruptly and she sensed more than saw that she was in a large open space. Exposed. Vulnerable. The heavy utility belt she'd hated wearing as a uniformed officer would have been a godsend right now because it would have had a flashlight attached to it. Instead, all she had was her gun and her cell phone.

Should she use the flashlight app on her phone? At most, the tiny LED light would illuminate a few feet directly in front of her. That would just make her more of a target, like a neon SHOOT ME sign. She reluctantly left her phone in her pocket and inched her way toward the promise of light up ahead.

No more screams met her as she made her way across the room. The air here seemed thicker, mustier, almost . . . rotten, much as she envisioned a crypt might be. She shuddered and sent up a quick prayer that this place wouldn't become *her* crypt.

Where was the suspect? If this was a trap, why hadn't he met her at the door? He was probably watching her right now, following her, training his gun on her from some unseen hiding place. Was he playing a deadly game? Enjoying her fear?

A scratching noise sounded off to her right.

She jerked toward the noise, her hands wrapped so tightly around the gun her fingers ached. What was that? A rat? A snake seeking cool relief from the late-afternoon heat outside? Or something far more sinister?

Holding her breath, she squinted into the darkness. No shadows separated from the others. No footsteps echoed against the concrete floor. There was nothing but silence. Her lungs demanded oxygen. She allowed herself small breaths, fighting the urge to gulp in a huge lungful of air all at once. Her teeth began to chatter even though she wasn't cold.

Don't panic. Use your training. You don't have a partner to lean on this time. You have to do this.

She inched forward again and collided with a wall, banging her forehead against the concrete block. She let out a low curse before she could stop herself. She tensed, listening, waiting, praying that the suspect hadn't heard her.

Her pulse raced so hard she could hear each thump of her heartbeat rushing through her ears. When no one leaped out at her from the dark, she edged to her right, following the wall until she turned a corner. The darkness gave way to blessed light. A row of short, rectangular windows ran along the top of the wall, illuminating a long, narrow corridor.

Her fear of what lay behind her in the dark trumped her fear of what might lie ahead. She hurried forward. Half a dozen doors were built into the wall on her right at regular intervals. Each of them was solid, except for a small, square glass inset near the top. She pressed her back against the wall between two of the doors, clutching her gun.

She tried to open the door closest to her. Locked. She turned, stood on her tiptoes, barely able to reach the bottom of the glass window in the door. Peering inside was as useless as staring down into a dark well. Continuing down the row of doors, she tried each knob. All locked, until she reached the last one. The knob turned easily in her hand. Determined not to give herself time to think—and freeze—she clutched her gun and ran inside.

As her eyes adjusted to the meager light from the hallway that filtered in, she inventoried the room. Approximately nine by nine, it was empty, except for a cot against the far wall. And there, huddled on that cot with a blanket thrown over her, was a woman. She lay facing away from Emily, her long brown hair draped over her shoulders.

Virginia Hawley.

Emily took a quick glance behind her and hurried forward, crouching down beside the cot.

"Mrs. Hawley," she whispered. "I'm Detective O'Malley. I'm here to help you."

No response.

When she gently touched the woman's shoulder, what should have been warm flesh was soft and cool, without the resistance she'd expected. Emily frowned and pulled the blanket back. Her breath caught in her throat. She hadn't touched a shoulder. The blanket had been covering a pillow. But that wasn't all it had covered.

Bile rose in her throat at the sour, musty smell of the blanket and cot. Lying on the cot beside the pillow was a pile of bones. What had once been connected with muscles and flesh had nothing left to hold them together, nothing to indicate whether the person they'd once belonged to had been young or old, male or female.

Except for the long dark hair.

Fighting down nausea, Emily forced herself to lean over the pillow to look at the woman's face. As she'd expected from the condition of the rest of the corpse, there was nothing to see except a grinning skull. The hair draped across the pillow appeared to be human, but it was attached to the skull with some kind of cord. This poor woman had decomposed a long time ago. She wasn't Virginia Hawley.

The realization of what Emily had stumbled into hit her like a hurricane, sweeping away her caution and what was left of her courage. The long row of doors. The damp, rotten smell that filled the air. The skeleton on the cot in front of her. This wasn't a basement. It was a prison. How many victims were down here? How many were in the other rooms, the other cells? And where was Mrs. Hawley?

Coming in here without backup had been a mistake, a potentially *fatal* mistake. She had to get out. *Now*. She lunged to her feet. A faint shuffling noise sounded behind her. She whirled around just as the door slammed shut.

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Chapter Two

FEAR MADE IT seem like hours had passed since Emily had been locked in the cell. But the display on her phone told her it had been only fifteen minutes. The thick maze of concrete walls blocked signals from getting in or out, so the phone was essentially useless except for the LED light. She'd used that to examine the corpse, finding several pieces of jewelry lying among the bones. A gold wedding ring. A mother's ring, with a diamond in the middle, surrounded by five birthstones. Next to that was an engraved silver bracelet with a little round charm for each of the five children.

Worried that the light from her phone might attract the suspect's attention, Emily had used it for only a short time before putting it away. The only light now was from the thick square of glass high up in the door, but it barely penetrated the gloom.

What was taking her backup so long? She leaned against the wall by the door, gun drawn. Should she risk shooting the lock in the door? Would that break the lock or just jam it?

A dull thud echoed in the cell, startling her. Someone was rapping on the door. Tuck? Jones? She edged out from the wall to take a look.

A man stood peering through the glass inset. She jerked back even though she doubted he could see her in the dark. All *she'd* been able to see of *him* was that he was tall and had close-cropped raven-black hair, like the suspect. He definitely wasn't blond-haired Tuck or vertically challenged Jones. He must be the man who'd taken Hawley.

Was Hawley with him? Emily hoped not. If she was forced to shoot, she didn't want to have to worry about him using the victim as a human shield. Several minutes ticked by in silence. Had he left? Or was he still there, waiting, toying with her? She bit her bottom lip to keep her teeth from chattering and tightened her hands around her gun.

Ping. A muffled, metallic sound filtered through the door. *Ping.* Her finger jumped on the trigger, nearly firing her Glock. She forced herself to ease the pressure and focus on the noise. *Ping.* What was he doing out there?

A loud thump vibrated through the wall behind her, and the door fell back into the hallway with a loud crash. The man she'd seen through the window stepped into the cell, looking around as if to find her. She swung her Glock toward him. Her mind registered that he wasn't holding a gun just as she squeezed the trigger. At the same time, he dove at her, knocking her gun arm up. The bullet whined harmlessly past him and buried itself in the wall.

They both fell, a tangle of arms and legs. He twisted, bearing the brunt of their fall, landing on his back with a solid *whump* and a guttural curse. She landed on top of him, her chin smacking his hard chest.

For the space of a heartbeat, neither of them moved or spoke. He blinked, as if stunned from slamming his back and maybe his head against the concrete floor. Her gaze darted around the room, which had lightened to a murky gray because of the open doorway. Where was her gun? There, lying three feet away. She lunged for it. He cursed and grabbed her, turning and pulling her beneath him. Now *she* was the one flat on her back and he was the one on top. She desperately tried to shove him off her.

He tightened his hands around her wrists. "Stop fighting me before you hurt yourself." His deep voice rumbled in his chest, vibrating against her own. "I'm here to help you."

"I'm a police officer, Detective Emily O'Malley," she uttered through clenched teeth as she kept struggling to free her hands. "Let me go." Without waiting for his response, she jerked her knee up, aiming for his groin.

He twisted, easily blocking her assault, then used his weight to press her down so she could barely move. It seemed like every muscle in his body was plastered to her softer curves. She gave up her ineffectual struggles and

squinted up at him in the dark, trying to confirm whether he was the man who'd kidnapped Hawley.

With the light from the open doorway behind him, she could see only the vague outline of his face and his eyes since he was so close. But his voice—he'd sounded exasperated, *concerned,* when he'd told her he was there to help. Definitely not what she'd expect from a psychopath. Then again, what should she expect of a psychopath in this situation?

For one thing, he'd probably have a gun. And if he had locked her in this cell, wouldn't he have used a key to open it instead of breaking down the door? Yes—he would have. Which could mean only one thing. He *wasn't* the man she'd chased into the basement.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

His gaze dipped to where her breasts were crushed against him, and he cleared his throat. "My name is Devlin." His white teeth flashed in a wry grin. "But given our current . . . *predicament* . . . you can call me Devil."

Her face flushed hot as she realized exactly what he meant by "predicament." His body's response to their closeness was starting to harden against her belly. A completely inappropriate tingle of awareness shot through her, making her grit her teeth.

She tugged her hands again, trying to free them and to free herself from this impossible and embarrassing situation. "If you're here to help, then prove it by letting me go and getting off me. *Now*."

He let out an exaggerated sigh. "Only if you promise you won't try to castrate me again," he teased, even as he subtly shifted his hips so that he wasn't pressed so intimately against her.

His outrageous comment had her wanting to shoot at him. Again.

"I won't try to knee you again. Promise." She had no intention of keeping her word. She'd use every dirty trick she knew if it would help her escape.

He laughed—a deep, husky sound that sent a delicious shiver all the way to her toes. Good grief, what was wrong with her?

"Liar," he said. "But I'll take my chances and let you up anyway."

As he eased to the side to lift himself off her, the light from the doorway struck his face, and hers, giving both of them their first clear look at each other. He drew in a sharp breath and froze above her, suddenly studying her

with an intensity that should have frightened her. But it didn't. Probably because she was studying him just as intently.

His nose was slightly crooked. But it did nothing to detract from the fierce, masculine beauty of his features. Enviably thick lashes framed dark, hungry eyes that admired her with open appreciation, sending excitement pulsing through her. He was all sharp angles and perfect symmetry, framed with a light dusting of dark stubble along his jaw, as if he hadn't shaved in days.

Chemistry. That was the only way she could explain this raw, physical attraction that had her fingers curling into her palms. The only thing keeping her from being completely disgusted with herself over her unwelcome fascination with this stranger was that he *was* a stranger. His face, just inches above hers, was handsome and compelling, yes. But it was also completely unfamiliar. Which meant he was *not* the suspect.

Feet shuffled in the hallway. They both started as if coming out of a daze and looked toward the door. Two men rushed into the cell, guns drawn. Devlin shoved himself up and whirled around in one seamless movement that was astonishingly fast and graceful for a man his size. He crouched in front of her, *as if he were trying to protect her*.

"Police," one of the men yelled. "Hold it right there."

Devlin slowly straightened, as if to make sure he didn't spook the police, and held his hands in the air. Emily certainly couldn't blame him for that worry, not after being shot at once already.

She scooted back several feet. The cell was almost too bright now because of all the flashlights being aimed inside. Jones was the one who'd yelled "police" and was pointing his gun at Devlin. Tuck stood beside him. And outside the cell, three uniformed officers aimed their guns and flashlights at Virginia Hawley's abductor.

Except that he *wasn't* Hawley's abductor.

When Emily had chased the suspect into the basement earlier, he'd turned and looked directly at her before slamming the door. Only a few feet had separated them. And the bright sun had shined straight down on his face. She knew exactly what he looked like.

This man, Devlin, was tall and had deep black hair like the suspect, but that was where their similarities ended. Devlin was far too . . . attractive, for lack of a better word, than the other man had been. And Hawley's abductor

was clean-shaven, with none of the sexy stubble that shadowed Devlin's jaw.

"You okay?" Jones hauled her to her feet. "You have a red spot on your forehead. Did this guy hit you?" He jabbed his thumb over his shoulder toward Devlin.

Emily's stomach sank when she saw Tuck handcuffing Devlin's arms behind his back.

"Let him go," she said. "He's not the suspect."

"But he hit you," he insisted.

"No, no, he didn't. I ran into a wall in the dark. No one struck me. I'm fine. Please, Tuck, let him go. He's a witness. He's not the one who abducted Hawley."

Tuck frowned but did as she asked. He removed Devlin's cuffs and handed them back to the officer he must have borrowed them from.

Devlin rubbed his wrists and gave Emily a crisp nod of thanks.

"Everyone, holster your weapons." The men exchanged uneasy glances but did as she'd ordered. Tuck made a show of resting his hand on the butt of his holstered pistol, as if in warning.

Emily let out the breath she hadn't realized she was holding and hurried to explain. "I chased the suspect and the victim into the basement. But both of them disappeared." She waved toward the cot on the far wall. "I came in here, saw the body on that cot, and thought it was Hawley. But when I ran inside, someone closed and locked the door behind me. This man, Devlin, busted the door open to let me out." She glanced from Jones to Tuck. "Please tell me you found Hawley and that she's okay."

Tuck slowly shook his head. "You and this guy are the only people we've seen since we got here."

Her shoulders slumped.

Another uniformed policeman with a flashlight in his hand rushed to the doorway. "I can see skeletons through the windows in two other rooms."

Damn. "What about Mrs. Hawley?" Emily called out.

"No sign of her so far." He and two of the other officers headed back toward the other cells, leaving one uniform with her, Tuck, and Jones.

Emily retrieved her Glock from where it had fallen during the scuffle and shoved it into her holster.

“What about the white truck I followed here?” she asked no one in particular.

The remaining beat cop trained his flashlight inside the cell.

“There’s a white truck parked out front. A Ford F-150,” Tuck said.

“The suspect wasn’t driving a Ford. He was driving a Chevy,” Emily told him.

“The Ford is mine.” Devlin’s deep voice cut through the gloom with the sound of authority, snapping everyone’s attention back to him. “The man I assume you’re looking for took off in his truck when I pulled into the yard.”

Emily closed the distance between them and craned her neck back so she could look him in the eyes. Good grief he was tall, probably six foot three. How could she ever have thought he resembled the suspect when the man she’d chased into the basement had been just a tad over six feet tall and without the solid muscle that filled out Devlin’s impressive frame?

“I’m Detective Emily O’Malley,” she reminded him, wanting to establish formality between them and gloss over the awkward intimacy from earlier. “Who are you? Full name this time.”

He hesitated, as if deciding whether or not to answer. Finally, he said, “Buchanan. Devlin Buchanan.”

Buchanan. Why does that sound so familiar? “You said you saw our suspect. What did he look like?”

She was testing him to see if he was telling the truth. From the wary look in his eyes, she thought he might be trying to hide something. She studied him closely. Reading people’s body language, interpreting the subtle changes in their tone of voice and how that related to what they were actually saying was her forte. It was one of the reasons her boss and peers often asked her to interview suspects on cases that weren’t even hers.

“He looked a bit like me,” he admitted. “Caucasian, short dark hair, tall, probably mid-thirties. And the answer to your next question is no, I didn’t see anyone in the passenger seat. But that doesn’t mean there wasn’t anyone there. The driver took off as soon as I pulled into the driveway. He tore across the field to the road out front and I didn’t get more than a quick look at him.”

His description was spot-on. And his body language told her he was probably telling the truth. “Which direction did he go?”

“West.”

“Jones,” Emily said, “I gave dispatch the license plate number and description of the truck when I was following it here. Put out a—”

“BOLO. Will do. Every law-enforcement officer within a hundred miles will be on the lookout for that truck. We’ll get him.” He pulled out his cell phone.

“You’ll have to go outside to make the call. No coverage in here,” she said.

Jones hurried out of the cell and down the hallway, leaving Tuck and the officer holding the flashlight on Buchanan to back Emily up.

“Start talking,” Emily said. “Why are you here? If you were trying to help me, how did you know I needed help in the first place? This is a fairly deserted rural area. Seems oddly coincidental you were driving down that road the same time as me and just happened to come into the basement after I was locked in this cell.”

He hesitated again, then let out a deep breath, as if resigned to answer her questions. “I keep a police scanner in my truck. I heard you ask for backup and figured the odds were against any other cops being in the area. I thought you could use the help.”

If he was telling the truth, he’d just risked his life for a complete stranger. But far from wanting accolades or thanks, he seemed impatient and uninterested in any attention—which made Emily all the more suspicious. There was something else going on. What was he hiding?

Normally when she and Tuck interviewed witnesses, they would take turns firing off questions, ferreting out the clues. But since she hadn’t briefed him yet on what had happened, he stood silently beside her, trusting her to ask the right questions.

“How did you know I was in this cell?” she asked.

Buchanan gave her a bland look, as if she was wasting his time. “I didn’t. But when I didn’t find you in the rest of the basement, I figured you were behind one of those doors. I tried all of them and they were locked, so I decided to bust them open one at a time to look for you.”

“I didn’t hear you opening any other doors. You expect me to believe you just happened to open my cell first, without knowing I was inside this one?”

He shrugged, as if he couldn’t care less whether she believed him or not.

“If you were trying to help Detective O’Malley,” Tuck said, “why were you on top of her when we got here?”

Great, of all the questions Tuck could have asked, he had to ask *that* one.

Devlin’s lips twitched, as if he were trying not to smile. His heated gaze met Emily’s, leaving no question that he was remembering the feel of her body crushed against him, and her unfortunate movements that had elicited a response she didn’t think either of them had expected. He seemed content to let her answer Tuck’s poorly worded question.

Not wanting to humiliate herself further, she decided it was time to get rid of her audience. She motioned to the officer holding the flashlight. “Get Mr. Buchanan out of here. I’ll interview him at the station.”

Her casual dismissal of him had Devlin stiffening. But he didn’t protest and allowed the policeman to escort him out of the cell, leaving Emily alone with Tuck. She breathed a sigh of relief and ran a shaky hand through her shoulder-length hair as soon as they were gone.

“What’s going on?” Tuck demanded. “Why *were* you on the floor when I got here?”

“I might have . . . tried to shoot Buchanan, and he was forced to knock me down in self-defense.”

He blinked. Twice. “You *tried* to shoot him? You fired your weapon?”

She put her hands on her hips. “He busted into the cell. It was dark. I thought, for a split second, that he might have a gun.”

“You *thought* he *might* have a gun?” Tuck glanced around the cell. “He didn’t?”

She let out a long breath. “No. He didn’t.”

He slowly shook his head. “Emily—”

“I know, I know. Lousy under pressure. You don’t have to remind me.”

“Lieutenant Drier is going to be pissed.”

Her fingernails bit into her palms. “He has every right to be. I screwed up. Big-time.”

A civilian would be easily forgiven for the mistake she’d made. But a trained police officer knew better. She shouldn’t have fired at an unarmed man. She should have maintained control of the situation. She should have kept her distance from the cell door, announced she was a police officer,

given him a chance to surrender. Instead, she'd guaranteed he *had* to attack her to avoid being shot.

If she was lucky, her mistakes today would just become fodder for the gossips at the station, something for the guys to laugh at and tease her about. If she *wasn't* lucky, her first six months as a detective would be her last. She'd have to crawl back home to Nashville, Tennessee, and admit to her over-achieving parents and siblings that she'd failed—just as they'd expected she would.

"You should have waited for backup." Tuck put his hand on her shoulder in a comforting gesture. She fully expected those same words to come out of her boss's mouth once he heard about this, but they'd be said in a shout. And he certainly wouldn't squeeze her shoulder in solidarity when he said them.

"No arguments here," she said.

"What exactly happened?"

She shoved her hands into her pants pockets to keep from twisting them together. "I told you, I heard screams and gunshots outside the basement and ran inside. Someone locked me in this cell."

"Someone. Not Buchanan?"

"I couldn't swear to it, since I didn't see who shut the door. But I don't think it was him. I never saw the suspect or Hawley once I went into the basement. Did you see any other exits when you got here?"

"No. We circled the entire house before we entered. There's only one way in and out of this basement. And all the windows and doors on the ground floor are boarded up."

"Then the gunshots and the screams were probably a diversion to get me inside. The suspect must have circled around the maze of walls and got away with the victim while I was in here thinking I was rescuing her." She shook her head in disgust. "Thanks to my stupid decision to go in without backup, that poor woman is still being held against her will. And we don't have a clue where she is."

Tuck didn't say anything. He didn't have to. The commiserating look on his face told her he'd already arrived at the same conclusion.

Emily wanted nothing more than to crawl into a hole and hide from the reality of what she'd done. But that wouldn't help the victim. She owed it to Virginia Hawley to use the skills she did have—her talent for solving

puzzles—to help find out exactly what had happened and who was behind it. Once she had that information, she might be able to figure out where the suspect would have taken his victim. To do that, she first needed to decide once and for all if Buchanan was in any way involved. She couldn't rely exclusively on her instincts about him—she needed facts.

She looked around the cell again, searching for some kind of clue, anything that would help her piece things together. The doorway captured her attention. The door that had once secured the opening was now propped against the wall in the hallway. One of the officers must have picked it up off the ground to move it out of the way. The lock mechanism appeared to be fully intact. So was the door frame. The brass hinges were dull and mottled but unbroken.

"Where are the hinge pins?" She hurried into the hallway.

Tuck followed. "What are you talking about?"

"The pins that held the door on its hinges. They're gone." It didn't take long to find them. They were lying right where they must have fallen, along with a discarded tire iron next to the propped-up door.

"So that's how he did it," she said.

"What are you talking about?" Tuck asked. "Share."

She waved her hands toward the door and the pins. "It all makes sense now, the noises I heard inside the cell. Buchanan rapped on the window. He must've gone to his truck, got the tire iron, and used it to pull out the pins and pop the door off the hinges."

Tuck's mouth pursed, as if considering what she'd said. "He wouldn't have gone to all that trouble if he had a key."

"Exactly. He didn't have a key. I think he was telling the truth. He isn't a part of all this. He *was* trying to help me."

"But he had his hands wrapped around your wrists and was holding you down when we got here."

"Only because of me almost shooting him. He was about to help me up. He acted in self-defense. Buchanan . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"What is it?" Tuck asked. "You've pieced something together?"

The hope in his voice wasn't surprising. They'd worked together since the academy. He was used to how she'd sift through the details of a crime scene and find clues where others failed. It wasn't uncommon for her to have a sudden epiphany, a theory seemingly based on nothing that later

proved to be true. She wasn't exactly getting an epiphany right now. Instead, she had a niggling belief that she'd missed something important.

"Devlin Buchanan, Devlin Buchanan," she murmured. "Why does that name sound so familiar?"

"*Alex* Buchanan was a pretty famous defense attorney back in town for years," Tuck said. "I think he still takes on a few cases here and there as a favor to friends. Maybe that's what you're thinking of?"

"Maybe." She closed her eyes, trying to bring the illusive thought or memory into focus. "No. It's something else." A memory, a very recent memory, slammed into her. She sucked in a sharp breath and her eyes flew open. She ran back into the cell and dropped to her knees beside the cot.

"What are you doing?" Tuck squatted down next to her. "Don't touch the body until the coroner gets here."

"Don't you mean skeleton? It hardly qualifies as a body anymore." She pulled her cell phone out. "Here, look at this." She shined her phone's LED light onto the bracelet that lay on top of the woman's wrist bone. "See the engraved charm, the largest one on the chain?"

His eyes widened as he read the words.

"And these." She shined the light on the five smaller charms attached to the bracelet's chain. She used the edge of her fingernail to flip the third charm over so Tuck could see the name on the back.

"Holy shit," he whispered.

"Ditto." She lowered her phone. "Who gets to tell Devlin Buchanan that this skeleton is what's left of his mother?"

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Chapter Three

EMERGENCY VEHICLES CONTINUED to arrive at the little house of horrors every few minutes, parking in the overgrown field that served as the front lawn. Devlin leaned back against his truck at the top of the long gravel driveway, arms crossed as he observed the chaos erupting around him. Police officers stood in clusters or shuffled back and forth between the basement and the yard. But with all the activity, nothing of value seemed to be getting done.

The inefficiency swirling around him was enough to make him want to start barking orders. But this wasn't one of his operations, and offering advice would only raise questions he wasn't prepared to answer. He'd raised enough questions already by playing the damn hero when he'd heard Detective O'Malley's call for help on his police scanner.

Usually the scanner was a way to keep tabs on the police so he could *avoid* them—a necessity in his line of work. But when he'd heard that feminine voice shaking with adrenaline and fear, he'd known she was in trouble. He'd foolishly turned his truck around and headed to the location she'd given. Since she was a cop, he'd left his unregistered gun hidden in the door panel of his truck before going into the basement. He'd gone back to his truck to grab the tire iron only once he'd realized she must have been locked behind one of those doors.

Turns out, the little vixen hadn't needed his help since her backup had arrived right after him. And now he was caught up in this mess, wasting

what precious little family time he had before his next assignment.

After Detective Jones had escorted Devlin out of the basement, he'd led Devlin to a patrol car to take him to the police station for an interview. Devlin had told Jones exactly what he thought of the offer and promptly turned around and headed to his truck. It was at that moment that Jones's boss, Lieutenant Drier, had arrived. He'd quickly assessed the situation and asked Devlin to wait to answer a few questions after Drier spoke to Jones and the officers at the house to get an update.

Sticking around had been the last thing Devlin wanted to do. But he'd reluctantly agreed. With his father and four brothers living here in Savannah, he didn't want to give the local cops an excuse to involve his family, or to start digging into his carefully constructed and mostly fake past. Instead, what he needed to do was placate the cops, *without* giving them any useful information. Then he could go on his way and spend some time with his family before he had to leave again. He didn't plan on saying much. The less the police knew about him, the safer it was—for *all* of them.

So now, here he waited, while Detective Jones leaned against a patrol car on the other side of the driveway, pretending to watch the activity at the house even though he was obviously keeping an eye on Devlin.

A group of three men and a short woman with shoulder-length brown hair separated from a larger group at the back corner of the house and headed Devlin's way. He straightened. The woman, O'Malley, was too far away for him to see her face clearly. But the tantalizing details were burned into his memory.

A full lower lip that fairly begged to be kissed. Dark, expressive eyes that were far too serious for someone who couldn't be more than twenty-five or -six. Her pert, slightly upturned nose, a smattering of freckles across the bridge, and slightly fuller curves might have been flaws in some men's eyes. But Devlin thought her perky nose and freckles made her more interesting. And even though he'd enjoyed plenty of women who fit the traditional definition of beauty, he'd always been a sucker for a woman with curves. A real woman, who didn't starve herself to live up to some false society standard of the perfect body.

He didn't have to work hard to fill in the rest of the details. The feel of her full, soft breasts pressed against his chest was a memory he wasn't likely to forget anytime soon. But even though she was one hell of an

attractive package, it wasn't her looks that had struck him so intensely back in that basement. It was the way she looked *at* him, as if she wanted to see past the façade he presented to society and was staring right into his soul. For the space of a few breaths, he'd felt laid bare, as if she had peeled back the layers and seen him for who he really was. Since every single thing he did was with the intention of hiding those layers, he should have felt uncomfortable beneath her scrutiny. Instead, he'd felt a connection unlike anything he'd felt in a long, long time. Thirteen years to be exact.

Too bad she was a police officer.

Walking beside her was the detective who'd handcuffed Devlin back in the cell—Eddie Tucker, "Tuck" to his co-workers. Devlin had gleaned that particular detail as he'd eavesdropped on Jones briefing Lieutenant Drier when he'd arrived. On Tuck's immediate right was the lieutenant, and beside him was the coroner—Kennerly. Devlin had seen the name on the man's white lab coat when he drove up earlier in the coroner's van.

That wasn't all Devlin had noticed. He knew exactly how many police were on the scene, how many were in the basement right now, and how many vehicles were either in the yard or parked on the shoulder of the highway. In addition, he had three different escape routes mapped out in his mind for how he could drive his truck out of here in a hurry without getting stuck behind a patrol car or ending up in a ditch. He didn't expect to need any of that information, but logging it and marking the exits was as natural to him as breathing. *Especially* when there were cops around.

"Mr. Buchanan, thanks for waiting." Drier offered him a falsely bright smile.

Devlin reluctantly shook his hand.

"I apologize on behalf of Savannah-Chatham Metro PD for the *unfortunate incident*," Drier said. "We appreciate that you were trying to assist an officer in need and we hope you understand that sometimes less-than-ideal decisions are made during the rush of excitement."

From the way Jones and Tuck were staring at Devlin, their jaws locked tight, he imagined the "we" didn't include them. O'Malley didn't look any more pleased than her fellow detectives. Her face was flushed and she wouldn't meet his gaze. Amusement flashed inside Devlin. The "unfortunate incident" Drier referred to must have been the fact that

O’Malley had shot at him even though he didn’t have a weapon. That explained the simpering smile. The lieutenant was worried about a lawsuit.

Devlin was mildly surprised Drier hadn’t insisted that O’Malley do the apologizing. Maybe she had more gumption than he’d given her credit for and she’d refused her boss’s order. Good for her. She didn’t owe him an apology. He’d have done the same thing in her position. To hell with a fair fight. If someone came at him, he wasn’t going to wait and see if they had a weapon. He’d neutralize the threat, whatever it took. Because he admired O’Malley’s spirit, he decided to take Drier down a peg.

“I assume you’re referring to Detective O’Malley drawing her gun on me. My understanding of the situation is that she felt her life was in danger and did exactly what any officer would have and should have done. That *is* what you’re trying to say, isn’t it, Lieutenant? That I shouldn’t be . . . concerned . . . because you’d have done the same thing if you’d been in that basement. Correct?”

The look on the lieutenant’s face was comical. He obviously didn’t want to say that O’Malley had been right. But if he didn’t, he was probably worried Devlin might sue the police department. He finally cleared his throat and adjusted his tie, as if it had grown too tight.

“Of course, of course. Detective O’Malley acted appropriately.”

O’Malley’s eyes widened and the ghost of a smile curved her lips.

Mission accomplished.

“Good. I don’t have much time,” Devlin said. “And I’ve already been waiting out here too long. I’ll allow you five minutes for questions.”

Drier blinked and his face turned red. He looked like he was about to choke, probably on whatever biting retort he wanted to throw at Devlin. His mouth thinned and it seemed to take some effort before he could make it curve into the practiced, false smile of a politician again.

“I know you prefer not to go to the police station,” Drier said. “But it would be much easier for everyone, including you, if you did. I can have an officer follow behind us in your truck and you can leave right after the interview. Won’t take long at all.”

“No thanks.”

Drier’s smile dimmed. He obviously wasn’t used to being told no.

“Will you at least sit in a patrol car where we’ll be more comfortable in the air conditioning while we talk? This blasted heat is horrendous.” He

wiped a bead of sweat off his forehead as if to emphasize his point.

Devlin wasn't unaffected by the heat himself. His black T-shirt was damp between his shoulder blades. But no way was he going to agree to sit in a patrol car, especially if Drier wanted to put him in the backseat, where he'd be locked inside. He'd rather endure the muggy July heat.

"I'm fine right where I am."

The lieutenant frowned, giving up all pretense of smiling. "My apologies for being blunt then, but you leave me no choice. We have some bad news for you. We'll run some tests of course, to be sure, but our fact-checking over the phone makes us confident that you know one of the victims we found inside the basement."

Since Devlin had spoken to his father on the phone a couple of hours ago, he knew his family was up at his dad's house for their traditional Friday night gathering and cookout. Which was where Devlin would be right now if he hadn't allowed himself to get sidetracked by the wobble of fear in O'Malley's voice. Devlin was already anticipating the mouth-watering steaks he'd throw on the grill on his father's back deck.

If Drier believed Devlin knew one of the victims, then Devlin wasn't going to shed a tear for them. Most of the people he knew, besides his family, were just as likely to put a bullet in him as to speak to him.

One of the many hazards of his occupation.

And if the victim was one of the few people Devlin called a friend, the only way Drier would know that was if he'd discovered Devlin's true occupation. In which case, he'd be having this conversation from inside a jail cell.

"Who's this person you think I know?"

Drier waved the coroner forward. "Dr. Kennerly removed some items from the victim."

The coroner didn't say anything. He just handed Devlin a large, clear plastic evidence bag.

Devlin held it up, saw the rings and bracelet inside, and froze.

"We strongly believe," Drier continued, "that the victim is Carolyn Buchanan, your mother. A clerk at the courthouse pulled some records and confirmed Carolyn was the name of your father's wife before they divorced years ago. That name is on the bracelet. The clerk was also familiar with the Buchanan family due to your father's occupation as a lawyer and confirmed

the names of Carolyn's sons, which match the names on the charms. The Division of Motor Vehicles provided the hair color and height from your mother's driver's license. The victim's, ah, *estimated* height and hair color match the . . ."

Devlin tuned everything out around him. He didn't have any clear memories of the jewelry. Not something he would have paid attention to as a kid. But he'd seen that bracelet in so many family photos there could be no doubt. It had been a gift from his father. It was definitely Carolyn's. Which meant she was dead. And even though she'd divorced his father over two decades ago, when Devlin was thirteen, he knew with absolute certainty that Alex was going to be devastated when he found out she'd been murdered.

Alex had loved Carolyn to distraction, had never remarried, and to this day could be found—when he didn't think anyone was watching—staring wistfully at one of her many photographs still hanging on the walls of the house where they'd spent their eight-year marriage.

The silence around Devlin intruded on his thoughts. He looked up, directly into O'Malley's expressive brown eyes. There was a deep sadness there, for him—sympathy that was entirely misplaced. Devlin's *father* was the one who deserved sympathy. Carolyn was barely a blip on the radar of Devlin's life. She wasn't his biological parent and had never pretended to want him as her son. She'd worn that bracelet only to please her husband, not because of any motherly affection. And after the divorce, she'd never made any attempts to contact his dad, his brothers, or Devlin. She'd abandoned all of them.

"I'm sorry for your loss." Unlike her boss, she sounded like she genuinely meant it.

Devlin nodded his thanks and returned the bag to the coroner. "How did she die?"

"I'm not sure yet," Kennerly said. "There are no obvious signs of trauma. But the body—that is, Mrs. Buchanan—has been in that basement for some time. It's difficult to pinpoint the cause of death. I won't know more until after the autopsy and some tests."

Dozens of questions swirled through Devlin's mind, but the answers would have to wait. Right now, the most important thing he could do was to try to soften the blow for his father. He didn't want the falsely solicitous

Drier or the abrupt coroner to break the news. As much as he hated the necessity, this was his responsibility. He was the one who needed to tell Alex that the woman he loved had been murdered.

He yanked his truck door open.

“Wait.” Drier sounded panicked. “Mr. Buchanan, what are you doing? We still need to ask you some questions.”

O’Malley stood on her tiptoes and whispered something to her boss.

Devlin didn’t wait to see what they were discussing. He climbed into the truck and started it up. When he rolled the window down, he didn’t see O’Malley anywhere. He directed his comment to the lieutenant. “Your questions can wait. I have to tell my father the love of his life is dead.”

He put the truck in gear just as the passenger door popped open. He slammed on his brakes and O’Malley hopped inside. She calmly shut the door and put the seat belt on as if she and Devlin were old friends about to head up to the corner store together.

“What are you doing?” he demanded.

“Going with you.”

“No. You’re not. Get out.”

Her fingers curled against the tan leather seat. “Mr. Buchanan, I royally screwed up my career today by defying orders, going into that house without backup, allowing myself to be trapped like a rookie while the suspect got away with the victim, and then shooting at an unarmed civilian.” She gave him a hesitant smile. “Thank you for that, by the way. For pretending you thought it was justified, even though we both know I shouldn’t have fired my weapon.” She waved her hand in the air. “Regardless, I just lied to my boss and told him I’d established a rapport with you earlier and that I was certain I could get you to answer his questions. So that is exactly what I’m going to do—ask you questions.”

Devlin tightened his hand on the steering wheel. Apparently he’d given her the impression that he was a nice guy and that he wanted to keep helping her. Well, he’d left *nice* in the dust years ago. The best way to help O’Malley was for him to get as far away from her as possible, as quickly as possible. Which meant it was time to reveal just how *un-nice* he could be.

He rudely raked his gaze down her body and let out a puff of laughter. “Rapport? Is that what they call it these days when a woman wiggles her sweet ass under a man and gives him a hard-on?”

Inwardly wincing at his crudity, he was glad his very proper father wasn't here to see his son's reprehensible behavior. Alex Buchanan would never tolerate any of his sons being rude, especially to a woman. Devlin waited, expecting O'Malley to hop out of the truck any second and return to her safe, *nice* world.

Instead, her mouth tightened and her eyebrows drew down in an angry slash. "If you think you're going to scare me away by being a jerk, think again. I have two brothers, and I promise you there's nothing you could say that could burn my ears any worse than what I've already heard. But more importantly, we're wasting valuable time sitting here. This isn't about you or me. It's about a young, terrified woman who's out there somewhere because of my screw-up. Her life is on the line. If anything you can tell me gives me even one clue about where she is and who's holding her, then there is no way I'm getting out of this truck. Not without the answers I need."

Devlin could have easily plucked the sexy little hellion from the seat with one hand and deposited her outside. But he was so surprised, and impressed, by the courage and tenacity coming out of such a small, vulnerable-looking woman that he couldn't hold on to his anger. There were very few women, or even men, who stood up to him. His respect for her just shot up several notches.

Besides, like she'd said, this was bigger than her. It was bigger than both of them. If she believed asking him a few questions might give her clues to find the missing woman, so be it. She could come along for the ride. He could think of far worse things than having her sweet, curvy body bouncing around in his truck for half an hour while he made the drive to Alex's house.

He threw the truck in gear and floored the accelerator.

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Chapter Four

DEVLIN'S TRUCK SKIDDED around a curve. Emily clutched the passenger armrest to keep from sliding across the seat. When they were on the straightaway again, she jerked her seat belt tighter.

"Do you always drive this fast?" she grumbled.

He didn't answer. But a few minutes later, he asked, "Why is that cop following us?"

Damn. He'd noticed Tuck tailing them. She swiveled in her seat, pretending surprise as she looked over her shoulder. A speck on the horizon kept pace with them, or at least tried to. She was amazed Devlin had spotted their tail. Tuck was one of the best in the department at tailing people.

"That's not a patrol car," she said. "Or at least I don't think it is. What makes you say it's a cop?"

"He's been behind us since we left. It doesn't take a genius to figure out he's one of Savannah's finest."

His sarcastic emphasis on *Savannah's finest* had her studying him more closely. "You have a problem with law enforcement?"

"My father is an attorney. One of my brothers and one of my sisters-in-law are both FBI agents. Another brother is a private investigator who works with the police and the FBI on cold cases. Do I sound like someone who would have issues with the police?"

No. But he obviously *did* have a problem with them. Was that predisposition against *all* police or just against her and her team because of

what had happened today?

He slowed the truck, abruptly turned right, and careened down a narrow dirt road that led into the woods.

Emily glanced nervously in her side mirror. She sure hoped Tuck had seen them turn, or that he was paying attention to the dust or tire skid marks Devlin was leaving all over the place since he was driving so fast. “Where are we going?”

“My father’s house.”

“He lives down this road?”

“No. Shortcut. Why? Worried we’ll lose Tuck back there?”

She swallowed. “How did you know it was Tuck?”

“A hunch, which you just confirmed. Is he supposed to be protecting you from me?”

She tried to affect a nonchalant expression. She didn’t think she had any reason to fear Devlin. But his size was certainly intimidating. Having Tuck follow her seemed like the sensible thing to do. Just in case.

“I can protect myself, if it comes to that.” She patted the gun holstered to her belt. “I told the lieutenant to have Tuck follow us so he could give me a ride back into town after I interview your father.”

The skin around his jaw whitened. “No one is going to *interview* Alex. Not today. You said you had questions for *me*. Ask them. Because when we reach Alex’s house, you aren’t saying a damn thing. You’re not even going inside.”

If he thought she was going to sit on his father’s front porch while he broke the news about Carolyn, he was living in Disney World. But she didn’t see the point in telling him that right now.

“First question: Why do you call your father ‘Alex’?”

“What does that have to do with Carolyn’s murder?”

“Second question: Why do you call your mother ‘Carolyn’?”

He laughed but didn’t sound amused. “Touché.”

He steered the truck around a rut in the road, making Emily grab the armrest again. “Those were serious questions. I need background on the victim . . . I mean, on your mother.” When he didn’t seem inclined to answer, she leaned forward, catching his attention. “Mr. Buchanan, why do you call your mother and father by their first names? Are you adopted?”

He seemed to weigh her question, as if deciding the pros and cons of answering, just like he'd done back in the cell. "I call them by their first names because my older brothers always have and I grew up hearing that. As for whether I'm adopted, the answer is complicated."

"You're either adopted or you aren't. How is that complicated?" She pulled her cell phone out of her pocket. She would rather have had a notebook and pen, but those were in her purse, which was in her car at the murder scene. She opened up a note-taking app and waited for his response.

"Technically, my two older brothers and I were adopted. But it's more accurate to say we were . . . inherited. Alex and Carolyn had twins together —my younger brothers, Matt, then Austin who has the distinction of being the baby of the family by less than one minute. The rest of us were passed along to Alex through Carolyn's previous marriages."

She blinked. "Inherited? Passed along?"

He blew out an exasperated breath. "How exactly is this supposed to help you find that missing woman?"

"Even the smallest detail might prove useful in helping us figure out how your mother caught the suspect's attention. I need to retrace her last steps."

"*Carolyn* left Alex twenty-one years ago, divorced him when I was thirteen. Unless she was in that basement for a couple of decades, I don't see how anything I tell you is going to be useful."

His statement had Emily shifting uncomfortably on the bench seat and pretending sudden fascination with the notes on her phone.

The silence in the cab stretched out. She risked a quick peek at him.

He was staring at her, his eyes narrowed, searching. Eyes that she'd thought were a dark brown earlier but that she now realized were actually dark gray. Not that it mattered. It was her job to notice details like that. In case she had to describe him later.

His gaze flicked to the road, then back to her several more times. His jaw tightened, as if he'd just come to some kind of decision. He slammed on the brakes, bringing the truck to a skidding halt, sending another cloud of dust flying up from the road.

Emily gasped as the seat belt locked against her chest. It took several seconds for her to forcibly uncurl her fingers from the armrest. The leather

would probably bear permanent marks from her nails, but she didn't feel a bit guilty over that. *She* wasn't the one who drove like a freaking maniac.

The maniac in question flung off his seat belt and swiveled to face her. "You *know* something," he snapped. "What did the coroner tell you?"

She unclicked her belt too, so she could face him, and subtly look over her shoulder.

"We're miles ahead of him." His words were clipped, impatient. "Tuck isn't going to save you from answering *my* questions. Spill. Now."

He crowded her against the passenger door.

Suddenly his hand clamped around her right wrist and he leaned down, his face inches from hers, his eyes as dark as a thundercloud. "Were you seriously going to try to shoot me again?"

"What?" Her breath left her in a surprised rush when she saw the gun in her hand. She didn't even remember reaching for it.

He snatched the gun, popped out the clip, and handed the gun back, all so quickly, so smoothly, she'd barely had time to blink, let alone try to stop him. He tossed the clip on the floorboard and wrapped his hands around her upper arms, giving her a gentle shake. "Do you honestly think I'm going to hurt you?"

She glanced longingly at the magazine of bullets.

Devlin cursed and let her go. He studied her for a moment, then grabbed the clip off the floor and tossed it in her lap. He'd surprised her again, but this time she didn't hesitate. She shoved the clip into her gun and pointed it at him.

Obviously not considering her a threat, or just not caring, he didn't bother to look at her. Instead, he stared out the windshield. "You may not believe this," he said, "but I wouldn't hurt you. Not on purpose, anyway." His mouth quirked in a wry grin. "Ever since I left that basement I've been wanting to get you horizontal again. And I promise, if I did, the only pain you would feel would be from an overload of pleasure."

The sexual promise in that statement sent a shiver of longing straight to her core. Her entire body flooded with heat. She should tell him not to talk to her that way, but that would just make her a hypocrite. Since the moment he'd touched her, pressing his hard-muscled body against hers, she couldn't seem to stop fantasizing about what it might be like to roll around on a mattress together for a couple of hours, an entire day, a weekend. She'd

love to slide her fingers into his short, wavy hair. Or get a better look at the tattoos that peeked out from the edges of his T-shirt sleeves. But being so obsessed about a virtual stranger was insane. And besides him being a stranger, he was the only lead she had right now to find Mrs. Hawley. She didn't have time to be distracted, no matter how sexy that distraction happened to be.

Devlin was certainly distracted right now. But not, apparently, by thoughts of her. He was quietly staring through the windshield, his mind seemingly millions of miles away. The angry stranger was gone. The sexy bad boy was gone. In their place was a man who looked . . . resigned, tired, even a little . . . vulnerable.

She looked down at the gun still in her hands. Once again, she'd handled the situation all wrong. She holstered her gun.

"Mr. Buchanan . . . Devlin?"

He raised a brow in question and looked at her.

"You stopped the truck because you thought I knew something that I wasn't telling you. You're right."

His gaze sharpened, but he waited, without interrupting.

She cleared her throat. "The coroner has to perform tests to try to determine not only a cause of death for Carolyn Buchanan and the others in that basement, but a date of death as well."

He blinked. "*Date* of death? What are we talking here, days, weeks?"

"Months. Maybe . . . longer."

He cursed, surprising her with his creative way of stringing together a phrase.

"What did the bastard do? Hold those women as his prisoner that whole time? Torture them?"

"I . . . I honestly don't know."

"What about the coroner? He must have expressed some opinions specific to Carolyn, even without the autopsy."

He had. There was evidence of several old fractures in her bones, a lot more than was considered normal. The coroner believed Carolyn had been tortured for some time, probably *years*. She bit her lip, reluctant to share such devastating information.

The truth must have been revealed by her expression. He swore bitterly and threw the truck into drive. But he didn't take his foot off the brake.

“Buckle your seat belt,” he spat out.

Surprised and grateful that he would consider her safety after that revelation, she hurriedly clicked the belt into place. As soon as she did, he stomped the accelerator and took off down the road.

Moments later, he braked and turned the wheel hard right. She braced her arms against the dashboard. The truck slid sideways. The tires grabbed, held, then shot the truck down a side road. She was about to demand that he slow down when she realized why he’d turned down this road. He must have seen the same flash of white up ahead that she now saw.

“That’s the suspect’s truck!” she said. “How is that even possible?”

“Doesn’t make sense to me either. He should have been long gone by now. I sure as hell would have been.”

That last part had been uttered beneath his breath. Emily stared at him, suddenly wondering if she’d misjudged him after all. Was it possible he was in on the kidnapping? Had she made a horrible mistake insisting he take her with him?

“There are two people in the cab,” he said.

She turned her attention to the truck they were chasing. Sure enough, someone was sitting in the passenger seat, a woman with long brown hair. Hawley?

“Can’t you go faster?” She pulled out her cell phone.

“Not without flipping this thing. It’s not exactly a Maserati.”

“I wouldn’t know. Have you driven a Maserati?”

He didn’t answer, but something about the tightening of his jaw made her think he *had*, and that he regretted letting that fact slip out.

The truck hit a bump and started to slide. He steered into the skid, his arm muscles bunching as he fought the wheel. He hit the gas and straightened the truck out.

Emily’s heart seemed to skip several beats, her stomach flip-flopping as if she were on a roller coaster. She swallowed hard and tried to ignore the dizzying rush of trees flying past her window. Had she seriously wanted him to drive faster?

“Tuck,” she yelled into her cell phone. “We’re chasing the suspect. It looks like he might have Mrs. Hawley with him. Request backup.” Devlin supplied the name of the road they were on and Emily relayed the information to her partner.

They lost sight of the truck as they maneuvered through several sharp turns. When Devlin rounded another long curve, the suspect's white truck appeared ahead—pulling to the side of the road.

Devlin yanked the wheel, bringing his truck to a shuddering stop behind the other truck. Before Emily could remove her seat belt, Devlin was out of the cab, sprinting into the woods after the fleeing driver.

Emily said a few choice words that would have eclipsed the cursing Devlin had done earlier and hopped out. She drew her gun and aimed it at the other vehicle, determined to follow procedure this time to clear the cab and make sure there wasn't a second suspect.

Crouching down, she crept to the bed of the truck. She straightened and aimed her gun over the side. Clear. No one hiding in the back. She crouched down again and continued to the driver's door. She stood up, pointing her gun inside. The only person in the cab, her eyes wide with terror, was the young mother who'd gone missing four days ago.

Emily's knees went weak with relief. *Thank God.* Her screw-up in the basement hadn't cost this poor woman her life.

She shoved her gun in the holster and held up her hands. "Mrs. Hawley, I'm Detective Emily O'Malley. Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

Stupid questions. She regretted them as soon as she said them. The woman had bruises on her face and arms. Of course she wasn't all right. Hawley burst into tears.

"It's okay, ma'am. Everything's going to be okay." Again, the inadequacy of what she'd said twisted her gut, but what else could she say at a time like this?

The sound of a roaring engine had her turning. Tuck's car barreled around the curve in the road. He skidded but quickly corrected and pulled over behind Buchanan's truck. Emily ran to the driver's side.

"Mrs. Hawley is in the first vehicle," she yelled as Tuck rolled down his window. "Call an ambulance. Stay with her. Buchanan took off after the suspect."

She ran toward the pine trees lining the road, ignoring Tuck's shout, telling her to wait. An unarmed civilian was chasing an alleged murderer who probably *was* armed. Waiting this time wasn't an option. Buchanan's life was at stake.

Tracking someone through the woods wasn't a skill she'd ever mastered, but she didn't need to be an expert to follow the trail Buchanan and the suspect had left behind. The grass was matted down, and little branches were broken all along the path.

She burst out of the woods into a clearing and skidded to a halt. Twenty feet in front of her, Devlin and the suspect were locked in combat, rolling back and forth on the ground. She leveled her gun at them.

"Police, freeze—both of you!"

Devlin wrapped his hands around the man's head and jaw and gave a mighty jerk. A sickening crack echoed through the trees. The suspect slumped to the forest floor, unmoving, his neck twisted at an impossible angle. Devlin slowly climbed to his feet. He crossed the clearing, passing Emily without looking at her. His jaw was clenched tight and his entire body seemed taut, like a bowstring ready to snap. He continued into the trees and disappeared back toward the road.

Emily rushed to the suspect, checking his pulse even though she knew he was most likely beyond any help she could give him. As she'd feared, he was dead. Her gun hand began to shake. She holstered her weapon and bent to the side to get a good look at the suspect, or victim, or whatever label applied in this situation. This was definitely the man she'd passed on the highway a few hours earlier, the same man who'd shut the basement door in her face. At least they had the right guy this time.

She checked his pockets. No wallet. Nothing to identity him. She took a picture of his face. If a fingerprint scan didn't yield results, maybe she could get the local FBI office to run his picture through their fancy facial-recognition software.

When Emily emerged from the trees by the road, Tuck and Mrs. Hawley were sitting on the hood of Tuck's car. He was speaking to her in low, soothing tones. She seemed much calmer now. Then again, Tuck hadn't pointed a gun at her like Emily had.

Devlin leaned against the tailgate of his truck a few feet away, looking deadly and dangerous. The image was certainly accurate. He truly *was* dangerous. Lethal. His unreadable gaze briefly met hers before shifting to the other woman.

Emily halted beside the car. "Mrs. Hawley, the suspect is . . . he's dead, ma'am. It's over."

Tuck gave her a questioning look. She shook her head. She'd tell him the details later, when the victim wasn't around.

The young woman's brows drew down. Maybe she was still in shock. She didn't look relieved. Instead, she looked . . . confused, and scared.

"What do you mean it's over? Are you saying you found him?"

"The man who was driving the truck? Yes, we . . . found him. He's dead."

Hawley waved her hand, as if what Emily had said was irrelevant. "Yes, yes, I heard you. What about the other one?"

Devlin straightened, suddenly on alert. "*Other* one?"

Hawley shrank away from him. He sighed and leaned back against his truck, as if he was used to eliciting that kind of reaction.

"I don't understand," Emily said. "Was there a second man in the truck with you?"

"No, no. The truck driver was the one who abducted me and drove me back and forth between the different locations."

"Different locations?" Emily breathed.

"From that house where you saw me to the cabin to that other place. But the driver, he's not the one who . . ." She squeezed her eyes tightly shut. "He's not the one who . . . hurt me," she whispered miserably. "He was the *assistant*." She shuddered.

Emily stared at her in horror. Tuck looked just as stunned as she felt. Devlin looked . . . intent, like a predator waiting for his prey.

"'Cabin'? 'Other place'? What are you saying?" Emily asked. "He drove you to different places to . . . hurt you?"

Hawley wiped at her tears. "You don't understand." Frustration warred with grief on her face. "They were a team, *two* men. One of them moved us around. The other one, he's the one who . . ." She closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around her waist.

Tuck and Emily stared at each other in shock.

Emily put her hand on the woman's shoulder. "Mrs. Hawley, please. What did you mean by . . . *us*?"

Hawley opened her eyes, the tears flowing freely down her cheeks now. "I'm not the only woman they were holding captive. There are three more women out there."

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Chapter Five

A MAZE OF police cars and the coroner's van blocked Devlin's pickup truck on the side of the road. O'Malley, her boss, and her sidekicks—Tuck and Jones—spoke in a huddle thirty feet away, probably trying to decide what to do about Devlin.

While he didn't regret killing one of the scumbags who'd abducted and tortured those women, he did regret killing him in front of a witness—especially when that witness was a police officer. A detective was bound to notice the quick, practiced efficiency of his movements, and wonder *why* he seemed so comfortable doing what he'd done. *Why* was a dangerous word in the mind of a cop.

Two uniformed officers strode past the driver's side window and headed into the woods where the CSI team was collecting evidence. Devlin curled his fingers around the steering wheel. But what he really wanted to do was curl them around the gun hidden in the door panel. Cops made him nervous as hell, but that wasn't the only reason he was agitated.

In less than forty-eight hours, he was due to report back to his employer, Extreme International Tours, Incorporated. There was no reason anyone from EXIT should be monitoring him right now, or know that he'd foolishly managed to get involved in police activity. But he, better than anyone, knew EXIT didn't always need a reason. He'd done his share of random monitoring over the years, watching assets without them knowing it, to ensure they were still loyal, following instructions, not doing anything to

jeopardize the company's true mission. If one of his peers was watching him, and reported back to his boss on today's events, what would Cyprian think?

Damn it, he didn't need these complications. He should have made O'Malley get out of his truck back at the house and just gone to Alex's by himself. Then he wouldn't be watching the deep shadows between the trees, every muscle in his body tensing in warning. He needed to get out of here and call his employer, see if he'd heard anything.

Cyprian was a reasonable boss, and Devlin had never given him cause to doubt him in the past. But if this situation in any way compromised EXIT, if the cops dug into the company, searching any deeper than the tour front, potentially forcing EXIT to temporarily shut down sensitive operations, things could quickly spiral out of control. And if Cyprian believed Devlin had disclosed confidential information to the police, it could spell disaster for anyone involved—including the sexy detective.

Of course, *not* answering O'Malley's questions was just as dangerous as answering them. A guide who spent his days escorting wealthy, eccentric people on extreme, dangerous jaunts around the world had no reason to avoid questions—unless he had something to hide. Devlin definitely had something to hide, so he'd have to walk a thin line between satisfying O'Malley's curiosity so that she wouldn't dig too deeply into EXIT and whetting her appetite for more.

He thumped the seat beside him and studied the trees again, searching for an elusive shadow that would tell him he was already on Cyprian's radar. Hopefully, after conferring with her boss and cohorts, O'Malley would decide he had nothing to contribute to their investigation—which he didn't—and follow other leads. Then he could head to Alex's house and gently break the news about Carolyn. After that, Devlin would spend a few precious hours with his family before heading out of town on his next assignment.

He forced his gaze away from the trees. Too late, he realized O'Malley was watching him. Her gaze shifted to the woods. Devlin cursed again. He'd just made her even more curious than she already was.

Sloppy. Sloppy and stupid.

Her hand drifted to her side, where her firearm was holstered. She nodded in answer to something her boss said. Then she motioned to a

uniformed officer and took a pair of handcuffs from him.

Damn.

She started toward Devlin, the silver circles of metal dangling from her left hand, her ever-present buddies—Tuck and Jones—at her side.

Devlin sighed deeply. It looked like he was going to have to answer her questions at the police station. Still, he figured as long as she was the one interviewing him, things would go fairly easily. That zing of instant attraction that had swept through both of them back at the house gave him an advantage. A few well-timed smiles and some sexy innuendos would throw her off her game and convince her he was just a flirt with nothing to offer her investigation.

But what would happen to Alex while Devlin was on his way to the police station? Would simpering Drier end up callously breaking the news about Carolyn? Alex deserved far better than that. There was only one way of ensuring that Devlin would be the one to break the news.

He needed to lawyer up.

By calling Alex, he could ask his lawyer father not to talk to any cops before speaking to him. By the time Alex got to the station, Devlin would have convinced O'Malley that her questions were pointless and she'd have already decided to release him. Then Devlin could take Alex aside, break the news, and drive him back home. Simple. Easy.

He grabbed his cell phone and punched in the familiar number.

O'Malley reached the truck and tried the door handle. Locked. She frowned and motioned for him to open the door.

He pointed to the phone and pretended not to understand her request.

"Hello?" Alex's polite but formal voice told Devlin he didn't recognize the number calling him. Since Devlin had never called him from this particular phone number before, that made sense.

All of the people Devlin worked with used burn phones—cheap, throwaway phones without a contract that couldn't be tracked back to an owner—when on missions. But Devlin used one even when he was on a break between assignments, which had led to some teasing from others at EXIT, like Gage and Kelly. But Devlin preferred to be overprepared and overcautious. His prepaid burn phones were difficult to trace to an owner, which was exactly what he wanted.

“It’s Devlin,” he said into the phone. “I need you to meet me at the police station. And promise me you won’t discuss any details with the police about anything that happened today until *after* you talk to me.”

She motioned again for him to open the door.

He gave her a smile meant to charm and distract, while he held up his hand, signaling he needed another minute.

The smile was a wasted effort. She moved back, drawing her gun. She’d been awkward and hesitant the first time she’d held that gun today, but it was quickly becoming a smooth, practiced habit. He couldn’t help but think that was a damn shame.

“Open the door and step out of the vehicle,” she yelled through the glass.

The phone crackled. “Why do you want me to meet you at the station, son? What’s going on?”

Tuck and Jones pulled their guns too, flanking her like a pair of bobblehead dolls.

Devlin gritted his teeth. “I’m about to be arrested.”

EMILY STUBBORNLY MET Devlin’s irritated gaze across the interrogation room table. For the first ten or fifteen minutes of the interview, he’d been all smiles and flirty, inappropriate comments. At first, she’d been flushing hot like a teenager with her first crush. But she’d finally realized he was manipulating her, using her obvious attraction to him against her. And that had sent an entirely new kind of heat flooding through her.

She’d stay here all evening if that’s what it took for him to start giving her more than the light, fluffy answers he’d been feeding her so far. But unfortunately, as soon as she’d stopped responding to his practiced charm, he’d obviously realized he couldn’t manipulate her anymore. His smiles had faded, and he’d turned into the stoic man in front of her right now.

At least he was still talking, as if he felt compelled to try to answer her questions. But he wasn’t giving her much. And as time dragged on, his frustration level was becoming evident in every tense line of his body.

The only good thing about the interview so far was that Lieutenant Drier had insisted on keeping Devlin handcuffed. The chains between the cuffs

looped through a hook bolted to the top of the table that was in turn bolted to the floor. Without the restraints on him, she might have been too intimidated by his steadily darkening disposition to keep going.

In response to his request, again, for her to remove the handcuffs, she said, “Sorry, I can’t. Lieutenant’s orders.”

He leaned toward her as far as the cuffs would allow. “I saved your ass today and took out the guy who locked you up. Instead of harassing me, maybe you should spend your time looking for those missing women.”

She stiffened at his reference to the search. That’s where she wanted to be. Half the department was searching the miles of woods and farmland around the house where the bodies had been found. Drier was performing damage control with the media. And Emily was stuck here at the police station. Her boss’s official reason was because of her reputation for reading people and figuring out what buttons to push in an interview. But Emily was more inclined to believe he was punishing her because of her mistakes in that basement.

“As it turns out, I would have been perfectly fine if you hadn’t shown up,” she said, trying not to let him know he’d struck a nerve.

“What about Hawley? Would she have been fine if I hadn’t seen the suspect’s truck and took off after him?”

She flushed. He was right. Hawley would likely still be a prisoner of the man who’d taken her, suffering God only knew what kind of torture. But that only brought her back to one of the many questions for which she still had no answers.

“Why do you think the suspect was still in the area when you and I drove past?” she asked.

“I have no idea.”

“But you do agree that’s kind of strange, right? The suspect should have taken off and been long gone by the time we saw him.”

He hesitated, then shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not. The perp could have gotten lost on the back roads. Once you issued a BOLO, he might not have known how to get out of the area without being seen.”

She watched him closely. “BOLO. Perp. You speak like a cop.”

His lips quirked in a wry grin. “I watch a lot of cop shows on TV.”

His flippant tone had her clenching her left hand in her lap. “Why do you have a police scanner in your truck?”

“Entertainment.”

She tossed her pen on the pad of paper. “Sarcasm isn’t going to get you out of here anytime soon. How were you able to kill the suspect so easily?” When he didn’t answer, she picked up her pen again. “Are you an undercover police officer, from another jurisdiction, and you’re worried about blowing your cover if you answer my questions?”

He laughed without humor. “Not hardly.”

“Why did you kill the suspect?”

He cocked a brow. “Self-defense. I tried to stop him from running away and he attacked me.”

Since she hadn’t seen the beginning of the fight between him and the man he’d killed, she didn’t know if the suspect had attacked him, or whether Devlin was the one who’d struck first. And she still wasn’t sure if the vicious twist of the suspect’s neck had been warranted.

“What do you do for a living?”

He sat back and tried to cross his arms, but the length of chain jerked him up short. His jaw tightened and he lowered his hands to the table. “As I already told you, I’m an outdoor guide for an extreme adventure travel company.”

“Right. A guide.” She consulted the notes on her legal pad. “Extreme International Tours—EXIT for short. Headquartered in Colorado. Can’t say that I’ve ever heard of them.” She waited, but he didn’t say anything, which might mean he was telling the truth. Most people caught in a lie would rush to come up with an excuse to cover their mistake. She wrote a note to herself to surf the Net later for a company named EXIT Incorporated.

“What do you do as a ‘guide’? Ferry people up and down the Savannah River while they snap pictures of seagulls and paddle wheelers?”

The corner of his mouth twitched, as if what she’d said amused him. “Not exactly.”

Devlin’s face was devoid of expression, a little too composed, as if he’d purposely wiped it blank to avoid giving away any clues to his thoughts. Other than a few tattoos, he was covered in a golden tan, like someone who spent a lot of time outdoors. And judging by the way his black T-shirt hugged his body, and the way he’d felt pressed against her in the basement, he was solid muscle. That again seemed to support his guide profession.

But she'd yet to meet a tour guide adept at rescuing cops and snapping bad guys' necks.

In spite of the hyped-up police shows on TV that showed villains breaking people's necks with a quick, easy twist, the reality was far different. The victim in those situations was more likely to get a stiff, sore neck than a broken one. It took a great deal of power and skill to twist with the right angle, speed, and torque to get the job done.

"Why were you driving down the highway in front of that house this afternoon?"

"I already told you. I was going to my father's place for dinner."

"Where were you driving *from*?"

"*My* house."

"And before that?" she pressed.

"If you're asking for my alibi for when Carolyn was murdered, you'll need to be more specific about when she was killed."

"There was more than one body in that basement."

He glanced at the solid glass door behind her as if expecting someone. "Without knowing when those women were killed, it would be difficult for me to provide alibis."

"Just give me this past week for starters."

"Montana."

She blinked. "Montana?"

"For the past four months, I've been escorting a wealthy European couple through Montana. I flew into Hilton Head International Airport earlier today and went straight home. You already have my address. After that, I drove to my father's house. Or at least I was trying to when your call for help went out on the radio. Does that satisfy the alibi question?"

"I won't know until the coroner performs the autopsies and nails down when the vics were killed. And until I speak to that couple. I don't suppose you have their names and contact information handy?"

"Stacy and Everest Rand. I'm sure my employer can provide their numbers and addresses, along with any business receipts you need."

His quick, easy answer told her his alibi would probably check out, but she noted the names on her pad anyway.

She considered his mannerisms, his body language. He didn't fidget like most people when grilled with questions. Instead, he sat almost deathly still.

He was obviously annoyed to still be there, but other than when he'd expressed his displeasure over the cuffs, he'd remained in control—watching, waiting, as aware of her every movement as she was of his, even when he wasn't looking directly at her.

"Are you military, or former military?" she asked. "Special forces?" That could explain his fighting skills, and his ability to kill so easily.

He affected a bored look and didn't bother to answer.

The lieutenant had posed the idea that Devlin might be in on the kidnappings and torture, that they might be dealing with a *group* of killers instead of the two-man tag-team Virginia Hawley had described when she gave her full statement. If that theory were true, it could explain why Devlin had been so quick to kill the suspect. He'd wanted to keep the suspect from telling anyone about Devlin's involvement. It would even explain why Devlin had chased the suspect's vehicle instead of leading Emily somewhere else. Devlin wouldn't want the suspect to get away to be caught in the net of the BOLO that had been issued. Again, that would allow the suspect to talk and tell the police about Devlin's role in the kidnappings and murders. But if he were involved, why didn't Hawley recognize him? That one fact seemed to blow that theory apart.

Even if she assumed Devlin hadn't actually been involved with Hawley's kidnapping, and that he was involved with just the other kidnappings, the theory still didn't ring true with her. She'd seen the anger and disgust on Devlin's face when he'd killed the other man, whom they still hadn't identified. The man's crimes were as repulsive to Devlin as they were to Emily, which made it unlikely he was involved.

So what other conclusion could she make about who Devlin really was, or what he really did? He was focused, calculating, intelligent, almost . . . *professional* in how he carried himself.

And in how he'd killed.

She stilled and stared at him. He wasn't a cop, but he'd come to her rescue after hearing her on a scanner. When he saw the suspect's vehicle, he'd taken off on a high-speed chase without hesitation. He'd pursued the suspect. He'd run *toward* danger the way only cops, firemen, or those in other branches of law enforcement were trained to do.

"Are you with the FBI?" she blurted out.

He'd been studying the far wall as if gray paint had suddenly become fascinating. But with her question hanging in the air between them, his gaze slowly shifted back to her.

"No, Detective. I'm not FBI."

His golden skin didn't flush or turn pale. His eyes didn't flicker. Did that mean he was telling the truth? Or that he was just a really good liar?

"Homeland Security?"

"No."

"CIA?"

"Again, no."

"NSA? U.S. Marshals Service?"

"No, no, and hell no. As I already explained, I'm an *outdoor guide*."

He was concerned. She saw it in the slight tightening of the tiny lines at the corners of his eyes. Which must mean she was close to the truth. If he wasn't in law enforcement, there was only one more thing that matched the facts as she saw them. At first, the idea seemed ludicrous. But as she considered it, looking at all the angles, the pieces snapped together beautifully. It just made sense. Still, it was one of those concepts that was far too TV land, something accepted in a dramatic series but that, in reality, was rare enough to seem ridiculous. But when she applied that label to him, it didn't seem ridiculous at all. It just . . . fit.

Silently thanking her boss for insisting that Devlin be kept in chains, she popped her next question, fully expecting him to laugh at her. "Are you some kind of professional hit man, a trained assassin?"

He didn't laugh. He didn't blink. He didn't move. The only indication that he'd even heard her was that his gaze was now so focused, so intense, it sent a chill racing down her spine.

She'd just stumbled onto the truth. She knew it in her bones.

She met his icy stare without flinching or blinking, even though her instincts screamed at her to get out, to run as fast as she could, to get as far away from this man as possible. She couldn't help but feel as if this was an important moment in her life, as if nothing was ever going to be the same again.

And it scared the hell out of her.

A tapping noise broke the spell that had fallen over them. They both looked down, and she realized the tapping was coming from her. She was

tapping her pen on the pad of paper.

She tossed the pen down, flushing at the obvious sign that *he'd* rattled *her*.

"Here's the thing," she said, proud that her voice sounded confident, strong, in spite of how much she was shaking inside. "If you're an assassin, you must be working for someone. And yet you took time out of your . . . busy schedule . . . to try to save a cop. Why would you do that?"

She waited, but he didn't say anything or react in any way.

"Tell me, Devlin," she continued, trying to find the right button to push to get a reaction, to get him talking again. "I've never met a hired killer before, so I'm kind of curious. Why would you bother to save me when you usually *take* lives without worrying about the pain or loss you cause for the loved ones they leave behind?"

A flash of some powerful emotion shot through his eyes, but then it was gone, his face as carefully blank and impassive as before. What had she seen? Pain? Regret? What did that tell her? That a professional killer felt *remorse* for his actions?

Maybe she was the one who was crazy here. She didn't have any proof of her assassin theory. And none of her questions had gotten her any closer to finding the missing women. Somewhere along the way, she'd gotten off track. She needed to bring the interview back to the events of this afternoon to see if there was any reason to seriously consider that Devlin was in on the kidnappings with the two other men. Three women's lives hung in the balance.

"Let's start from the beginning," she said. "When you heard me ask for help on the police scanner, where were you going? Where were you coming from?"

His gaze shot past her and his mouth curved into a humorless smile. "This interview is over. My lawyer is here."

She frowned. "Your lawyer? I haven't given you a phone call yet."

"I called him from my truck, before you so generously gave me a ride to the police station."

A knock sounded on the door. She turned in her seat. Tuck and a tall, distinguished-looking, dark-haired man holding a briefcase were visible through the glass. The door opened and Tuck leaned inside.

“Detective O’Malley, Mr. Buchanan’s lawyer is here—his father, Alex Buchanan.”

ALEX GLANCED AROUND as if he were afraid to touch anything, then gingerly reclined against the wall. “Really, son? We have to talk in the men’s room? What was wrong with the interview room?”

Devlin finished checking the stalls, making sure no one else was there, before returning to stand by the sink in front of his father. “This is the only place I could be sure the police wouldn’t have any hidden cameras or recorders.” He rubbed his wrists where the cuffs had been, grateful his father had been able to get the cops to remove them.

Alex placed a hand on Devlin’s shoulder, his brow furrowed with concern. “I’m at a disadvantage here since you made me promise not to talk details with anyone else before speaking with you. All I know is that you’re under a forty-eight-hour hold because Lieutenant Drier thinks you might be involved in something. He thought I was crazy when I told him I didn’t want any details. What kind of trouble are you in?”

Devlin gently tugged his father’s arm down and held his hand in a firm grip. “We’ll get to that. First, I need to tell you something, Dad.”

Alex glanced at their hands, joined together, clearly puzzled by Devlin’s uncharacteristic display of affection. “You never call me ‘Dad.’ This is serious.”

“Yes. It is.”

“Well, since our entire family is back at the house, I know they’re all okay. So, whatever news you have can’t be that bad. Go ahead. Let’s get this over with so we can get out of this filthy bathroom and I can get you out of whatever trouble you’ve managed to get yourself into.”

In spite of Alex’s teasing tone, Devlin saw the worry in his eyes. Alex knew something was horribly wrong, but he couldn’t fathom what it might be. Devlin eased into his story, starting with hearing O’Malley’s call for help on the scanner while on the road to Alex’s house.

The whole time Devlin spoke, Alex listened intently. He seemed to weigh and sift through each of Devlin’s statements, as if warily waiting for that one piece of terrible news he instinctively knew was coming.

And then Devlin said the sentence he'd been dreading since the moment the coroner had held up the rings and bracelet with its little silver charms flashing in the sun like caution lights.

"They're performing some tests to be sure, but they feel confident they've identified the woman in that cell. Dad, it's Carolyn."

Devlin didn't have to tell him *which* Carolyn. The knowledge was in Alex's eyes, a tightening around the corners, the dilating of his pupils, the slight catch of his breath. His hand slid from Devlin's grasp and he stepped back, as if he could no longer bear to be touched, as if he could deny what he'd just heard if he could physically and mentally distance himself from everything and everyone around him.

The blood drained from his face, leaving it stark-white against the backdrop of blue-green tiles on the walls. He shoved his fingers through his hair, leaving the normally perfectly combed mass sticking up at odd angles. His broad shoulders slumped, making his meticulously tailored suit sag and bunch. Where moments ago a strong, virile, proud man stood as the patriarch of his family, ready to fight yet another battle to save one of his sons from whatever the world had thrown at him, he was now a shadow of his former self, beaten down, his eyes glassy, looking so lost it made Devlin's heart ache.

He took a step toward Alex, but Alex shook his head and somehow managed to dredge up the ghost of a smile. "Give me a minute, son. Alone," he whispered, his voice a raw rasp.

"You sure?"

He nodded, holding his smile, struggling to reassure his son, even though his heart was probably breaking.

Devlin fisted his hands at his sides to keep from reaching for his father. "I'll be right outside."

Alex nodded, still hanging on to his smile. Barely.

Devlin stepped into the hallway, letting the door close behind him. His police escort was leaning against the far wall. He straightened and looked at the bathroom door, his brow raised in question.

"My . . . lawyer . . . will be right out."

The policeman shrugged and crossed his arms, affecting a bored look.

Devlin leaned against the wall beside the door and settled in to wait. Breaking the news to his father had been more difficult than he'd expected,

and so had his interview with Emily. A difficult interview? No, more like impossible, disastrous, and potentially dangerous for both of them. He'd drastically underestimated her intelligence, her perceptiveness, and the depth of her insatiable curiosity. Even worse, he'd underestimated her effect on *him*.

From the moment she'd drawn her gun on him in the basement, she'd intrigued him. He was both enthralled and amused by her courage, spirit, and tenacity in the face of danger. And those sexy freckles, her pert, upturned nose, and that curvy little body had his blood running hot every time he was around her. Which meant, when he should have been focusing on her questions, instead he was remembering the feel of her breasts pressed against him and imagining doing a lot more than just lying on top of her. The longer the interview had gone on, the more unfocused and distracted he'd become, and the angrier he became—with himself. In the span of just a few hours, Emily had managed to become his Kryptonite. For both of their sakes, he needed to get as far away from her as possible, as quickly as possible. Which was exactly what he would do as soon as he got out of here.

He shook his head in disgust. Even when she wasn't right in front of him, she was distracting him. He shouldn't be thinking about her right now. He should be thinking about his father.

Devlin stepped to the bathroom door. He didn't want to intrude on Alex's privacy, but just remembering how pale his father had been earlier had Devlin on edge. He had to check on him. He carefully pulled the door open and peered inside.

Alex was still in the same spot where Devlin had left him, except that he wasn't standing anymore. Devlin's always-proper father was on his knees on the bathroom floor, rocking back and forth, tears silently flowing down his cheeks. And clutched between his hands in front of him, torn on one corner, faded and wrinkled from being carried in a wallet for decades, was a picture of the only woman he'd ever loved—Carolyn Buchanan.

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Chapter Six

AFTER SIGNING HER name beneath Alex's and Devlin's signatures, Emily slid the form across the counter to the property clerk. He filed the paperwork and then handed her a thick manila envelope. She frowned down at the package. Retrieving Devlin's personal belongings had taken longer than it took her boss to cave to Alex Buchanan's request to release his son.

She shoved the envelope into Devlin's hands. Judging by the way his eyes widened, she'd probably used more force than necessary. Not that she cared. She was far too annoyed at her boss's lack of a spine and her lost chance to question Devlin further to worry about being nice.

"There you go," she said. "Your wallet, phone, keys. Everything's there. Your truck's in the police lot on the north side of the building." Not waiting for his reply, she turned to his father. "Mr. Buchanan, your reputation as a powerful attorney with even more powerful friends appears to be justified. The DA demanded we release your son just as soon as my boss mentioned your name."

Alex gave her a kind smile with no hint of annoyance at her lack of tact. "It wasn't nearly that fast. I had to be brought up to speed on the details of the case first." He tapped the briefcase he was holding as if to remind her about the meeting he'd had with her and her boss, and the case documentation he'd manipulated Drier into giving him. After reading Hawley's brief statement taken at the scene, he'd immediately called the

district attorney. “I’m sure the DA wanted Devlin released because he agreed there was no compelling reason to keep him locked up.”

“I guess that’s a matter of opinion.” Emily crossed her arms.

Devlin slid his wallet into his back pocket and, like a model citizen, dutifully threw the manila envelope in the trash can beside the bank of elevators.

“If you have more questions for him,” Alex said, “please submit them in writing and I’ll arrange an interview. In my presence, of course.”

“Of course,” she spit out.

The sarcasm in her voice had Devlin stiffening and his father sending him a warning glance. Emily’s shoulders slumped. Even she was appalled at her behavior. It wasn’t right for her to take out her frustration on a man who’d just been given devastating news about the mother of at least two of his children—if she remembered the complicated family tree correctly.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Buchanan. You didn’t deserve that. I understand you’re just doing your job and acting in your son’s best interests. My sincere condolences, again, on the loss of your former wife.”

He took her hand in his and squeezed it gently, like she’d imagine a true gentleman might have done in a time when good manners were practiced far more frequently than they were today.

“No apology necessary, Detective.”

His expression told her nothing about what he was, or wasn’t, feeling. If it weren’t for the slight pallor beneath the man’s tan, Emily wouldn’t have suspected he’d just suffered a tragic blow. But from the concerned look on Devlin’s face as he watched his father, she sensed Alex might be near the breaking point.

“Now that Devlin’s free to go,” he said, “the next order of business will be to ensure that Carolyn’s . . . body . . . is positively identified and released for burial. I understand you’re certain it’s her, that it’s just a formality to perform tests. But I suppose dental records will be required. It’s too late to get them today, so I’ll visit her dentist first thing tomorrow.”

“I’d appreciate that,” she said. “But since it’s unlikely they’ll still have her records, perhaps we could cross match a DNA sample from one of her sons.”

“Of course, yes. I’ll call—”

“I’ll take care of it,” Devlin said. “Go home. You helped me today. Now it’s my turn to help you. I’ll give you an update later tonight.”

“Are you sure? I can arrange—”

“Everyone else is up at the house waiting for you. Let me take care of the details.”

His father nodded, looking relieved. “Thanks, son.” He patted Devlin on the shoulder as if he were a child instead of a grown man. “Detective O’Malley, I’ll call you tomorrow about those dental records.”

“Sure, thanks. Talk to you then.”

The elevator doors closed behind Alex.

“I may not remember all of your brother’s names or who’s related to whom,” Emily said. “But you made it very clear she wasn’t your mother. That leaves who for the DNA sample? Your younger twin brothers, Matt and Austin? They’re Carolyn’s biological children, right?”

He typed a text message on his phone. “Yes, and Pierce too. He’s one of my older brothers, the FBI agent.” He finished his message and slid his phone into his pants pocket. “Austin is already on his way into town because he was worried about Alex. He’ll be here soon and can give the sample. I’m guessing you keep the DNA kits in the morgue. I can go with you to get one.”

His sudden helpfulness had her studying him with suspicion.

“Yeah, I don’t think so,” she said. “The DA may have told us to let you go, but that doesn’t mean you aren’t still a person of interest in the investigation. Giving you access to the coroner so you can ask for details about the victims is so *not* going to happen.”

He crossed his arms. “What’s your angle here? Do you really think I had something to do with the abductions and murders?”

“Did you?”

“As I said before, I’ll be happy to supply alibis if you tell me how many victims there were and *when* each of them was killed.”

“I’m not sharing the number of victims. As for *when* they were killed, I don’t know that information yet.”

“Then let’s talk to the coroner and find out.”

She crossed her arms, mimicking his stance. “Nice try.”

He blew out a long breath. “Mrs. Hawley saw both of the perpetrators. One of them is dead. And she didn’t ID me at the scene as being the other

perp. That's a pretty good indication that I'm not involved, don't you think? What's the harm in letting a family member ask the coroner a couple of questions about his stepmother?"

"Aha. Then you admit that you want to speak to the coroner."

"Of course."

That was too easy. She narrowed her eyes, wondering what his game was. "'Perpetrator. ID me at the scene.' I still say you talk like a cop."

"I'm not a cop."

"Right. You're a 'tour guide.'" She made air quotes with her fingers.

His eyelids went to half-mast. "Has Hawley worked with a sketch artist yet?"

"Why?"

"Get the drawing and let's see if I resemble the guy you're looking for. You know, in case she was too overwrought at the scene to realize I'm the guy who tortured her for several days."

She rolled her eyes. "I'm sure you'd love for me to show you the sketch. That way you can try to figure out the suspect's identity and go after him yourself. Avenge your mother, assassinate the man who murdered her. That *is* what you do for EXIT Inc., right? Kill people?"

He let out a bark of laughter. "You just won't let that silly theory go, will you?"

His easy laughter surprised her. She'd expected the same cold stare that she'd received in the interview room when she'd first mentioned her assassin theory. She decided to throw more kerosene into the mix to see what happened.

"I ran your prints through IAFIS. That's the FBI's Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System, in case you don't remember *that* little detail from all those cop shows you watch. I wonder what I'll find out when the report comes back."

His jaw tightened. Why? Because he was worried about a fingerprint match? Or just because he was irritated with her?

"You're searching the FBI's database for my prints?"

"Yes. I am. And I'm going to call your boss at EXIT and ask some questions about that Montana trip. Does that concern you?" She watched him closely, but she couldn't detect any kind of reaction.

"Not in the least. I do wonder, though, why you're so curious about me."

He reclined against the counter behind him in a lazy pose, quirking his mouth in a sexy grin, instantly transforming himself from potential assassin to mouth-watering playboy. Emily found herself blinking at his chameleonlike ability to change right before her eyes. She couldn't quite catch her breath at the startling contrast, and how ridiculously appealing he looked right now.

His eyes practically undressed her as they raked her up and down. "If you want a . . . date, *Emily*, just ask."

Her name rolled off his tongue like a long, hot caress, making her body clench with need. *Good grief, this man was lethal.* She'd always been a sucker for the bad-boy type, probably because she'd always been a good girl—that whole opposites-attract kind of thing.

She cleared her throat and focused on a point above his eyes so she wouldn't get distracted again. "I assure you, *Devlin*, that my interest in you is entirely professional. Nothing more."

Liar, liar, pants definitely *on fire.*

"If that's true," he purred, leaning in close, "why are you blushing?"

His warm breath on her cheek sent a delicious shiver straight to her toes. The clean, masculine scent of him had her leaning closer. As soon as she realized what she was doing, she stiffened and took a much-needed step back.

His eyes practically smoldered as they followed her retreat. But there was something else there too, the shadow of another emotion. Confusion? Surprise? Had the raw attraction between them been as unexpected to him as it was to her?

She drew a shaky breath and plowed ahead, determined to get the conversation back on safer ground. "I submitted your prints to IAFIS because I don't trust you. *Tour guides* don't snap men's necks and calmly walk away."

His smile didn't falter. If anything, it widened, as if he thought she was amusing. Or maybe he'd decided on a new tactic, another weapon to use against her besides her traitorous hormones.

"You make it sound like I drive a trolley and recite tall tales to entertain tourists," he said, the laughter in his voice telling her he thought the idea was absurd. "I don't waste my . . . *talents* . . . on mundane things like that. I take wealthy, eccentric fools on expeditions to exotic, dangerous locations. I

use my considerable . . . *skills* . . . to ensure that they don't get killed in the process, and that they have a . . . *pleasurable* . . . time." His gaze dipped to her chest before he looked in her eyes again. "If you think I seem like more than just a tour guide, that's because *I am*."

His last two words were said in a deep, husky voice that had her curling her nails into her palms. Determined to stay on task and not to respond to the sexual innuendo layered in his reply, she raised a disbelieving brow. "You said earlier that your last tour assignment was in Montana. *Montana* is an exotic, dangerous location?"

"Any place can be exotic. It just depends on who you're with. And what you do."

She drew an unsteady breath and cleared her throat. "That was quite a lengthy speech about your talents and skills. Kind of makes me wonder if my questions about your occupation are hitting a sore spot. Am I getting close to whatever secret you're trying to hide?"

"Nah. I just didn't figure you'd want to . . . date . . . a simple tour guide. I had to make sure we were clear about my . . . considerable . . . assets."

Erotic images flashed through her mind, along with a nearly overwhelming desire to look down to judge his *considerable assets* for herself.

A muted cough off to her left had her eyes widening with dismay. She'd been so busy fending off Devlin's verbal foreplay that she'd forgotten where the two of them were standing—*in the squad room*. Half a dozen detectives were sitting at their desks, watching and listening to her and Devlin's conversation with obvious interest.

Her face flamed. She could well imagine the teasing she'd get later when they repeated Devlin's thinly veiled double entendres.

"Let's cut through the crap," she said through clenched teeth. "I'll admit that I don't believe you're *directly* involved in the abductions or murders. But indirectly you *are* involved. There are too many coincidences to ignore. And I know you're hiding something. I just don't know if what you're hiding is related to this case. Yet."

His brows rose, but his smile didn't falter.

Emily had never punched anyone before, but right now, half of her wanted to swing her fist and knock that arrogant grin off Devlin's mouth. Unfortunately, the other half of her wanted to do considerably more wicked

things with his mouth, and every other part of his anatomy. It was that other half that terrified her.

One of the elevators behind her dinged and the doors swished open. Her knees nearly buckled in relief as she whirled around and escaped inside.

"Wait here," she ordered, without risking another glance at his handsome and completely infuriating face. "I'll be right back with the DNA kit."

THE MOMENT THE elevator doors shut behind O'Malley, Devlin leaned back against the countertop for support. He wasn't a smoker, but he suddenly had a craving for a deep drag on a cigarette. Or a really long cold shower. Or both.

Trading sexual barbs with her had him hard and aching and cursing himself for a fool. What had he been thinking? That was the problem. All higher forms of brain activity had ceased to exist the moment he'd felt her generous breasts pressed against him earlier that day, her soft body covered by his.

He cursed again. *Focus, Buchanan. Focus*. He had a small window of opportunity to get what he needed—the coroner's notes. He figured that was probably his best place to start if he was going to find the man who'd killed Carolyn. O'Malley had been right. He wanted vengeance, but not for his mother—for his father. Alex needed closure. He needed a way to move past today's horrible events. Finding the man who was responsible for Carolyn's death was the best way Devlin knew to help his father do exactly that.

But, of course, that wasn't the only reason he wanted those notes.

He watched the display above the elevator. It went to the basement, without any stops in between. He leaned against the property counter, his legs stretched out in front of him, pretending boredom until the detectives lost interest and turned their attention to their work. As soon as no one was looking, he hurried to the door beside the elevators marked STAIRS.

He jogged down three flights to the basement. A long, well-lit hall ran the length of the floor. After checking the few doors near the stairs and elevator, confirming they were storage rooms, he followed the antiseptic

smell toward the other end of the hallway. He walked boldly, smiling at and greeting the few people he passed as if he had every right to be there. They ignored him. He'd learned long ago that hiding in plain sight worked far better, in most situations, than ducking into doorways and thereby drawing suspicion.

Once he reached the morgue, he waited a few seconds to make sure no one was in the outer office, then slipped inside. There was a small catacomb of rooms but only one that interested him—the autopsy room, which appeared to be deserted.

Except for the three skeletons lying on steel tables waiting to be autopsied.

It didn't take much of a leap in logic to conclude that all of the skeletons were from the basement where he'd been earlier. Which meant the killer had abducted seven victims so far that they knew of—Hawley, these skeletons, and the three women Hawley said were being held with her. But Devlin was interested in only one particular victim—his stepmother.

The muted sound of voices carried in from one of the other rooms. O'Malley and Dr. Kennerly. She was talking to him about the DNA kit. Devlin pulled his cell phone out and hurried to the desk over by the wall. There were several sheets of paper lying on top. He thumbed through them until he found a page with *Buchanan* across the top, then started snapping pictures.

He took pictures of as many of the pages as he could before the sound of footsteps and O'Malley's voice had him rushing out of the room. He took the stairs again, up only one flight this time. After cracking the door and making sure no one was watching, he stepped into the main lobby of the police station.

BY THE TIME Emily located Devlin—in the lobby—she was half-tempted to shoot the man. No one in the squad room remembered him leaving, so she'd gone floor by floor to see if he was snooping around where he shouldn't be. By the time it occurred to her to check the lobby, she was out of breath and out of patience. Now, as she stepped out of the elevator and saw him

smiling and laughing, sitting beside a young man in a wheelchair, her temper was ready to explode.

Devlin glanced up as she reached them, his smile widening as if he were pleased to see her.

“Detective O’Malley, I hope you weren’t worried about me. I got a call that my brother was here, so I hurried down. I was going to ask the desk clerk to tell you where I was, but I forgot. I haven’t been home in a while and we’re catching up. I hope I didn’t worry you.”

The angelic look on his face had her anger fading and guilt taking its place. He did seem genuinely happy to see his brother. And his story sounded plausible. Maybe he was telling the truth.

“No problem.” She held her hand out to the man in the wheelchair, who was nearly as handsome as Devlin, with equally dark hair. But instead of dark gray eyes, his were blue, like his father’s. And he was several years younger than Devlin—perhaps in his mid-twenties. “I’m Detective Emily O’Malley,” she said, shaking his hand.

“Austin Buchanan. You weren’t lying, Devil. She’s *very* pretty.”

“Just how does one go about getting the nickname Devil?”

Devlin shrugged. “I never have understood why my brothers call me that. I was a perfect child growing up.”

Austin rolled his eyes. “We call him that because he never met a sin he didn’t like, or a pretty woman he didn’t try to—”

Devlin cuffed his brother on the shoulder. “I’m sure Detective O’Malley has more important things to do than hear about my sordid past.”

“Whatever.” Austin pointed at the small box Emily was holding. “If that’s the DNA kit to prove the skeleton belongs to the *egg donor*, let’s get this over with. I’ve got a T-bone waiting for me back home. What do I have to do? Pee in a cup or something?”

Her mouth dropped open at Austin’s reply.

Devlin gave her a pained smile. “Austin’s a bit abrupt, and crass. Takes some getting used to. My brothers think it’s a side effect of his neurological disorder, because of the stress of not knowing until he wakes up every morning whether he’ll be in a wheelchair that day or able to walk just fine. But me, I think it’s more of a personality disorder. He’s just naturally a jerk.”

Austin shot his brother an aggravated look.

Emily couldn’t help but notice the concern that lent an edge to Devlin’s voice as he made excuses for his brother’s behavior. It was obvious he cared about Austin and didn’t want her to think badly of him.

“No problem. Um, no, Austin, no need to . . . fill a cup. I just swab the inside of your mouth. I’m curious, though. You don’t seem upset that your . . . mother . . . was killed.”

“Why would I be? She ditched my dad when I was four. I don’t even remember her.” He narrowed his eyes. “Devil didn’t tell you anything about her and how we’re all related?”

“Detective O’Malley isn’t interested in—”

Emily cuffed Devlin on the arm, just like he’d done to Austin.

He was so surprised he actually sputtered.

She pulled a chair over to his brother and sat down. She hoped she’d finally found an ally who’d give her the background she needed on the Buchanans.

“He told me a little, but not much. Any information you can give me on your family and their relationship with Carolyn would be helpful to our investigation,” she said. “Perhaps you can begin with the whole who’s-related-to-whom thing again. I don’t have it straight just yet. And tell me their occupations too.”

“Fine,” Austin said, “but we’ll have to make it quick. You’ve got exactly ten minutes and I’m out of here. That includes the time it takes for the DNA sample.”

What was it with these Buchanans and their time limits on questions? She pulled her cell phone out and punched up her note-taking app. “Ready when you are.”

Devlin crossed his arms, not looking happy with this turn of events. But he didn’t try to interfere.

A handful of minutes later, Austin asked, “Did you get all that? The family background you wanted?”

“Yes, yes. I think I did. Basically, your mother married a much older man who already had a son from his prior marriage, your oldest brother, Braedon—who owns and operates B&B Construction now. When Carolyn’s husband died, she took Braedon with her, remarried, had a son with that husband. That was, um—”

“My second oldest brother, Pierce. FBI agent here in Savannah. And then she married another old geezer—”

Devlin punched him in the arm.

Austin punched him back. “He *was* an old geezer. Devlin’s bio dad by a prior marriage. He died too, which sent Carolyn out on the hunt for another sucker.”

Devlin appeared to be gritting his teeth. He obviously didn’t like sharing the intimate details of his family history with her. Either that or he didn’t care for Austin’s commentary.

Austin continued, not a bit concerned about his brother’s discomfort. “When Carolyn married Alex, she brought Braedon, Pierce, and Devlin with her, then had me and Matt.”

“Right, right. Got it. And Matt’s the private investigator?”

“Right. He’s the entrepreneur of the family too. Invents all kinds of sh __”

“Austin,” Devlin warned.

Austin grinned and winked at Emily. “Devlin’s like an old hen, just like dad. Always worried about my manners.” He tilted his head. “He’s not really all that old. He’s thirty-four. And he’s single. Did I mention he likes brunettes? Of course he pretty much likes *all* women, but still, he—”

“Shut up,” Devlin growled.

Austin winked again, enjoying teasing his brother.

Emily felt her face flush hot. She refused to look at either of the men, focusing instead on her notes. “So, Austin—you, Matt, and Pierce are blood related to Carolyn. But only you and Matt are blood related to Alex. And Braedon and Devil—I mean Devlin—aren’t blood related to anyone else in the family?”

“Bingo.”

“Your mother didn’t seem to have very good luck with keeping her husbands alive. Seems rather . . . unfortunate.”

“Suspicious, you mean?”

She laughed at his lack of tact. “Well, yes, actually.”

“Yeah, a few of us wondered about that over the years. When Pierce became an FBI agent, he looked into it and concluded it was just bad luck. Or maybe she purposely chose older men with health problems, hoping they’d die and leave her their estates, until she met my dad at least. There’s

nothing to support that she was a black widow or anything. She certainly never made it rich."

Emily studied him closely. "You seem remarkably okay with all of this. It doesn't bother you that your mother abandoned all of you and went from husband to husband the way she did?"

He leaned forward in his wheelchair. "Detective, I thank God every day that she left us. Alex is the best father that I could have hoped for. And I'm grateful for every one of my brothers, even him." He aimed a thumb at Devlin, who rolled his eyes. "No telling what kind of life we might have had if she'd hung around. Honestly, I'm relieved to close the door on the whole thing. Maybe if Alex knows that Carolyn is dead, he can finally move on and find someone else. He deserves that. Can we do the swab now?"

His abrupt change of topic threw her off guard. She closed her phone app and grabbed the box Dr. Kennerly had given her. "Yes, of course. I'll take care of that right away."

As soon as Devlin and Austin headed out of the lobby, Emily headed up to her desk to ship the DNA kit to the state lab. When she stepped out of the elevator, Tuck motioned to her from across the squad room. Two other detectives were with him, and they were all looking at the computer monitor on Tuck's desk. From the excitement on their faces, she knew something big must have happened.

Since Tuck's desk was beside hers, she set the DNA kit on top of her own desk before joining the others.

"What are we looking at?" she asked.

Tuck waved toward one of the other detectives. "This genius used the sex, height, and approximate age information from Kennerly's preliminary autopsy notes to look for a match in the missing persons report database—which, I might add, has digital copies of dental records for each missing person to assist with identification. This other genius was assigned to find Carolyn Buchanan's last known address." He picked up a folder on his desk and flipped it open to reveal a drawing of a young woman. "And I had the fun assignment of sitting with Hawley while she worked with the sketch artist. While you spent the past hour flirting with Devlin Buchanan, the rest of us were getting a boatload of work done."

The other detectives snickered. Emily narrowed her eyes in warning until they sobered. “Say that to me one more time, Tuck. Don’t be surprised when you end up with your ass on the floor.”

He held up his hands in surrender. “All right, all right. I couldn’t resist. Here”—he pointed to the screen—“take a look at what we’ve found.”

She leaned over his shoulder and read the relevant parts of the report on the screen as he rolled the cursor over them. Then he scrolled down and pointed. She blinked and reread the conclusion.

“Wait, are you sure about this?”

“Yep. Kennerly was just up here and made it official. You must have just missed him.” He crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. “Now who’s the amazingly fast and brilliant detective on the team?”

She waved to the two men standing behind him. “These guys.”

The detectives laughed and headed back to their own desks. Tuck shot her an irritated look. “Admit it. For once, while you were off chasing a dead end, the rest of us were chasing down real leads.”

She sat in her chair and eyed the DNA kit. “I admit it. You did good. Really good. All of you.”

“And?”

“And you’re an amazing, fast, brilliant detective. There. Happy?”

He hooked his hands behind his head and leaned back in his chair. “Yep. And since you’ve been kind enough to stroke my ego, I’m going to do something for you. Next time your family of doctors calls to rub their accomplishments in your face, I’ll get on the phone and brag about you so much that they’ll have no choice but to finally accept your chosen career path.”

“Yeah, *that’s* never going to happen. But just to keep you straight, in case you ever do talk to them, only my dad and my oldest brother are doctors. Mom’s a nurse. The others are an EMT and a physical therapist.”

“Wait.” He held up his fingers. “Dad, mom, and only three siblings. I thought you had four.”

“I do. My baby sister is a housewife.” Without looking at him, she held up a hand to stop him. “Before you say it, she also won the Nashville Volunteer of the Year award.”

“Oh, please. I’m sure she didn’t do anything all that spectacular. Winning the award could just be a fluke.”

“Three years in a row?”

“Ouch.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m not in competition with them.”

He snorted.

She ignored him and picked up the DNA kit. “Guess we don’t need this anymore.” She dropped it in the wastebasket.

“Who gets to break the news to the Buchanans?” he asked, his teasing tone gone.

“I will,” Emily said. “Just as soon as I make a call. It’s been on my mind, and I want to call before it gets too late today.” The windows on the other side of the room were growing dark as night fell. “If it isn’t already too late.” She pulled the phone closer to her.

“Too late for what?”

“To call EXIT Incorporated. Colorado’s three hours behind us, right?”

“Two. What is EXIT?”

“I’ll explain later. But for now, let’s just say that I’m not convinced I was chasing a dead end when I interviewed Devlin Buchanan. He may not be the one who abducted and killed those women, but he’s definitely hiding something, something that links him to the crimes. And I’m going to find out exactly what that is.”

DEVLIN WAS ABOUT to get into his truck in the police lot when Austin rolled down the passenger window of his van and called him over. Devlin leaned into the opening. “What’s up?”

“You sure you don’t want me to wait for you?” Austin asked.

“I’m sure. Go home and eat that steak you’ve been whining about. I have to return a call that came in while I was in Montana. I’ll be just a few minutes behind you.”

“Don’t take too long. I can’t guarantee your steak will be waiting for you.” Austin grinned good-naturedly and backed out of his spot.

Devlin hopped in his truck and waited until his youngest brother was heading down the road before punching in his boss’s number. Since he hadn’t planned on calling Cyprian when he’d left the house, he didn’t have one of his satellite encryption phones whose numbers were registered with

EXIT with him. Those phones ensured no one could pick up their conversation off the airwaves. Since he wasn't calling from one of those phones, Cyprian wouldn't recognize the number on caller ID. Devlin would have to identify himself by punching in a special code. And even then, they'd both have to be careful what they said, knowing the line wasn't secure.

When the line clicked, he typed in his code.

"Devlin," Cyprian's smooth, cultured voice came on the line. "You're supposed to be taking it easy for a few days between tours. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

So far, so good. Cyprian didn't sound upset. Maybe news of this afternoon's incident hadn't reached him.

"There've been a few hiccups here. I was a witness to a crime. Had to answer a few questions. But that's over now. It's handled."

A pause, then, "Hiccups. Pesky little things. But as long as you're certain it's handled, I've got no cause to worry. Correct?"

"Correct. No cause at all, sir. Detective Emily O'Malley may call EXIT to verify details of the Montana tour with the Rands. But that's the end of it."

"I'm sure human resources will take care of the call, or forward her to one of our public relations specialists. Shouldn't be a problem. Anything else I should be aware of?"

This was where it got tricky. Cyprian wouldn't want Devlin looking into Carolyn's murder. He wouldn't want anyone from EXIT Inc. caught up in a police investigation. Devlin understood the concerns. It was necessary to insulate EXIT Inc. from all suspicion. But this was something Devlin couldn't let go. He wanted closure for his father. And he didn't have time to wait for the police to methodically cross and dot their t's and i's on their way to solving the case. He needed those autopsy notes. They might give him a clue, a starting place to search for Carolyn's killer.

"No, sir, there's nothing else you need to be aware of. That's it. Oh, wait, there is one more thing; a request, actually," he added, trying to sound nonchalant. "It's been quite a while since I've had any real time to spend with my family, and I've got a young niece I've hardly seen since she was born. Is there any chance I could take a week of vacation before reporting in for another assignment?"

Another pause. “Of course, of course. You’ve got plenty of time built up. I’ve got a sweet, midwestern couple with a bucket list, and they insist on the best guide I’ve got. Naturally, I recommended you. But I can reassign them. No worries.”

Midwestern couple. More likely a Middle-Eastern contact with something far different than a bucket list in mind. “Sounds great, sir. I appreciate it.”

“Hold on a second. My assistant is trying to call me on the other line.” A few moments later, he came back on the line. “Sorry about that. Looks like your detective already tracked me down through human resources. She must be a real bulldog to have gotten through several departments and then to get my secretary to put her through directly to the top.”

The blood drained from Devlin’s face, leaving him cold. “You’re going to speak to her yourself?”

“I’m always happy to assist law enforcement. She wants to speak to the CEO, she’ll speak to him. She’s on the other line. I don’t want to keep her waiting. Enjoy your vacation.”

The line clicked. Devlin lowered his phone and stared at the brick wall of the police station. O’Malley was speaking to his boss, the man who ran the public side of the organization, as well as the secret side. That wasn’t something Devlin had expected. He’d figured she would be schmoozed by one of the lower-level assistants and that would be the end of it. Once again, she’d surprised him.

And not in a good way.

What would she say to Cyprian? She wouldn’t say something crazy, like bringing up her assassin theory. Would she? If she did, would Cyprian see it for what it was, a detective with a wild hunch based on nothing but conjecture? Or would he think her theory was based on fact, which could only mean that Devlin had caved during the interview and betrayed his boss and everyone he worked with?

If Devlin *had* talked, he would have used the term *enforcer*, his actual job title. Enforcer was somewhat synonymous with agent at one of the alphabet agencies like the CIA or FBI, but without the shackles of laws and political policies to tie him down. The assassin role was only part of what he did, and only when absolutely necessary. Most of his peers called him “*The* Enforcer” because he was the one called upon to hunt down other

enforcers if they went rogue—off the grid, defying orders—and became a danger to EXIT and the general public. Since O'Malley wouldn't have known to call him an enforcer when she spoke to his boss, wouldn't that clue Cyprian in that she was reaching? Guessing? What if it didn't? What if he believed her?

The potential consequences of *that* had him swearing every curse word he knew, in several languages.

He believed in what the company stood for, in what he did. The money was incredible. He regularly pulled in seven figures in any given year. And he had to admit that had been part of the attraction when he'd joined. But he couldn't do what he did if he didn't feel deeply that what he was doing mattered. He *saved* lives with the work he performed. Last year alone, he and his fellow enforcers had prevented dozens of terrorist attacks that would have killed hundreds, if not thousands, of innocent people in half a dozen domestic cities, not to mention the attacks they'd foiled in foreign countries. And fighting terrorism was only one small aspect of his work for EXIT. So the idea that his boss might even consider that Devlin would ever betray his fellow enforcers was ridiculous. Wasn't it? Right now, he didn't know what to think.

He opened the photo app on his phone and zoomed in on the notes from the morgue. Kennerly had given an extremely detailed, somewhat clinical assessment of each prison cell and the condition of the skeletons that were found in them. Most of it was useless to Devlin and didn't offer him any clues. But at least now he knew the victims were all female, between the ages of thirty and forty. That struck him as odd, given that Hawley seemed much younger, probably barely in her twenties. If the victims were from the same killer, wouldn't they be in the same age range? It seemed like he'd heard something like that about serial killers—if that's what this was. Too bad he couldn't ask his brother Pierce for his opinion. Pierce used to hunt serial killers for the FBI before he burned out on violent crimes and chose to work on cases that wouldn't haunt him every night.

Devlin filed the information about Hawley away in case it was a clue that could help him in the future. Unfortunately, right now, even after reading Kennerly's notes, he had exactly what he'd started with—absolutely nothing—except the new concern about what O'Malley was saying to Cyprian.

He sat in his truck for a few more minutes, debating his next move. But without more information, there seemed to be only one move that made sense. Stick to routine, do what was expected so he didn’t raise any red flags. Which meant he’d go to Alex’s house and pretend everything was fine, that he didn’t have any reason to be worried, that he was happy and normal like everyone else. He’d been pretending that for years. What was one more night?

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Chapter Seven

FRIDAY NIGHTS AT the Buchanan home base—the sprawling one-story ranch house where Alex and Austin lived—were usually a time of laughter and fun. No matter what each of the family members was doing during the week, it was understood that Friday nights belonged to their father. Unless there was a damn good excuse, each son was expected to be at Alex's house to grill steaks on the back deck.

Too often these days, the excuses were racking up. Obligations at work or a teething toddler, in Pierce's case, meant that only half the family was there on most Friday nights. But tonight everyone was in attendance. It should have been a night of good food and shared stories, especially since twelve-month-old Nikki was already settled in her port-a-crib in one of the guest rooms. But the gruesome discovery in the basement of an abandoned house had put a dark pall over the entire gathering.

Alex had insisted everything proceed as usual, except that he'd held the dinner hour to wait for Austin and Devlin to get back from the police station. As Devlin sat at the long dining room table and took a bite of steak, he glanced at Alex at the head of the table. Pierce's wife, Madison, tried to keep up a normal conversation with Matt's new bride, Tessa. But Alex resisted any attempts to draw him into the exchange. He was silent, his eyes downcast, his plate of food untouched.

Devlin washed down a half-chewed piece of steak with a healthy swallow from his beer bottle. Today called for something much stronger

than beer, but Alex would frown on that. Devlin leaned toward his oldest brother, Braedon, sitting on his left.

“Has he been like that since he got home?” Devlin whispered.

“Pretty much. He explained what had happened at the police station, and about those poor women you found in that basement, and that you saved that young mother from her abductor.” He lightly squeezed Devlin’s shoulder and gave him a crisp nod, as if to thank him for being a hero.

Devlin returned his nod, feeling like a total hypocrite as he did so.

“After that,” Braedon continued, “Alex announced dinner would wait until you and Austin got here. But he hasn’t said much of anything else since.”

In spite of Austin’s quip to O’Malley about wanting to get back to his food, he hadn’t eaten any more of his steak than his father. Instead, he stared at Alex, his mouth getting tighter and tighter. He finally shook his head and dropped his fork to his plate with a loud clatter, startling Tessa beside him.

Alex’s head shot up and he looked questioningly at his youngest son.

“I don’t get it,” Austin said. “Why are you so depressed about this? She dumped you. She dumped all of us. It’s been twenty-one freaking years, Dad. Get over it already.”

Devlin rose from his chair, prepared to haul his brother out of the dining room and kick his ass, wheelchair or not.

Alex aimed a stern look at him. Devlin hesitated, but respect for his father had him sitting back down.

“That’s a fair question.” Alex’s deep-blue gaze landed on each of them before returning to Austin. “I loved your mother deeply. For eight years we built a life together, and my love for her grew every day. She may have stopped loving me by the end of our marriage, but that didn’t change *my* feelings for her. It might seem silly to you, but I’d always hoped that she would finally find the right person for her, someone who could soothe her troubled spirit, make her happy. All these years I kidded myself with the fantasy that she was happy. And now, to find out she was . . .” His throat worked as he swallowed. “I’m grieving, son. Not for my loss, or yours, or even for your brothers’. I’m grieving for how Carolyn must have suffered. No matter what she did to you, to me, to us, she didn’t deserve to be locked up like an animal and tortured and . . . killed. *That’s* why I’m sad. The

woman I loved was murdered. And for the first time, my vow of ‘till death do us part’ really hits home.” He pushed back from the table and stood, his eyes suspiciously bright and watery. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got a devil of a headache and am going to go lie down.”

After Alex disappeared down the long hallway, everyone turned an accusing glare at Austin.

He blinked. “What?”

“You’re doing the dishes.” Matt rose from his seat on Austin’s left. “By yourself.”

Austin’s brows drew down, but he didn’t argue as everyone else left the dining room, not even bothering to clear their dishes as they normally would.

Devlin took pity on his brother and helped him clear the table and clean the kitchen while the others gathered in the family room. They worked in companionable silence together, Devlin rinsing the dishes in the sink and handing them to Austin to load in the dishwasher. This wasn’t the first time they’d ended up helping each other with chores. In spite of their nine-year age difference, the two of them had always been close. It wasn’t that way with his other brothers, not like with Austin.

Devlin had very few memories of life before becoming a Buchanan, but the few he had weren’t good. His mother had died when he was three. His father married Carolyn just a few months later. She’d brought Braedon and Pierce with her from prior marriages, but they were thirteen and nine. He couldn’t blame them for not wanting to play with a four-year-old. But he’d never felt more alone.

A year later, his father was dead and Carolyn had married Alex. His new dad did everything he could to make Devlin feel loved and wanted, but Devlin resisted Alex’s efforts for years. He supposed he was trying to protect himself for when Alex died, or left, like his other parents had done. He assumed Carolyn would end up carting him off to a new father, and he’d have to start all over again. When that didn’t happen, he’d slowly begun to warm up to Alex. It had taken years for him to feel like part of the family, and to become friends with his older brothers. But he’d never truly fit in, and that feeling had followed him through school, and later to college. It was one of the reasons he’d been such a good candidate when EXIT offered him a deal he couldn’t refuse.

Later, after the twins were born and Austin faced physical challenges no child should ever have to face, Austin developed the sarcastic, defensive shell that he showed the world. But Devlin could see the same hurt inside his brother that was inside him. Neither of them felt like they belonged, and because of that, he and his little brother had become fast friends. Even to this day, if Austin needed someone to confide in, it was usually Devlin he called.

"I don't understand how he could have loved the egg donor this much." Austin's words broke through Devlin's thoughts, yanking him back to the present. Since Austin had spoken so quietly, Devlin assumed he hadn't meant to say them out loud, so he didn't respond.

Austin's derogatory label for his mother didn't fool Devlin. Growing up with significant health issues had given Austin a lot of time to sit and think and resent his mother for not being there when he needed her most. He had probably suffered just as much as Alex because of Carolyn's abandonment.

No, that wasn't true. No one could have suffered as much as Alex, not if he truly loved Carolyn. Devlin knew that for a fact because he'd loved that deeply once, a long time ago. And since Arianna's death, he'd never been the same either.

Pierce and Braedon had both found out about her during an impromptu visit to Devlin's dorm during his junior year. And since he'd just asked her to marry him, he'd sworn them to secrecy, preferring to introduce her to the family and make the announcement at the end of the semester. He was worried that his father wouldn't approve of him getting married because he still had a year left in college. So he'd wanted to wait until he could introduce her to Alex in person, figuring his father would have to love her as much as he did and would accept the engagement. He needed his father to understand that Arianna wasn't interfering with his life. She *was* his life.

Until her tragic death a month later.

Austin swatted him on the shoulder with a dish towel. "What are *you* moping about?"

Devlin locked away his thoughts about his former fiancée and forced a smile. "Women. What's that saying? Can't live with them or without them?"

Austin snorted. "Like you've ever had a problem in that department. Every time you visited me in college, all those sexy sorority girls I was

trying so hard to get to notice *me* fell all over themselves trying to get *you* to notice *them*. I dreaded every one of your visits." He shook his head in disgust, but his grin told Devlin he was teasing. Mostly.

"That was a long time ago. I'm much more mature now. I've learned to appreciate women and take things much slower."

Austin gave him a droll look. "It was only three years ago. And you're obviously still a ladies' man. Every time I've been at your house you've had a different woman coming out of the bedroom."

Ladies' man. He'd earned that reputation, he supposed. He'd gone on a binge of self-destruction after Arianna's death. But he'd quickly realized the key to survival wasn't drowning his sorrows in whiskey or a beautiful woman. The key was to keep himself so busy with work that he didn't have time to think about what he'd lost.

Still, the ladies' man label had stuck. And he'd found it useful to keep the illusion alive. It kept Braedon and Pierce from worrying about him and the darkness that had nearly consumed him after Arianna's death. It also kept his family from expecting more of him. The fact that he supposedly made a living taking wealthy people on tours to exotic locations served only to enhance his reputation of not taking life seriously. It was his cover, his way of keeping his family from asking questions he didn't want to answer. They all thought he was shallow and immature. Sometimes that stung. But keeping his family in the dark was how he protected them, so it was worth the occasional humiliation.

He maintained a Cheshire cat grin, as if secretly thinking about all his conquests. "You're making that up," he teased. "When's the last time you were at my house?"

"Last summer. And I still remember the sweet little dish you had that time—brunette, leggy, tiny waist, great big—"

"Shut up." This time Devlin was the one to snap a dish towel against his brother's shoulder.

"What was her name? Shandra? Sharon? Sherry?"

Devlin laughed, genuinely amused that his little brother was describing an enforcer as if she were a bimbo. In truth, they'd been in the middle of planning a joint operation when Austin had shown up. After seeing his brother on the security cameras outside, Devlin had suggested that Shannon pretend to be his girlfriend to explain her presence and, he hoped, to

encourage his brother not to stay very long. She'd thrown herself into the role, surprising both Austin and Devlin when she'd stepped out of his bedroom naked, pretending shock and embarrassment when she'd discovered Austin was there.

The ploy had worked. Austin was gone within a minute, his face a fiery red even while he stared unabashedly. Not that Devlin could blame him. He'd stared his fill as well, and he and Shannon had ended up sharing a lot more than mission plans after his brother left. But they'd both known it was just for the night; no strings, no promises. And he hadn't seen her since. Last he'd heard, she'd gone deep undercover on a mission. She could be anywhere in the world right now.

"Her name was Shannon Fisher, and I'm sure she'd resent being called a 'sweet little dish.' She's an intelligent woman who runs her own small business." He repeated the fake cover she'd used last summer.

"But you're probably not dating her anymore." Austin wheeled around to face him. "And like all of the women you date, you never brought her home to meet Dad. What was wrong with this one? She looked pretty close to perfect to me."

Devlin shoved away from the countertop. "I should have made you clean the kitchen by yourself."

Austin followed him to the kitchen archway. Devlin didn't relish the additional teasing his little brother would probably dose out for the next half hour about all the women Devlin had "enjoyed" through the years.

The doorbell rang just as he stepped into the foyer. He glanced at his brother in surprise. Alex's property was a good distance from Savannah, a several-hundred-acre spread without any neighbors close by. No one just "stopped by."

The doorbell rang again.

"Someone gonna get that before they wake Alex?" Braedon called out from the family room.

"I've got it." Devlin looked through the peephole and swore.

"What's wrong? Who is it?" Austin asked.

Devlin swung the door open and braced his hands on the door frame. "O'Malley, haven't you done enough damage for one day? Couldn't you have waited until tomorrow?"

She clasped a thick manila folder to her chest, which of course sent Devlin's thoughts down the lusty path of self-destruction again. Maybe he should try to get her into bed just so he could work her out of his system. One thing was for sure—he didn't want her inside the house. She was enough of a distraction in his thoughts without having to deal with her in person.

"I'm sorry. Truly I am," she said. "But I couldn't risk your family hearing about this secondhand. The lieutenant is already feeling pressure on this case even though it's only a handful of hours old. He's holding a press conference in the morning. So, no, this couldn't wait."

"*What* couldn't wait?" Austin asked.

When Devlin didn't move to let O'Malley inside, she shot him an exasperated look.

"May I please come in?" she asked.

He tried not to. He really tried. But his gaze dipped down to those perfect, heavy breasts, modestly covered by her plain white button-down blouse. For the tiniest of moments he allowed his gaze to linger, to caress her curves, to trace the shadow that hinted at the hidden cleavage. To his dismay, he started to harden.

He wrenched his gaze up to her face and glared at her. "You're not setting foot in this house without a warrant or a damn good reason."

She returned his glare without a hint of fear or respect for the fact that he towered over her both in height and muscle mass. She was feisty, stubborn, and a real pain in the ass. Which made him want her only more.

"How about this for a reason?" she snapped. "The body in the morgue is *not* your stepmother."

EMILY TRIED TO pay attention while Devlin made the introductions, but after meeting his four very tall, handsome, impressive-looking brothers—including Austin, even if he was hampered by a wheelchair—she couldn't remember which name went with which brother. Only two of the Buchanan men were married, which made it easy for Emily to remember the women's names. Tessa was the green-eyed, auburn-haired FBI agent on the same couch as Emily. Tessa's husband sat between them. On the opposite couch,

the tiny, black-haired beauty named Madison, sat beside her husband. Devlin sat beside him.

Austin's wheelchair was a few feet from Emily. The last brother—she thought his name might be Braedon—sat alone on the couch that made up the middle of the U-shaped arrangement. But there was one person noticeably absent.

"Where's Mr. Buchanan?" When all the men looked her way, she realized how foolish that question had been. "I meant your father, Alex. Is he home?"

"He's here," Devlin said.

She waited, but he didn't seem inclined to explain further. "He needs to be here for this discussion."

He waved his hand to encompass the rest of the family. "We'll decide what to tell him after we hear you out."

His reticence was understandable after everything that had happened, so she forced back her irritation. Still, Alex needed to be here. "It's important that your father—"

"You said Carolyn isn't the woman in the morgue," Austin said, wheeling right up to the end of the couch. "I thought DNA tests took days or weeks to come back. How can you change your mind so fast? You were sure it was her earlier."

The anger in his voice surprised her, especially given his lack of emotion at the station when he'd learned his mother might have been murdered. But as she noted the anguish on his face now, and the concern mirrored in Devlin's, she realized the hurt that Carolyn Buchanan had inflicted on this family ran much deeper than she'd thought. They weren't cold and unfeeling. Quite the opposite. The survivors—the ones left behind when Carolyn had abandoned them years ago—had formed a close-knit family, and the common emotions they shared were love and concern for one another and their father.

But Austin's hurt went deeper. She could see that by the spark of hope in his eyes. He thought his mother was still alive. What had she done? She'd been here only a few minutes and already she'd bungled things. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt these people again.

"O'Malley." Devlin's deep voice broke into her thoughts.

Relief swept through her at the excuse to look away from Austin's tortured gaze. Devlin looked at her with none of the anger, condemnation, or even hope that had been in his brother's eyes. Instead, he gave her a small smile of encouragement.

"Whatever you have to tell us, just say it."

She gave him a grateful nod. "Thank you. On behalf of my entire department, I'd like to express our deepest apologies to your family. We made a terrible mistake saying Carolyn was one of the victims in that basement. We know now that she wasn't. But," she said, forcing herself to be brave and looking at Austin as she broke the rest of the bad news, "that doesn't mean she's alive. I'm sorry to tell you this, but she died a few months ago in a single-car accident. That's why we don't have to test the DNA."

Austin's face paled, confirming that she'd been right—he'd been holding out hope that his mother was still alive. "Are you sure this time?" he accused.

"Half the department is working on this case because of the urgency to find the missing women before it's too late. We've found out quite a bit in the last few hours. One of the detectives was assigned to find Carolyn's last known address, which was in a small town about an hour away. And when he went there, he spoke to the person still living in the home—her *husband*—who told us about the accident. We verified the information through local police records. We even pulled her death certificate, which was under her married name—the reason it didn't come up in the routine search we performed earlier today. We did everything right this time, got all the facts together before I came out here. So, yes, Austin, I'm certain that Carolyn is gone. I'm so sorry."

He stared at her for a moment. Then he shrugged and looked away, as if he didn't care. But Emily wasn't fooled. She doubted anyone else in the room was either.

"What about the jewelry?" Devlin asked, drawing her attention back to him. "Did you ask her husband about that?"

"Yes. He told us it was reported stolen four months ago, just a few months before the car crash. Carolyn is the one who reported it. Our detective worked with the local police to verify that as well."

“Are there any leads on who stole the jewelry?” Devlin asked. “It could have been the killer. But it also could have been a petty thief who pawned it, and the killer acquired the jewelry that way.”

“Those are both theories we’re considering. We haven’t had time to look into them yet.”

On the couch beside Emily, Austin’s identical twin edged forward. His poise, and calm, friendly demeanor, gave the impression he was much older than Austin.

“I’m Matt,” he reminded her. “I’m a private investigator. Do you mind if I ask a few questions?”

“Not at all. Go ahead.”

“I’d be surprised if Carolyn wore that jewelry in public, since it was specific to this family. The charm bracelet would have made friends or co-workers curious.”

“You’re right. Her husband said she never wore the jewelry.”

“Was anything else stolen?” That question came from his wife, Tessa.

Emily couldn’t help but smile. It was obviously impossible for a family of FBI agents and PIs to allow her to say what she’d come here to say without barraging her with questions.

“Just jewelry—the items you know about and a handful of others.”

“Anything expensive?” Tessa continued.

She shrugged. “Expensive enough. Total value was just under six thousand dollars.”

Matt nodded, as if absorbing that information. “So the thief, or thieves, took the jewelry but nothing else. I assume there would have been other items of value in the home.”

“Yes, and before you ask, we’ve already concluded the theft doesn’t seem typical. If other jewelry hadn’t also been stolen, I’d suspect someone had specifically gone looking for those particular pieces. Then again, the thief could have taken the additional pieces to make sure no one realized he was specifically targeting any of it.” She turned her gaze to Devlin. “And we can’t ignore the tie-in at the murder scene this morning—that one of Carolyn’s sons just happened upon that basement where his stepmother’s jewelry had been left with a corpse.”

When Devlin didn’t react, she raised her brows. “But you’d already thought of that.”

“The coincidence is somewhat glaring. It also supports your theory that I’m involved in the murders and abductions.”

Everyone started talking at once, barraging Emily with denials and angry accusations.

The brother beside Devlin held up his hand. Surprisingly, everyone quieted down immediately.

“I’m Pierce, a special agent with the FBI,” he reminded her. Where earlier he’d been calm and only mildly curious as he’d sat and listened, now his eyes practically snapped at her and he was all business.

“Detective O’Malley, my brother was cleared by Mrs. Hawley’s own statement. If you consider him a suspect, this entire conversation is inappropriate and should be taking place with his attorney, downtown.”

The angry mutterings started up again.

Emily held up her hands in surrender. “Listen, everyone. Please. The investigation has only just begun. To be fair, *you’re* the ones asking *me* questions, not the other way around. I’m not here to interrogate Devlin. I came here tonight to correct our mistake about the victim’s identification, and hopefully to make you feel better knowing your mother, your stepmother, wasn’t abducted and murdered. She died tragically, yes, but it was better than what she would have suffered in that basement.”

Pierce started to reply, but his wife, Madison, shot to her feet and put her hands on her hips. “This is ridiculous. You people arrested Devlin and interrogated him and you don’t even know who the victims are. You have a lot of nerve even showing up here.”

Pierce gave Emily a pained look and tugged Madison back down on the couch beside him. He whispered something in her ear, which earned him a glare. But she crossed her arms and didn’t say anything else.

“My apologies,” Pierce said. “My wife has a . . . history . . . with the Savannah police and being the object of false accusations. Regardless, we do appreciate your updating us. My father will be relieved that Carolyn’s death was . . . kinder than it could have been.”

Emily nodded. “Thank you. I would, however, like to address one thing Mrs. Buchanan said, about our not knowing the identity of the victims.”

She thumbed through the manila folder, pulled out a sketch, and handed it to Matt. He and his wife studied the paper before passing it to Braedon on the middle couch.

“That’s a police artist’s rendering of one of the women Mrs. Hawley said was being held with her when she was abducted. As you can see, it’s a very detailed sketch, including a birthmark on the woman’s cheek. So we’re hopeful someone will recognize her once we begin circulating it through the media tomorrow.”

“Is there a sketch of the man who tortured Mrs. Hawley?” Devlin asked.

“Yes, but I’m afraid it’s not of much value. Her abductor wore a hat and kept his face concealed much of the time, or kept the room dark when he was with her. We have a vague description. The only things she felt certain of were that he was Caucasian, about six feet tall, and had no tattoos or distinguishing marks.”

She would have expected him to look relieved that Hawley’s description, even though it was vague, ruled Devlin out. Instead, he looked disappointed at the lack of information.

As the sketch of the woman Hawley had seen slowly made its way around the room, Emily slid a photograph out from the folder. “One of the detectives on the case was assigned to compare basic statistics from the coroner’s preliminary autopsy report—sex, height, approximate age—to our missing persons reports. He found two reports that met the basic criteria. And since we encourage families to provide us the dental records with each missing persons report, he was able to immediately have the coroner compare the records to the victims. We have a match.”

She handed the photograph to Matt. “The woman who was wearing Carolyn’s jewelry was Shannon Fisher. Even if her name isn’t familiar, I’d like each of you to look at her picture and tell me if you’ve ever seen her or met her in the past. We’re trying to figure out if there’s a link between her and your family because of the jewelry.”

Matt carefully studied the photo. “If she was a skeleton when she was found, she must have been dead for quite some time. When did her family report her missing?”

“Four months ago, which also correlates closely to when the coroner thinks she was killed.”

“Four months? The jewelry was stolen four months ago too. He must have stolen the jewelry right before he kidnapped Miss Fisher and then placed it on her body.”

“It’s certainly one of the theories we’re exploring,” she said.

He passed the photo to his brother, sitting on the U part of the couch arrangement. When the photo reached Devlin, Austin wheeled his chair beside him. But instead of looking at the picture, Austin stared at Devlin.

Emily glanced back and forth between them. “Does one of you recognize the victim?”

Devlin flicked a glance at Austin before handing the picture to Emily. “Sorry, no.”

Austin stared at him another moment, then wheeled back to the end of Emily’s couch.

“What about you?” she asked. “For a moment there, I thought you recognized her.”

He shrugged. “She was beautiful. I couldn’t help but stare.”

He’d barely looked at the picture. Was he covering something up? She waited, but he didn’t say anything else.

“No one recognized either of these women?” she asked.

“Unfortunately, no.” Pierce looked at his siblings for confirmation. “I wish there was something we could do to help.”

Emily watched Devlin, but his face gave nothing away. She sighed and put the sketch and photograph back into the folder. “Thank you for looking. I appreciate your time and your patience, especially after everything that happened today. My condolences on the loss of your mother. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll head back to town. I’ve got a long day ahead of me tomorrow.”

“Detective,” Matt said, “if you can spare us a few more minutes, I’d like to point out some things before you go.”

“Of course.”

He clasped his hands in front of him, his forearms resting on his thighs. “From what I’ve heard, there isn’t any physical evidence of involvement by anyone in this family. Is that correct?”

“I assure you, if that wasn’t the case, I wouldn’t be here talking to you right now.”

He grinned. “Point taken. Well then, it’s seems obvious to me that our family is being targeted, or baited, by this killer.”

Emily had thought the same thing. “What makes you say that?”

Matt held up his hand, ticking off his fingers as he spoke. “First, it seems obvious the thief’s goal in breaking into Carolyn’s home was to steal

those specific pieces of jewelry."

Emily shrugged, not willing to share her own conclusions.

"Second, if his goal was to kill a woman and leave the jewelry on her body, he could have done that anywhere—including the town where Carolyn lived. Why choose to kill his victim in Savannah, just a few miles from my father's house, where officials would quickly make the connection between the names engraved on the jewelry and our family? There's only one answer I can think of. The killer wanted our family to know about the jewelry, and the murders."

"Possibly," Emily allowed.

"Since he couldn't have planned on you seeing him at the same time that Devlin was driving down the road near that house, and that Devlin would hear you on the police scanner and decide to help you, it's logical to assume the killer didn't specifically intend for Devlin—or any of us—to discover the body with the jewelry. But I think he would have eventually made sure to alert someone about the body if no one found it on their own. He wanted that jewelry found. He knew it would be traced back to our family eventually, and we'd be notified."

None of this surprised her or was something she hadn't already thought of. But she hadn't made any conclusions yet about the killer's reasons for what he'd done.

"Why do you think the killer would do that?" she asked.

"He wanted to torture Alex," Devlin interjected. "Obviously, since the police thought the dead woman was Carolyn; Shannon was a perfect match for her in height, sex, and hair color. The killer knew the police would jump to the conclusion that that woman was Carolyn. Maybe he actually wanted to kill Carolyn, but her accident stole the opportunity from him. His next best strategy was to kill someone who resembled her so the one person who cared the most about her would be led to believe Carolyn was tortured and murdered. He's playing a game, a sick, deadly game. He enjoys torturing and killing women, but they're really just pawns to obtain his true goal."

"And what is that goal?" Emily asked.

"I think he wants to hurt Alex—to cause him pain and suffering. He's probably someone from Alex's past, perhaps a former client who went to prison and blamed Alex for not defending him properly. Now he's out and looking for revenge. He wants Alex to suffer like he suffered, and then he

wants Alex to pay for his perceived sins with the ultimate penalty—his life.”

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Chapter Eight

DEVLIN LEANED AGAINST the railing on his father's back deck. He wasn't interested in the vast field that served as the yard, or the pond clogged with cattails and lily pads, or even the thick woods beyond that. It was the majesty and beauty of the night sky out here in the country, without the light pollution of the city to obscure the thousands of stars, that fed his soul, that soothed away the hurt, the doubts, the aching loneliness of the life he'd chosen.

When he was on a mission, he'd often look up before turning in for the night and remember this same view from his father's house. He'd think of his family, imagining them back home, looking up at the same inky blackness, the same brilliant stars, the same sliver of moon. It made him feel more connected to them.

But not tonight.

Tonight, even though his family was less than thirty feet away, the distance separating them had never felt so vast.

After O'Malley had left, it was too difficult to stay inside and face the guilt and anxious conversation between his brothers and sisters-in-law about how to protect Alex—especially since Devlin didn't really believe Alex was the target. No, his instincts told him the killer had a completely different goal in mind. And from the accusing looks Austin had been giving him since that picture of Shannon had been passed around, Devlin suspected his little brother had come to the same conclusion.

The killer was targeting Devlin.

The sliding glass door opened behind him. His hands tightened on the railing even before the sound of wheels rolling across the wood floor confirmed that it was Austin who was intruding on his solitude. The upcoming confrontation was inevitable. But Devlin had hoped for a few more minutes alone before being forced to lie to his family once again. He blew out a long sigh and was just starting to turn around when a stinging blow to his hip slammed him against the railing.

He frowned at his brother, whose fist was still balled up, as if he wanted to let another punch fly.

"What was that for?"

"As if you didn't know. What were you thinking, Devil? Lying to a cop? You know she's going to find out eventually that you knew Shannon."

He forced a nonchalant shrug. "I didn't see the point of bringing that up."

Austin snorted. "We were just talking about her in the kitchen, or had you forgotten? You were lovers. Why would you lie about that?"

"I didn't lie, not outright. I just didn't admit I knew her. Which is the same thing *you* did."

"Because I followed your lead. It was obvious you didn't want to tell Detective O'Malley you knew the victim. What gives? I know you didn't have anything to do with her death. So why not get the facts out in the open? It will only look worse later, once the truth comes out."

Devlin turned and stared up at the sky again. He needed a minute. Just one more damn minute before he faced the elephant in the room.

Austin wheeled up to the railing. But he didn't say anything else, not yet, as if sensing Devlin needed to collect himself. It had always been that way between them. Austin, with his rare neurological disorder and resulting dark moods, seemed to recognize the darkness in Devlin, even if he didn't understand it, or know just how dark Devlin's soul had become.

When Devlin finally faced his brother, Austin looked up at him.

"What's really going on?" he asked quietly. "If I didn't know about Shannon, I might have bought that load of crap you were shoveling in there, trying to convince us that you think some twisted killer is after Alex. But I don't buy that. And I don't think you do either. What were you trying to do?

Get everyone to focus on Alex and his supposed enemy instead of focusing on you?”

Yes. Devlin forced a laugh. But inside he was anything but amused. This was the worst part of his job, lying to people who cared about him. But it was also necessary. Not just to protect himself but to protect his family. As long as they knew nothing about EXIT Inc., they were safe. That was part of the code all enforcers lived by—families were off-limits as long as they weren’t a threat to EXIT’s mission of saving lives.

“That’s ridiculous,” he said.

“No, it isn’t. I’ve been thinking about what happened today. There are too many coincidences going on here. Adding Shannon into the mix kicks it over the top into unbelievable territory. I have a theory. Want to hear it?”

“Not particularly.” Devlin turned to go back into the house.

Austin cut him off and blocked his way. “I lied to that cop to cover for you. The least you can do is listen to what I have to say.”

He was right. Devlin owed him that much. He glanced through the glass door. Madison was standing in the middle of the room ticking off points on her fingers, much as Matt had earlier. No telling what kind of crazy plan she was coming up with. All to save Alex, who didn’t even need saving.

Retreating to the railing, Devlin leaned against it and affected a bored look. “Fine. Tell me your theory if it makes you feel better.”

Austin cocked his head sideways. “For argument’s sake, I’ll assume it really was a coincidence that you just happened to be close by when O’Malley saw that guy with Hawley, and that you went into the basement to save her. But I don’t have to be a brainiac math major like Matt to know that the odds of you then happening to see the bad guy’s truck on a secluded side road *an hour later* are just about zero. Why would that guy still be hanging around the area to be discovered?”

That was the question, wasn’t it? It had been bothering Devlin from the moment he’d spotted the other truck. He shrugged and threw out his own theory, even though—once again—he didn’t believe it.

“The cops set up checkpoints on the major highways. He didn’t have anywhere else to go. He was traveling the back roads to find a hiding place.”

“This is the guy you *killed*, right? You haven’t even mentioned him. Not at the police station. Not since coming home. The only reason I know about

him is because Dad told us what happened once I got home tonight. You killed someone, Dev. Doesn't that bother you?"

Yes, but only because Devlin couldn't interrogate the creep to find out the name of his partner. Killing animals like that guy—men who hurt innocent people, especially women—would never make Devlin lose any sleep. Since he didn't think he could pretend he had remorse when he didn't, he remained silent.

"Tell me about him," Austin prodded. "Was he big like you?"

"Not especially. Why?"

"Did he have a gun? A knife?"

Did he? Devlin didn't remember any weapons. But then again, he hadn't given the guy a chance to draw on him even if he'd had a gun.

"Where are you going with this, Austin?"

"Dad told us the big picture about what happened before you got home, but he didn't tell us all the details. As your attorney, he had to have been given more information in order to make his case to the DA so they'd let you go. This isn't Dad's first case. I know the drill, how all this stuff works. And I figured he got his hands on the facts that are pertinent to the case against you."

"Ah, hell." Devlin crossed his arms. "You picked the lock on his briefcase, didn't you? I thought you stopped doing that sort of thing when you were fifteen and Dad tanned your hide with a switch."

"Nope. I just got more careful after that. Like I said, I know the drill. Yes, I opened his briefcase. And I learned a few things you may not know."

In spite of Devlin's goal to end their conversation as quickly as possible, he couldn't resist the carrot Austin had just dangled in front of him. "What things?"

"Hawley's initial statement. She said the guy you killed was a lightweight, a pawn, someone the real bad guy used as his lackey to cart his victims from place to place. Which of course means if this guy was caught, he could identify the guy he worked for." He stared up at Devlin and waited, as if to make sure everything was sinking in. It was definitely sinking, like quicksand.

"Why would the guy calling all the shots risk having Hawley out in the open?" Austin asked. "Did you know that Hawley said the driver kept going

up and down the same road in front of that house for over an hour before O'Malley spotted him?"

Devlin's fingers tightened painfully around the railing. He had to force himself to loosen his grip. "No. I didn't know that." And he hadn't. But now that he did, the events of this morning were fitting together even more perfectly than they had before, reinforcing his working theory.

Someone was trying to destroy him.

"Why do you think he did that? Drove up and down that road?"

"I have no idea." *Liar.*

"I think he was waiting for someone," Austin said. "Like you. Or O'Malley. Or both."

"And why would he do that?"

"Because his boss told him to. You said whoever left that corpse with the jewelry in the basement wanted it found. And that he wanted our family to know about it. What better way to ensure that happened than to have a Buchanan discover the body?"

Sometimes Austin's insight was almost scary. Then again, he was Matt's twin, and Matt was a brilliant investigator. If Austin shared this information with Matt, there'd be no way to stop his family from trying to dig into Devlin's life and figure out who was after him. He couldn't let that happen.

Austin was waiting for his answer. Right now, Devlin didn't have any answers, not even lies. He glanced through the sliding glass doors again. Alex was in the family room now, his sons and daughters-in-law surrounding him. Pierce appeared to be the spokesperson for the group as he apparently broke the news about Carolyn. Tessa and Madison stood behind Alex, both with a hand on one of his shoulders, as if to offer him strength. Devlin and Austin should be in there with them, offering their father comfort. But Devlin didn't think he had any comfort left to give.

"Ready for my entire theory?"

Dreading whatever his astute brother was about to say, Devlin braced himself and gave Austin his full attention. "I'm not sure I could stop you if I tried. Go on. Get it over with."

Seemingly undeterred by Devlin's abrupt response, Austin moved closer, his wheels almost hitting Devlin's knees.

"You're the only one in this family who uses that road in front of the house where those bodies were found to get here. And even though I tease

you about being a tour guide, I know you're trained to keep your clients safe in any situation. You're basically a survivalist, a bodyguard. Someone who knows how to defend himself in a fight. And when you and Hawley's abductor fought in those woods, you were forced to kill him to save your own life."

Devlin winced at that incorrect observation. Bodyguard? Sometimes, yes. But usually Devlin was the one other men feared, the exact opposite of a bodyguard. He'd even designed his own tools of the trade to make killing easier, more efficient. His signature garrote was impossible for the victim to remove once the wire wrapped around their neck. Somehow he didn't think Austin would still think he was a *good* person if he knew about that.

He'd traded his soul for the chance to save countless innocent lives. He had no regrets. But he had no illusions either. He'd learned a long time ago that the only way to fight true evil and win was to become just as evil as his prey. And Devlin was one of the best at what he did.

"Bottom line," Austin said, "how hard would it be for someone who knows you to realize you go to Dad's every Friday around the same time when you're in town? Ask yourself if the most direct route from your house to Dad's is down that little two-lane road in front of the house where those victims were found. Ask yourself if someone you know also knows that you listen to a police scanner all the time. Sure, it's a hobby, but don't your friends—or, in this case, your enemies—know about your hobbies too?"

Devlin stared at Austin, stunned at the wisdom coming from someone so young and inexperienced. Unlike his brothers, Austin didn't have a career, or even a job, since he was in and out of hospitals so much. And yet everything he was saying made perfect sense and had Devlin thinking—hard—about the possible answers.

"Ask yourself if whoever knows all that about you also knows about the shortcut to Dad's house, that turnoff down that same road. The turnoff you take every Friday if you're in town. I mean, really, how hard would it be for someone to watch your pattern a few times?"

If he were home, on leave between missions, he wouldn't have been watching his back. He wouldn't have thought it necessary. "Not hard at all," he admitted, seeing no point in denying it. "I wouldn't have had any reason to think someone was watching me. Maybe you should work for Matt. You're just as good at figuring out this stuff as he is."

Austin grinned, clearly pleased with that comment. “I’m not done. Ask yourself if you really believe the guy calling the shots would risk his assistant being seen with Hawley unless he figured *you* would be the one to see him, and that you would try to stop him.”

Devlin frowned. “Why me? Why not Pierce, or one of the others?”

“Braedon’s too gentle. He couldn’t hurt anyone. Pierce is all about following the rules. Matt’s too unpredictable. But you? You’re trained in self-defense. It’s all part of your survival skills for your job. And you’re not in law enforcement, so you’re not going to care about rules. You’d act on instinct.”

“You think the killer wanted me to kill his gofer,” Devlin said, his voice quiet.

“Exactly. You’re six foot three and solid muscle. There’s no chance that other guy would survive a fight with you. None. Now add up everything I just said, along with the fact that your former lover was the victim in that basement, the one wearing Carolyn’s jewelry. In what universe is a coincidence like that even possible?”

“None.” Devlin couldn’t deny the facts when they were laid at his feet so succinctly.

Austin laid his hand on Devlin’s forearm. “Devil, I’ll go to my grave lying for you if you need me to. But I’d rather help you out of whatever mess you’re in.”

Oh, hell no. He wasn’t about to involve his little brother in something that could get him killed. He gently moved Austin’s hand back to the railing. “You can’t help me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Are you saying you know who killed Shannon?”

“Of course not. I didn’t even know she was missing, much less that she was one of the murder victims in that basement. I don’t have a clue who killed her.” *Not yet.*

“Then why lie about knowing her?”

“What do you think would have happened tonight if I’d admitted I knew her?”

Austin shrugged. “O’Malley would probably have wanted you to go back to the police station and answer more questions. There’s no harm in that. You’re innocent. And if we can get the police looking at you, figuring

out who wants to hurt you, that makes more sense than sending them on a wild-goose chase looking into Alex's past. It could even help save the women who are still alive, the ones the killer abducted."

Devlin let out a pent-up breath. He wanted to help those women too, but it wasn't that simple. There was much more at stake than Austin realized. If the killer were someone who knew Devlin and was trying to draw him out—which was seeming more and more likely—then he would use those women as bait. If the police got too close, there'd be no reason to keep the women alive. The killer would cut bait and run. And when the timing was right, he'd just abduct more victims to try to draw Devlin out again. But that wasn't something he could explain without revealing his true occupation.

"This is the same police department that almost put our sister-in-law in prison for murder when *she* was a victim," Devlin said. "You do remember what happened to Madison, right? The Simon Says Die case?"

Austin seemed to consider that for a moment. "Good point. But what choice do you have? Someone who knew Shannon is bound to know you two dated."

"It was a year ago, and I never met any of her friends. We haven't spoken since."

"You don't think she told anyone about you? Girls talk. This is going to come out. Things like this always do."

Yes, they did. But Austin was worried about the wrong things. He was worried about the police. The police were the last people Devlin was concerned about. This was way bigger than Detective O'Malley and any heat she could rain down on him. Far bigger, and far more deadly.

And that was exactly why Devlin needed to get as far from his family as he could. Someone was after him, playing a game. Until he knew who it was and why, he couldn't risk bringing any danger to the people he loved.

Lines of worry wrinkled Austin's forehead.

"Everything will be okay," Devlin reassured him. "I just need a couple of days on my own to find out what's going on."

"What do you mean? You're going to investigate a murder, the abductions? By yourself?"

"That's exactly what I mean."

“Why not get Matt to help, or Pierce? Or me, since you said I’m good at this stuff. Let me help.”

“No way. I’m not involving my family in this.” He winced. “Other than the lie I already involved you in. That’s it. It ends there.”

“That’s just stupid. You might be just as much of a computer genius as Matt, but he’s better at solving puzzles than you, and has experience investigating crimes. He’s also got a ton of resources you don’t have in that lab of his. And Pierce isn’t exactly a hack as an FBI agent. For that matter, neither is Tessa. Whatever’s going on, they can figure it out.”

Devlin didn’t doubt that Austin was right. But if his family knew Devlin was the one being targeted, they’d start digging into his background. The average person, even the average cop, wasn’t likely to get past his tour guide front—unless they had powerful incentive and a reason to believe it was all an illusion. But Pierce and genius-level Matt? If they ever felt the need to investigate him, they’d eventually figure everything out. They’d realize what he really did for a living, and that would lead them to EXIT.

He couldn’t allow that. He couldn’t risk his family hurting the company, or his company hurting *them* if his brothers became a threat to EXIT Inc.’s mission. He had a duty to protect both his employer and the people he loved.

He’d chosen his path after Arianna’s brutal murder. He’d known what he was about to do, what he was about to become, and he’d made his peace with it. The rewards were worth whatever price he had to pay. And if it came down to it, he’d pay for his sins with his life. But he would never allow one hair on the head of his brothers, their families, or his father to be sacrificed along the way.

Austin was staring at him, waiting.

“You’re right,” Devlin said. “I’m sure they could help. I’m sure *you* could help. And I’ll ask all of you for help if I can’t figure this out on my own,” he lied. “But I want to try it my way first. All I need is a few days without the cops looking at me, some time to check into a few things to find out what’s going on.”

His gaze touched on the profiles of each of his family members inside the house as he wondered when he’d be able to see them again. He forced himself to turn away and jogged down the steps to the yard.

Austin wheeled to the edge of the ramp on the left side of the deck. “You’re leaving? Just like that? What am I supposed to tell the others? What about Alex?”

He hesitated. “Tell them . . . tell them I got called back to work, an emergency.”

“An emergency *tour*? Yeah, right. Some wealthy couple suddenly decided they needed someone to take them down the Amazon River. And they insisted that *you* had to be their guide so you could fend off the local drug cartel.”

Austin’s fake scenario wasn’t as far off as he thought. Devlin had been to South America on more than one “tour” that just happened to coincide with the deaths of some very serious drug lords. But since Austin seemed to be waiting for an answer, Devlin shrugged. He was all out of answers.

His brother stared at him, as if he could see the truth if he tried hard enough. “A few days, huh? You really think you can resolve this that quickly? And that everything will be okay?”

Devlin was about to tell him yes, but he couldn’t stomach another lie. He turned and let the darkness swallow him up.

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Chapter Nine

JUST A FEW more lights and a handful of blocks to go and Emily could pull into her garage and settle in for the evening. She thumped her hands on the steering wheel, waiting for the traffic light to turn. It was almost ten o'clock. She'd been working solid since dawn and should have been more than ready to call it a day. But there were so many questions swirling through her mind she could hardly sit still.

Who had killed Shannon Fisher? And why? Had Carolyn Buchanan really been the victim of a single-car accident, or had someone orchestrated her death? There was no evidence to suggest otherwise, but Emily was questioning everything, accepting nothing at face value—especially if it related to the Buchanans.

Where were the missing women that Mrs. Hawley said were still being held prisoner? Were they in a remote cabin? A house? All Hawley remembered were trees, lots of trees, and driving down endless two-lane roads. Part of the time she'd been blindfolded, so her recollection of directions was unreliable.

She'd heard the other women's voices, but she'd seen only one of them face-to-face—the woman she'd described to the sketch artist. Had the killer *wanted* her to see that particular woman but not the others? Was it possible he'd intended for Hawley to escape so she could tell the police about the woman she'd seen? Was that why the killer always obscured his face when he was with Hawley? The idea that he'd wanted her to escape didn't make

sense, but it was within the realm of possibilities, so Emily stored the question with the others to take out later and consider. She might not have many answers, but there was one common denominator when she looked at what few answers she had.

Devlin Buchanan.

Everyone else seemed to accept that he was no longer a person of interest. But Emily couldn't put him out of her mind no matter how hard she tried. Unfortunately, part of the reason was the damn chemistry that zinged between them every time they were within ten feet of each other. She hated it, hated the way her respiration sped up, her pulse quickened, even how her breasts tingled the few times he'd touched her.

Well, *hate* might not be the right word.

He made her feel . . . good, *really* good—a first-crush/first-love, tingle-of-awareness kind of good that tightened her skin and set every nerve ending on fire just to hear the rumble of his deep voice or watch the fascinating flex of muscles in his arms. She longed to score his biceps with her nails and feel his muscles bunch beneath her hands, slide her fingers across that sexy scruff along his jaw. She wanted to pull his mouth down to hers and—

The high-pitched whine of a horn sounded behind her. The light had turned green. She waved an apology in her rearview mirror and accelerated through the intersection. Her body flushed with heat at the realization that she'd lost all track of her surroundings while fantasizing about a man she barely knew. A man full of secrets. A man her intuition told her was dangerous.

Was that sense of danger because she'd seen him in action, seen how efficiently, effortlessly, he'd killed Hawley's abductor? She'd like to believe that was the only reason she had doubts about him. Because then she could pursue her heady rush of attraction for Devlin. He certainly hadn't shown any reaction to either Shannon Fisher's photograph or the sketch she'd shown him earlier tonight. That should have reassured her.

It didn't.

The sixth sense that made her a good detective told her there was something sinister behind those secrets Devlin was trying so hard to hide. Her instincts were rarely wrong when it came to ferreting out the truth. So she wasn't going to ignore them now.

The only thing she was nearly certain about was that he'd purposely tried to steer her toward believing his father was the killer's real target. As Shakespeare would say, he "doth protest too much." Devlin's warnings about his father being in peril made her even more suspicious that he was trying to redirect her investigation away from himself.

The last light turned green, allowing her to make the final left turn down her street. Her one-story Craftsman bungalow normally shined white beneath the streetlight in front of her yard. Not tonight. The light was out. She'd have to notify the city tomorrow so they could replace the bulb. She pulled into her driveway and reached up to click the garage door opener mounted to her visor but paused with her finger on the button.

What would she do once she was inside? Pace the floor all night thinking about the case? She was exhausted but keyed up at the same time. She had a feeling sleep wouldn't come easy, if at all. Unanswered questions hammered at her skull, begging to be explored.

She dropped her hand from the garage remote. Right now, more than anything else, she needed to know who Devlin *really* was. Because he sure as hell wasn't a simple tour guide, no matter how *extreme* the adventure. Which meant the company he worked for, EXIT Incorporated, might not be what it seemed.

The CEO, Cyprian, had been all flowers and sunshine when she'd begun her earlier phone call with him. Her assassin theory had evoked laughter and a humiliating request to quote her in their next brochure. He seemed to think clients would get a kick out of such a ridiculous notion.

Yeah, that call had gone peachy. She hoped her boss wouldn't hear about it.

She hadn't had time today to perform any in-depth Internet searches on the company. And even though her call with the CEO had been painful, it hadn't raised any red flags. The company could be exactly what it claimed to be. But with her questions about Devlin still niggling at her, why not dig further into EXIT to see what turned up? She wouldn't have to tell anyone she was researching the company, except maybe Tuck. He was her partner and she wasn't going to keep her ideas from him, no matter how much he might tease her. Because too many times those ideas, after being vetted with him, had turned into nuggets that broke a case wide open. And one thing

was for sure: this case needed to be broken wide open, fast, if anyone was going to save the missing women.

She threw the car in reverse and backed out of the driveway.

COUGAR PEERED THROUGH the thick bushes beside the garage and watched the gray Ford Fusion drive away. With the streetlight broken, the yard was cast in darkness. Even knowing he wasn't alone, he could barely make out the darker shadow that separated from the row of hedges by the front door and slid like a wraith beside the garage to join him.

"Did she see you?" Ace's gravelly voice held a lethal undertone that had Cougar straightening and turning to face him. This man wasn't like his usual handler. He wasn't someone he felt comfortable having at his back even though they were supposed to be working together.

Cougar shook his head. "I don't think so. She just sat there a minute, like she was thinking about something, then backed out of the driveway. Should we wait until she returns?"

Ace's dark eyes glittered in the sliver of moonlight.

"No. We've wasted too much time as it is. We'll return to the hotel. Make new plans for tomorrow."

Cougar hesitated.

"Something bothering you, rookie?"

The "rookie" label had Cougar stiffening. This wasn't his first mission. He'd be off probation soon as a full-fledged enforcer. "She's a cop, sir."

"And?"

He wasn't sure what to say to that. There were very few rules enforcers had to follow:

Rule #1: Enforcers' families are not to be harmed in any way.

Rule #2: Never kill a fellow enforcer.

Rule #3: Never kill anyone in law enforcement.

The only exception to any of those rules was if EXIT itself was in danger, which usually meant an official EXIT order had been issued. Cougar hadn't seen an EXIT order for the detective. Had she done something to compromise the company? Something that required immediate remediation rather than going through the EXIT order process?

Cougar didn't know and wasn't even sure why they'd been watching the house. This new handler wasn't much for sharing information.

"I was just wondering, sir, what the detective did to endanger EXIT. Because if she hasn't done anything that . . . well . . . the rules forbid us from, I mean . . ." He stuttered into silence as Ace drew closer, like a snake curling in on its prey. The frost in his obsidian gaze made Cougar shiver.

"I'm well aware of the rules and the threshold for an exception. Your job is to follow my orders, unquestioningly." He studied Cougar, as if sizing him up. "If you aren't ready for fieldwork, I can call your usual handler and have someone else assigned to this mission."

Cougar straightened away from the wall.

Ace hissed and shoved him back before glancing through the hedge toward the street.

Chagrined at the reminder to be careful not to be seen, Cougar hunched down. "I *am* ready," he whispered. "It's an honor to be chosen for this duty. It's just that, staking out a cop . . . surprised me, that's all." He laughed nervously. "I shouldn't have questioned you, sir. It won't happen again."

He waited, growing increasingly uneasy. Ace emitted a sense of danger so strong it made Cougar want to gag. He swallowed hard, barely resisting the urge to flex his fingers by the gun holstered on his hip. He tried to keep his expression carefully blank as he waited for Ace to say, or do, something. Anything.

Ace's gaze swept down to Cougar's fingers, as if he knew what Cougar was thinking. His lips curved in a smile that didn't come close to reaching his eyes.

"I've got to check on a few things. I'll meet you back at the hotel." Ace strode off into the darkness, in the opposite direction of their van.

Cougar slumped against the house and brushed a shaky hand across his brow. His stomach rumbled. He whirled around and threw up his fast-food dinner in the hedge.

DEVLIN PAUSED IN the doorway of his bedroom. Technically, just barely, it was still Friday. But it felt like the hours had dragged on for days. Other than his brief stop here earlier to drop off his luggage and shower before

heading to Alex's house, he hadn't been home in months—not that this place had ever really felt like home. This house was just somewhere to go between missions, his official address. Situated deep in the woods on the opposite side of Savannah from where his family lived, it was his safe place, where he could retreat when he needed to regroup, replan, or reload.

Hidden panels in the walls contained a vast collection of weapons, including ones he'd designed himself. Nearly every room had at least one go bag of survival gear that could sustain him for weeks. And the underground garage with its camouflaged entrance contained a Porsche and a Maserati, fueled and ready to go.

In and around the city he had other vehicles in strategic locations, including several parking garages downtown. And he had two other homes similar to this one hundreds of miles away. No one else knew about them, not even his best friend, Gage. Those houses were his fallbacks, his nuclear options if he ever needed to disappear.

He'd purchased them as soon as his first big paychecks from EXIT had started rolling in, over a dozen years ago. Each estate had a caretaker and a healthy bank account for its upkeep, established under an alias buried beneath a trail of dozens of corporations. Odd that he would think about them now, because he rarely ever did. But after today, he was rethinking *everything*.

He strode into his bedroom and stopped at the far wall, opposite the bed. He didn't expect any security issues. But as was his habit, he slid a panel back to reveal an electronic screen and quickly checked the security camera views. Satisfied, he closed the panel and moved in front of the large painting centered on the wall.

It was something Madison had helped him pick out from an exhibit at the Savannah College of Art and Design. His artistically inclined sister-in-law adored SCAD and had insisted that he go there with her to find something special for his house. Somehow she'd seemed to know exactly what might appeal to him and had steered him toward this particular piece.

Of all the paintings he owned—and he owned quite a few—this one was his favorite: a night sky full of bright stars that reminded him of the view from his father's deck. He pulled the picture back on its hinges, revealing the wall safe behind it. One quick press of his thumb on the scanner and the lock clicked open.

Bundles of money in foreign currencies, passports, and IDs lay amid other documents that supported his many aliases. He reached past those and pulled out an inch-thick rectangular metal box that was just a little longer and wider than a typical piece of paper. He set it on the dresser beneath the painting and popped open the lid.

Dozens of photographs lay on top. He flipped past the favorites of his family, the most recent one of Matt and Tessa at their wedding a few months ago. As much as Matt had chased Tessa over the years, Devlin would have expected him to be confident and grinning like a fool at the altar. Just the opposite was true. Matt had been the nervous one, as if he couldn't believe he'd finally gotten the woman he loved to marry him. It was his bride, Tessa, who'd grinned the entire time, and teased Matt about how pale he looked beneath his tan.

After setting the treasured photos aside, all that remained was a half-inch-thick binder of dossiers on the enforcers who worked for EXIT. The dossiers were supposed to be secret, protected by firewalls and accessible only by Cyprian and his close associates. Devlin could appreciate why his boss wouldn't want this information to get out. But Cyprian was a little too careful sometimes in what data he shared, which had put Devlin at a disadvantage the last time he'd hunted a rogue agent, and had nearly gotten him killed. After that, he'd used some of the computer tricks his brother Matt had taught him and hacked into the EXIT computer system to obtain the dossiers on all of the agents.

Every few months he hacked back in through the same security loophole and updated the information in his binder, until about four months ago, when new security features were added to the system. Since then, Devlin hadn't been able to get back in. But the information was current enough for his purposes today.

He carried the binder across the room and sat at the desk by the window. Each page was dedicated to one enforcer. At the top were pictures. Beneath those were legal names, known aliases, and the monikers some preferred to use, such as Ace, Diesel, or Cobra. The second half of the binder contained summaries of each mission the enforcers performed.

He flipped through, stopping when he saw the picture of Gage Thomas. He'd joined the company for one reason: to earn enough money to provide for his little sister, Nancy, after their parents were killed. He'd bought a big

white farmhouse outside of town. Nancy, enamored with *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* that summer, had christened the house Jackson's Island, just like in the book, because the house was surrounded by a "river of grass." She drove Gage crazy calling him Joe Harper and herself Tom Sawyer all summer long. Gage had complained about it to Devlin, not realizing Ace and Kelly were nearby. Of course after that, for months, Ace and Kelly had teased Gage by calling him Joe Harper. Devlin grinned at the memories.

Nancy was a sophomore in college now, which should have made Gage happy. But her insistence on majoring in criminal justice had caused a deep rift between them. His secret role in EXIT had him convinced his sister would become his enemy and a threat if she continued down that path. He'd criticized her major and demanded she change it, threatening to cut her off financially. Nancy, knowing nothing about EXIT, couldn't understand her brother's hostility. Rather than change her major, she applied for a scholarship. And won it.

Nancy should be home now on college break. Devlin hoped she and her brother could work through their differences during the break and become close once again.

He flipped another page. His smile faded when he saw the picture of Shannon Fisher, her long dark-brown hair curling around her shoulders as she smiled up at him. She didn't deserve what had happened to her. She'd been a good person. Information she'd gathered on her missions had positioned others to neutralize threats and save countless lives. It was a tragedy that her family would never know that she'd been a true hero instead of the simple tour guide they believed her to be.

Impatience had him quickly flipping past several more familiar faces until he found the one he was searching for: Kelly Parker. Another enforcer, one who sometimes conducted regular missions but worked mostly on secret assignments known only to her and Cyprian. Kelly was Cyprian's right hand in many ways, his confidante and sounding board on important decisions, like whether to recruit Devlin to join EXIT.

After he'd joined the team, in addition to Gage helping him with the transition, Kelly had been right there to answer his questions and guide him through training. They'd become good friends. She was almost fanatical in her love of sailing and had tried, without success, to get him to love it too.

He’d gone boating with her and others they worked with—like Ace, Gage, even Shannon a couple of times. But the only part he’d enjoyed was when Kelly tried to teach all of them how to tie fancy nautical knots, like the *X*-shaped, double-overhand knot she was so fond of. That was definitely a skill that could come in handy in his line of work. Unfortunately, it was also a skill he’d never mastered. And using handcuffs was so much faster.

But it wasn’t Kelly’s inability to sway him to enjoy boating that had caused a rift between them. They’d made the mistake of taking their relationship to the next level. They became lovers. While Devlin was all for being adventurous in the bedroom, Kelly’s appetite for rough play left him cold. More importantly, it violated one of his own personal rules of behavior that he lived by in addition to EXIT’s rules: never hurt a woman. Even though Kelly was the one who wanted him to hurt her, he wasn’t about to break that rule. After he explained that to her, they had no choice but to go back to being just friends.

Not long after that, he’d recommended the termination of another enforcer—Ace. *That* was what had finally ended his friendship with Kelly. Devlin believed Ace was too brutal, that he took pleasure from killing, that he was a ticking time bomb dangerous to EXIT’s mission. Ace was a loose cannon, unpredictable, loyal to no one but himself. He could be your friend one minute and slice your throat the next. But when Cyprian debated the decision with Kelly, his confidante, she’d argued against termination. Devlin had countered the argument with the fact that Ace and Kelly were friends, so she might not be impartial. But Cyprian took Kelly’s side, as he often did. And since that day, Kelly had been cold and distant with Devlin. Rumors were that Kelly and Ace were more enemies than friends now, that Ace had been too brutal even for her tastes. But Devlin didn’t know if the rumors were true.

He studied her picture—her dark, expressive eyes, her long, blonde hair, the distinctive strawberry birthmark on her right cheek. He’d hoped he was wrong, that his memories had played a cruel trick on him, but he could no longer deny what was right in front of him. He hadn’t seen Kelly in months, maybe longer, until earlier this evening at his father’s house.

When O’Malley asked him if he recognized the missing woman in the police sketch.

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Chapter Ten

"WHY DIDN'T YOU tell me about what happened yesterday?" A bleary-eyed Gage Thomas stood in Devlin's kitchen doorway, his shoulder-length, dark hair unkempt, his clothes wrinkled, as if he'd slept in them.

"How did you find out?" Devlin didn't bother to pretend that he didn't know what his friend was talking about.

Gage snorted. "Right. You don't think Cyprian has eyes and ears in the police station?" Although he was several inches shorter than Devlin, he had a compact, muscular build and used his bulk to shove past him into the house.

Devlin shut the door, waiting to see what his friend would do. When he'd seen him on the security cameras a few minutes ago, he hadn't known what to expect. He'd hoped Gage was stopping by for something unrelated to the events of yesterday and last night. Obviously that hope had been foolish.

Gage glanced around the eat-in kitchen, as if he were automatically marking the exits even though he knew them all. He'd been here dozens of times over the years. During football season he practically lived in the family room, beer in one hand, peanuts or popcorn in the other, planted in one of the leather recliners in front of the big-screen TV.

He sat in one of the chairs at the table in the middle of the room and dropped a thick manila envelope next to Devlin's half-eaten breakfast of eggs and bacon. "Take a look."

Devlin resumed his seat across from Gage and shoved his plate out of the way. He opened the envelope and emptied out the contents: dozens of photographs. He was glad he hadn't eaten much yet because what he *had* eaten had coiled into a cold hard knot in his stomach.

Startling color images painted a heinous scene. Amid the chaos of torn clothing, wildly tousled hair, and matted branches and grass beneath the broken body was blood, *lots* of blood. But in spite of the blood and the bruises, the dead woman's face was still recognizable.

Shannon.

He focused on keeping his expression carefully blank while his heart ached for what she'd obviously suffered. This wasn't a quick execution. It was sadistic torture, performed by someone who enjoyed causing excruciating pain, and drawing it out as long as possible—for *days*, if the color of the bruises was an indicator.

The pictures, as awful as they were, did serve one useful purpose—they gave Devlin new information about the murder. They proved that even though Shannon's remains had been discovered in a basement, she'd been killed somewhere else, somewhere outside. If he could recognize a landmark in the pictures, figure out where she'd been killed, maybe he could go there and search for clues about her attacker.

Of course right now the more urgent question was, why did Gage have these pictures?

On any other day, if Gage had shown up this early at Devlin's house, he'd have been helping himself to the contents of the refrigerator or trying to steal some bacon from his plate. Instead, he was anxious, intent, watching Devlin's every move.

The same way an enforcer might watch his mark, the person he was tasked with executing.

Every muscle in Devlin's body tensed. His instincts urged him to strike before it was too late. But this was Gage, his friend, one of the few people who knew about Arianna and the horrible toll her death had taken on Devlin.

Gage had been his mentor, his confidant, his brother in everything but blood since the day EXIT had recruited Devlin. Killing him *had* to be a last resort. And even then, Devlin wasn't sure he could. So instead of striking fast and hard, he hesitated, waited, and hoped he wasn't making a fatal

mistake. Even though he and Gage were good friends—best friends—their loyalty to EXIT and its mission had always come first. But their loyalty had never been tested like this before.

“What is this?” Devlin waved at the pictures. “They obviously aren’t police photos. When the police found Shannon, she was just a skeleton. Where did you get these?”

“Cyprian. He said the killer sent them to him, to gloat.” His voice sounded raw, ragged, as he sorted through the pictures and pulled some from the middle of the stack. He thumped them with his fist. “Did you think Cyprian wouldn’t find out that you and Shannon were lovers?”

A cold feeling of dread flashed through Devlin as he stared at these newest pictures. What were the odds that someone would have taken surveillance photos of him and Shannon the *only* time they’d ever been intimate? The pictures were explicit, leaving no question about what he and Shannon were doing. And they had to have been taken with high-tech equipment, capable of filming through the tiny pinholes in the blinds over his bedroom window. Because he’d definitely had the blinds shut. That wasn’t a detail he would have forgotten, even if he hadn’t expected anyone to be watching from outside.

Those photos were from last summer, almost a year ago, which meant whoever had taken them had been planning this for a long time. Any doubts he might have harbored before evaporated now.

Someone was trying to frame him.

But who? Who hated him enough to sacrifice Shannon and those other women as part of his plan? What had he done to make such a powerful enemy?

Gage selected several more photographs and dropped them on top of the pile.

Devlin sucked in a breath, this time unable to hide his surprise. The top picture had been taken in France, over a year and a half ago. Even if the Eiffel Tower in the background hadn’t given the location away, he’d have remembered. It was the only time he’d ever partnered on a mission with the other enforcer in the photograph.

Kelly Parker.

The picture showed the two of them locked in a heated kiss. The kiss was part of their cover, for the benefit of the man they were pursuing, to

make him think they were an amorous couple strolling along the path behind him instead of his executioners. The ploy had worked. They'd gotten their mark. But apparently they weren't the only ones there that day. And whoever had snapped this photograph was now using it in their campaign to destroy him.

Devlin picked up another one of the photos, taken at a marina, showing him and Kelly getting ready to go sailing. How long ago had that one been taken? He held it up as if to study it, when his real goal was to distract Gage while he slid his left hand under the table to the shotgun mounted underneath. He tossed the picture on the table and studied his friend.

Or was Gage his executioner?

"What else do you have?" Devlin asked.

"What else? Isn't this enough? One ex-lover slaughtered. Another missing?"

"How did you know Kelly was missing?"

"How did *you*? Do you think Cyprian doesn't keep tabs on our personal relationships? He knows everything about us. He probably knows the flight number of the plane Nancy flew on to come home from school a few days ago. You know the drill. You know there's no true privacy at EXIT. How could you be so careless?"

Devlin stilled. "You think I killed Shannon? That I abducted Kelly?"

"Did you?"

His hand tightened around the gun beneath the table. "Do you really think I'd be stupid enough to take pictures of one of my kills and send them to Cyprian? What about the other pictures? Someone has obviously been conducting surveillance on me for a long time."

"Are you kidding? Tell me you don't conduct surveillance on the rest of us to make sure we haven't gone rogue. Isn't that part of your job?" When Devlin didn't say anything, Gage shook his head. "Just because you're the one who's supposed to keep an eye on the rest of us doesn't mean Cyprian doesn't keep an eye on you too. What do you think all those special projects are that Kelly works on for Cyprian? She's one of his spies. Or at least she was. I'm sure there are other spies too."

Devlin blinked in surprise. "How would you know that about Kelly?"

Gage was the one who didn't answer this time. His mouth tightened and he looked away.

Devlin swore. He'd never have guessed Kelly was Gage's type. But now he understood why Cyprian would send Gage to take Devlin out. Cyprian would assume since the two of them were friends that Gage could surprise him. And since Cyprian had to know that Gage cared about Kelly, he wouldn't be worried that the friendship with Devlin would stop Gage from carrying out his duty.

Devlin blew out a frustrated breath. "Where's the evidence against me? These pictures prove nothing."

His friend's bloodshot eyes zeroed in on him like laser-guided missiles. "Cyprian doesn't care about fingerprints or fibers or blood spatter analysis. Two enforcers with personal connections to you have been abducted or murdered. The police found you in a basement with Shannon's body."

"No, they didn't. I found a police officer in the basement with Shannon's body. Big difference."

"You think so? Cyprian doesn't. He thinks it's more likely you heard the cop had discovered your little underground horror chamber, so you went there to kill the cop and make sure no one discovered your playground. But O'Malley had called for backup already, so you had to come up with the story that you were trying to help her."

Devlin laughed without humor. "This is ridiculous. None of the other enforcers are going to buy into the fantasy that I suddenly turned rogue and started locking women up and torturing them for kicks."

Gage leaned toward him, the skin taut across his cheekbones. "You're right. You've got a rock-solid reputation as *the Enforcer*. No one would believe you'd ever turn bad. They'd deny it to their dying breath. Except for one thing." He dug another picture out from the bottom of the stack and set it on top. "When you strangled Shannon, you used that fancy garrote you designed yourself—the one with the wooden handles that twist the wire and snap off so the victims can't remove the wire no matter how hard they claw at their own flesh."

Devlin stared down at the gruesome scene, the wire cruelly cutting into the tender flesh of Shannon's neck. Beside her lay the pieces of wood that were the genius of his design. They allowed him to twist in one swift movement, leaving Devlin's hands free for other things. But the garrote wasn't a tool he was fond of using. It caused a slow, painful death. He used

it only as a last resort, when he needed to defend himself, or to save the life of an innocent.

Now, looking at all the evidence mounting against him, he had to admit it looked pretty convincing.

“Anyone could have copied my garrote design.”

Gage simply stared at him.

Devlin tightened his finger on the shotgun trigger beneath the table. “This is a setup. Tell me you know that. Please tell me you don’t really think I hurt Shannon or Kelly.”

Gage pulled his hand from beneath the table. Devlin was disappointed but not all that surprised to see the .357 Magnum pointing at him.

“Convince me.” Gage’s voice was a deadly echo in the small room.

All Devlin had to do was squeeze the trigger and a bullet would rip through the soft wood with deadly force. If anyone besides Gage were sitting in that chair, pointing a gun at him, he would have already shot them. But the man across from him wasn’t a stranger. He’d been Devlin’s closest friend for over a decade. And since Devlin could count all of his friends on one hand, that meant something. It meant everything.

He studied Gage’s eyes, the little lines at the corners tight with tension. His mouth was a thin line. The hand holding the gun made a telling wobble before Gage tightened his grip and steadied it.

Devlin was betting everything on that one little wobble. He carefully eased his finger off the trigger. “Why should I bother trying to convince you that I’m innocent?”

“Other than the fact that I’m holding a gun on you?”

He raised a brow. “Other than that.”

Gage stared at him for a full minute before cursing viciously and shoving his gun into his shoulder holster. “You’d better hope that Cyprian doesn’t realize I couldn’t shoot you. If he does, he’ll send someone who will, like Ace. Remember when an EXIT order was issued against Ace’s longtime girlfriend? Cyprian assigned another enforcer to carry out the sentence and told Ace about it as a courtesy. Rumors are that Ace *volunteered* to kill her and filleted her like a fish, splitting her open from the neck down—right after making love to her. Going after someone like you or me wouldn’t make him blink twice.”

As always, hearing about Ace's brutality sent a surge of anger sweeping through Devlin. But he had his own survival to focus on right now. "So Cyprian really did send you to kill me. He issued an EXIT order."

"What did you think he would do? He thinks you've gone rogue, out of control. He thinks you've already killed one enforcer and will probably kill Kelly too. One of the Savannah detectives has already been digging into EXIT. Damage control on this is going to be costly."

"And I'm one of those costs."

"What would you do in Cyprian's position? Weighing everything, looking at the facts, at what he thinks are the facts anyway?"

Devlin shoved back from the table and stood. "I would have sent Ace."

Gage grinned for the first time since entering the kitchen. "Yeah, you probably would have. God save me if my life is ever in your hands. You would have shot me without giving me a chance."

Devlin reached beneath the table, pulled the shotgun out, and set it on top of the photographs. "Give me more credit than that. You're still alive."

His friend turned pale, but before he could say anything, his cell phone rang. Gage pulled it out of his pocket and took the call. "Yeah." He listened for a moment, his troubled eyes rising to Devlin's. "No, Cyprian. Looks like I just missed him. The coffee is still warm."

EMILY HID A yawn behind her hand and straightened in her desk chair, struggling to stay awake as she finished reading a report on her computer screen.

"Great way to spend a Saturday, huh?" Tuck's voice called out to her from across the squad room as he maneuvered down the aisle to his desk. "Wait, you look like hell. Please tell me you haven't been here all night."

"Thanks a lot. And, yeah. Guilty." She waved at the handful of other detectives at their desks. "I'm not the only one. So you aren't allowed to fuss."

He glanced around. "Yeah. I am. That's the night shift about to go home, not the day shift working a double. Go home, Emily. Take a nap. Come back in a few hours."

"I already took a nap beneath my desk. I'm fine."

“No. You’re not. Your eyes are crossing.” He sat across from her.

“Stop acting like my mother and take a look at this.”

He snickered. “Mom still thinks you’re not living up to your full potential since you aren’t a doctor?”

“If I’m not in the medical field, I might as well sell burgers and fries for all the respect my family shows me. Get over here.”

He shoved his foot against the side of his desk, sending his chair rolling across the space that separated them. “What are we looking at?” He peered at the screen. “Virginia Hawley’s medical report?”

“Skim through it. Tell me your gut feeling.”

He frowned and grabbed the mouse, scrolling through the two pages before sitting back. “Pretty cut-and-dried. Multiple bruises, lacerations. Ligature marks on her ankles and wrists. The doctor mentions a cross-shaped bruise with each of the ligature marks. Did Hawley say what that was from?”

“She wasn’t sure. Maybe from the rope.”

He shrugged. “The rest of it looks fairly standard to me. What’s bothering you about it?”

“She wasn’t sexually assaulted.”

“Serial killers don’t always rape their victims,” he reminded her.

“I know. It just seems . . . surprising, given that she was tied up. There aren’t any broken bones either. Not even a cracked rib. Wouldn’t you expect that from the number of bruises?”

He pursed his lips and tilted his head back and forth as he considered her question. “Okay, yeah, probably. I guess he just didn’t hit her hard enough to break bones. Maybe he’s not a big guy. Or he just likes leaving marks on the skin, some kind of fetish. Or maybe he would have broken bones if he’d kept her longer.”

“I don’t think so.” She clicked the mouse and maximized another document. “I’m not the only one who pulled an all-nighter. Kennerly was here too. He finished all three autopsies. And *this* is the part that bothers me.” She highlighted a line in the report.

“Huh.” His brows rose. “No broken bones on that one either. Okay, but Carolyn Buchanan—I mean, Shannon Fisher—had multiple fractures. Kennerly noted that in the basement, even before he performed the autopsies.”

“True, but once he performed Shannon’s autopsy he concluded those breaks, all of them, were set correctly and healed with no issue, which wouldn’t be typical if an abuser had broken those bones. He wouldn’t have sought medical treatment for the vic.”

“Agreed. Fisher was either accident-prone or had a dangerous job or hobby. But her attacker isn’t the one who caused the fractures.”

“Right. Set that aside and what do we have? *None* of the three women in this case—four if you count Hawley—had broken bones as a result of their treatment by the killer. None, that is, except for the hyoid bone in their throats.”

“Wait, the killer was strong enough to strangle them, but not strong enough to break any other bones when he beat them?”

She tried to imagine Devlin as the man who’d hurt these women. He was tall, fit, arms bulging with muscles. If he’d beaten someone, wouldn’t he break some of their bones? He was certainly capable of violence. He’d killed Hawley’s abductor with his bare hands. And she hadn’t changed her mind that he was hiding something, that he might very well be the hired assassin she’d believed him to be back in the interrogation room. So then, why couldn’t she picture him hurting these women, or any woman?

She shrugged. “I don’t know what to think.”

“That’s because you’re exhausted. Go home. Don’t come back until you’ve had at least four or five hours of sleep.”

“I told you, I’m fine.”

“Okay. Then I guess you want to hang around for Drier’s press conference. That should be fun. It’s scheduled to start in a couple of hours.”

She shot him an aggravated look. “I’ll be out of here in five minutes.”

He laughed as she shut down her computer.

GOING TO THE police station was risky, but Devlin considered it a risk worth taking. Whoever had brutally murdered Shannon was either holding Kelly as his prisoner or had already killed her. Until a body was found, Devlin was holding out hope she was still alive and he could save her. And if she could save *him* in the process by telling his boss he wasn’t involved, that would be one hell of a fringe benefit.

He figured the fastest way to find her was to catch up on the police investigation, so he wouldn't waste time covering the same ground they'd already explored. That was why he was once again in the lobby of the one place where he felt the least comfortable, the police station.

One specific thing he wanted was a copy of the missing persons report that had been filed on Shannon. Getting a copy, or at least getting O'Malley to share the information, would take some creative lies. But he'd find a way. It was bugging the hell out of him that an enforcer could have been reported missing without any alarms sounding within EXIT. Shouldn't someone there have known she was unaccounted for? Her parents knew she worked for EXIT as a tour guide. Wouldn't they have called someone there to ask if they'd seen Shannon? He had way too many questions and almost no answers.

He started toward the main desk to ask for O'Malley, automatically scanning the lobby for potential threats. When he noticed a young man on the other side of the room, he stopped. There was nothing about the man that made him look any different from anyone else sitting on the benches and chairs waiting to see whomever they were there to see. Nothing except his deathly stillness, and the way he seemed to look at everyone *except* Devlin, as if purposely trying not to draw his attention.

An EXIT enforcer? Had Cyprian given EXIT orders to two different assassins? Or maybe this young kid was the real rogue, the one who was framing Devlin. Doubtful. Devlin didn't recognize him. And he knew the faces of every enforcer EXIT employed. The only way this guy could be an enforcer was if he was a new recruit, fresh out of training, still on probation. Which meant he had a handler somewhere. That upped the number of people after Devlin to at least three—Gage, this kid, his handler—and possibly four, depending on who was orchestrating this conspiracy against him.

The young man's gaze met his and quickly flitted away. Oh, yeah, he was definitely watching Devlin and trying unsuccessfully not to be obvious.

This was all spiraling out of control fast. He needed to talk to Cyprian again, try to convince him he was innocent—or as *innocent* as Devlin could ever be at this point in his life. But right now, the *only* thing that mattered was figuring a way out of the police station and into hiding without getting himself, or anyone else, killed. Seeing O'Malley was no longer an option.

He couldn’t risk making her a target by being seen with her again. If Cyprian were already convinced Devlin had gone rogue, it wouldn’t take much of a leap to think that he’d told O’Malley more than he should have, especially if she’d said anything outrageous on the phone when she’d called EXIT.

Keeping the rookie in his peripheral line of vision, he strolled back toward the front doors. His plan was to use EXIT’s own rules against them. Rule number #3: *Never kill anyone in law enforcement*. The only exception to any of the rules was if EXIT’s mission was in jeopardy, serious jeopardy, and there wasn’t a viable alternative. Which meant the rookie couldn’t shoot Devlin if it meant shooting a cop to get to him.

Not knowing who might be watching from outside, he stopped well back from the glass doors, waiting for his chance. The rookie suddenly stood, as if only now realizing Devlin’s intent. Devlin timed the movements of a large group of detectives and uniformed officers heading toward the doors. Ten feet, nine, eight.

The rookie started toward him, his movements jerky, panicked, as he tried to push his way through another group of visitors between him and Devlin.

Five feet, four . . .

The rookie burst through the group, turning his head back and forth, searching for Devlin.

Devlin edged closer to the door. *Now!*

AVOIDING THE MAIN lobby of the police station so she wouldn’t get stuck talking to anyone, Emily headed out the side door to the parking lot. As soon as she passed the visitor’s row, she stopped and did a double take. There was only one vehicle parked there, on the end, near the street. A white Ford pickup. The same one she’d ridden in earlier—Devlin’s truck. Why was he at the police station?

She headed to the truck and looked through the driver’s window. Empty. She felt the hood. Warm. He must have just gotten here. Had he gone into the lobby while she’d gone out the side? She debated continuing to her car,

but her curiosity wouldn’t let her do that. She wanted to know why Devlin was here and whether it had anything to do with the case.

She rounded the corner of the building to go in through the front this time, then stopped. What if Tuck caught her talking to Devlin and started teasing her again? She’d told him her suspicions about EXIT Inc. right before she’d left. Big mistake. He’d told her exactly what he thought about her ideas, that she was letting all those muscles distract her and was wasting time looking into both Buchanan and the company he worked for. Could he be right? Was she not thinking clearly? Was she really that shallow that a few dimples and a flat stomach could make her see clues where they didn’t really exist?

Her shoulders slumped. If there were even a chance Tuck was right, she should go home right now. If Devlin asked for her upstairs, Tuck would take care of it. That’s what partners were for.

She started to turn back around when movement across the street caught her attention. There, partially concealed by a coffee stand, was Devlin Buchanan. But he wasn’t getting coffee. He looked almost like he was . . . hiding . . . or watching someone. She followed the direction of his gaze. He was looking at the police station’s front entrance.

Tuck’s teasing faded into insignificance. Something was going on here, and she was going to find out what it was.

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Chapter Eleven

HALF-HIDDEN BEHIND A busy coffee stand, Devlin stood across the street from the police station. Blending in with the group of policemen leaving the station had gotten him out of the building, but instead of turning toward the police lot where his truck was parked, they'd continued to the diner a few feet from where he was now. He'd been forced to stay with them or lose his cover. But when they went inside, he turned around to see if the man from the lobby had followed him.

Sure enough, the recruit was staring right at him from a crowd of pedestrians waiting for traffic to clear so they could cross the street. There was no point in either of them pretending not to notice each other now. The game was on. But since they'd both come directly from the police station, with metal detectors at the entrance, neither of them was armed. Confronting the rookie now might be Devlin's only chance to try to talk to him, to find out who his handler was. But only if the handler wasn't nearby, possibly with Devlin in his crosshairs even now.

As the recruit started across the street toward him, Devlin decided to stand his ground. But not here. In the alley. There were some Dumpsters twenty feet in that he could use for cover, with scraps of lumber lying on the ground nearby. Those could become lethal weapons in a pinch.

He headed into the alley, grabbed a thick length of wood, and positioned himself so his right hand, holding the makeshift weapon, was concealed by

the Dumpster. When the young man came into view, he headed straight for Devlin without hesitation and without fear.

Not a good sign.

He stopped about five feet away and pulled a small derringer from the waistband of his pants.

Damn.

The derringer might not be a powerful weapon, but at this close range, it could kill just as effectively as a higher caliber gun. The advantage of the derringer was that it was easy to hide. Devlin used them himself when the situation called for something small and deadly.

The kid stood with his back to the main street. No one passing by on the sidewalk would notice anything unusual, just two men facing each other, talking. Unless someone stepped into the alley, they wouldn't see the gun.

"How'd you manage to get a gun into the police station without setting off the alarms?" Devlin asked, mildly impressed.

"I didn't. I hid several weapons outside before going in. Regardless of which way you went when you left, I could be armed in less than a minute."

He sounded pleased with himself, cocky, which was just fine with Devlin. Arrogance could make a man careless, overconfident, vulnerable.

"Well played," he said.

The kid nodded, his face flushing beneath the praise. Good grief. He was definitely a rookie. And he looked too young to have even left home yet. Were they recruiting them right out of high school now instead of college? Suddenly Devlin felt every one of his thirty-four years. He motioned toward the gun. "Is that really necessary?"

"Considering your reputation, yeah. It's necessary."

Well that answered one of Devlin's questions—whether the kid was with EXIT as he'd suspected. He certainly didn't have a reputation anywhere else.

"You have me at a disadvantage. You know who I am, but I don't know you."

The kid's mouth scrunched, as if he were debating whether to say anything.

"It's just a name, kid," Devlin said. "I can call you anything. Doesn't matter to me if it's your real name or not."

His shoulders stiffened at the "kid" label. "Cougar. My name's Cougar."

Devlin barely managed not to roll his eyes. Cub would have been far more fitting for a rookie like this one.

“You do know that pulling a gun on another enforcer is against the code we’re sworn to uphold?”

“You’ve pointed guns at other enforcers plenty of times.”

Devlin tipped his head in acknowledgment. “True, but only in the course of doing my job of going after rogues. Since I haven’t gone rogue, you’ve got no reason to point your weapon at me. Put it away. *Now*.”

His brows drew together as if he were confused, but he didn’t lower his gun. “You need to come back to headquarters with me, sir. Cyprian’s orders.”

Code words for “get out of this public place so I can kill you without witnesses.”

“Why?”

“Not my concern. I’m just following orders.”

“Tell you what,” Devlin said. “Put your gun away and I’ll call Cyprian,” he bluffed, trying to buy some time. “If he confirms that he wants to see me, I’ll go. But I’m sure not going anywhere with you holding a gun on me.”

Uncertainty flickered in Cougar’s eyes. He’d been told Devlin had gone rogue, but Devlin wasn’t acting like it. A rogue wouldn’t offer to call the man who’d ordered the hit on him.

Devlin flexed his right hand around the scrap of lumber. Could he buy himself a couple of seconds if he threw the board at Cougar? If the kid hesitated even a little bit, Devlin could take advantage of the two mistakes the rookie had already made—standing too close and not ordering him to move away from the Dumpster. If the kid ducked to avoid the board, all Devlin had to do was give the Dumpster a huge shove. If his aim were true, it would hit Cougar, knocking him down and hopefully sending his derringer flying. The metal Dumpster would also provide good cover.

“All right.” He tensed, ready to make his move. “I can be reasonable, even if you’re not. My truck is—”

“You won’t need your truck.”

“I can’t leave it parked in the police lot. They’ll get suspicious, start asking questions. The company wouldn’t want that.”

His gaze flicked to the top of the roof to Devlin’s left. Then he smiled.

Shoot. The kid's handler had arrived. Things had just gotten complicated.

"Don't worry about the truck. It's taken care of." Cougar's voice was smug, confident now that his babysitter was nearby.

If Cougar wasn't worried about the truck, then his handler had already removed Devlin's hidden gun and had hidden a GPS tracker somewhere inside, just in case Devlin got away and tried to drive it.

Damn. He'd really loved that truck.

Cougar fairly beamed at Devlin, certain he was about to bag his mark. Devlin could well imagine the bull his handler had fed him, being specifically chosen for the honor of bringing in *the Enforcer*. He'd been puffed up with importance, when in reality he was like the redshirt on a *Star Trek* episode—the expendable man, always the first to die. They'd sent the rookie in to see if Devlin would cooperate, fully prepared to let Cougar pay the price if he put up a fight. He almost felt sorry for the kid.

"Police, drop your weapon!" O'Malley's voice rang out from behind Cougar.

Ah, hell.

She was standing a few feet behind Cougar, slightly off to his right. Her gun was shaking so hard he was surprised she didn't drop it. Devlin's stomach sank. What was she thinking, to put herself in danger like this? There was an entire building full of cops across the street. If she thought he needed help, she should have gone for backup instead of putting herself in the line of fire. He was so furious he wanted to shake her. But first he had to save her.

Cougar's knuckles had whitened on the derringer's grip. He was just as nervous as O'Malley.

Devlin had to calm the kid down, make sure he thought this through. He needed to remind the kid that killing a cop was forbidden. There was no reason for Cougar or his handler to consider her a threat to EXIT. As long as that held true, she was safe.

He subtly shook his head, trying to warn Cougar off.

The kid just stared at him, his eyes wide and uncertain. He didn't have a clue what to do.

"Drop the weapon," O'Malley repeated, her voice tight, squeaking just a little, just enough to transmit her nervousness.

Cougar picked up on that nervousness. His gaze shot up to a spot somewhere over Devlin's left shoulder. The tension in Cougar seemed to drain right out of him. His handler must have given him some kind of signal. The kid was back in his cocky, self-assured mode again. Which meant he was not dangerous to only himself but to everyone around him. He raised his hands as if to surrender and slowly turned to face O'Malley.

Please, O'Malley. Don't panic. No sudden moves.

"Drop your weapon, now," she demanded.

Cougar immediately tossed the derringer to the ground.

That was way too easy. Slowly, so as not to draw attention, Devlin turned his head, looking for the handler. There, a shadow at the top of the building, moving to the mouth of the alley. He had O'Malley covered.

"Come out from behind the Dumpster, Devlin," she ordered.

Now *that* he was glad to do, so he could get closer to her and to Cougar.

Leaving the piece of lumber sitting on the metal ledge, he stepped beside his fellow enforcer. The rookie glanced at him, his cocky self-assurance firmly in place. Devlin would have loved nothing more than to punch that naïve arrogance right out of him.

"Officer O'Malley." Devlin gave her one of his best smiles. "This isn't what it looks like. Steve here"—he waved in Cougar's direction—"is an old buddy of mine. He was just joking around. His gun isn't even loaded. There's no reason to be alarmed."

Cougar smiled. "Yes, that's right. I'm an old buddy of Devlin's. We were goofing off. Sorry about that, Officer."

She took a few steps closer. "Goofing off, huh?" She eyed him up and down. "How do you two know each other? Are you one of those alleged tour guides from EXIT like Devlin?"

Devlin winced. That was the *worst* thing she could have said.

"The gun makes sense," she continued, "if you're a trained assassin too."

No. *That* was the worst thing she could have said.

He noted the subtle tensing of Cougar's body. O'Malley was fishing, trying to get information. She didn't really know anything and she certainly couldn't prove anything, but Cougar didn't know that. His handler didn't know that. From their perspective, she knew EXIT's true mission.

She'd just become their primary target.

Devlin forced a laugh and desperately tried to salvage the situation. “I told you already, Officer O’Malley. That theory of yours is all wrong. We’re __”

Cougar’s eyes flicked upward. A signal. He dodged to the right, toward his gun lying on the ground.

Devlin lunged forward, grabbing O’Malley’s gun out of her hand, jerking her toward the mouth of the alley just as a puff of concrete exploded where she’d been standing. The shooter on top of the building had targeted her, and he had a silencer.

She cursed and struggled against Devlin. He twisted and pulled her around the corner of the building just as another puff of concrete exploded near their feet, this time from Cougar’s gun, which barked loudly. But the small caliber made it sound more like a car backfiring than a gunshot. None of the pedestrians on the sidewalk out front seemed to even notice.

He clasped her small body against him, shoved her gun down the front of his pants, and whisked her into the diner. She pushed at his chest, struggling to break free.

“Let me go,” she demanded, squirming in his arms.

The café was bustling with diners eating breakfast before beginning their day. Unfortunately, about half of them were wearing uniforms. There was no way he could haul O’Malley through the building to the rear exit as he’d hoped.

“Devlin, I mean it. Let me go now, or I swear I’ll scream. Every police officer in this place will come down on you.”

An elderly couple waiting to be seated stared at them in alarm.

Devlin winked at them before grinning down at her. “Ah, honey, I told you I was sorry. Just let me explain.”

He pulled her down the short hallway beside the entrance that led to the restrooms. When she opened her mouth, no doubt to make good on her threat to scream, he clamped his mouth down on hers.

Knowing the couple was watching, and that dozens of cops were one shout away, he had to convince them O’Malley wasn’t really in trouble. He had to make it look like they were having a lovers’ spat. As he pulled her closer to the restrooms, he poured everything he had into that kiss. He cradled the back of her head with one hand so she couldn’t break free and clasped her body tightly against his so she couldn’t kick him like she was

trying to. He didn’t dare use his tongue for fear that she’d bite him, but he expertly molded his lips to hers, teasing, tasting, caressing, breathing her breath into his lungs.

By the time he’d hauled her through the door marked LADIES and into the extra-large handicapped stall, the feel of her soft breasts crushed against him had his pulse rushing in his ears. He should have stopped kissing her, but suddenly kissing her was all he could think about. He was consumed by the warmth of her body pressed to his, the delicate, flowery scent of her shampoo, the unexpected sweetness of her soft lips. If half of EXIT’s enforcers came for him right now, he couldn’t have stopped kissing her.

Because, by some miracle, she’d started kissing him back.

The moment her lips turned beneath his and moved against him in wanton abandon, all logical thought ceased to exist.

He thrust his tongue inside her warm, welcoming mouth and pressed her back against the stall door. She answered his every demand with her own, her tongue dueling with his, her heat scorching him from the inside out. When she moaned low in her throat, he gave an answering growl and slid his hand down her back to the delicious curve of her bottom. He lifted her against his thigh, reveling in the soft feel of her through her clothing, the heat of her that branded itself on him.

A toilet flushed in the next stall.

They jerked apart, gasping for air, as the other person in the restroom muttered something about “rude people” and “get a room” before yanking the main door open.

O’Malley’s eyes widened. No, *Emily’s* eyes widened. He could never think of her as O’Malley again after *this*.

She laughed, then covered her mouth, as if shocked at herself. She stared at him, confusion chasing a myriad of other emotions across her expressive features as she obviously tried to make sense of what had just happened.

Devlin was just as confused as she was. It was a kiss—a hot, intense kiss—but still, it was *just* a kiss. And yet, every nerve ending inside him felt as if it had been seared and left raw. His erection strained against the front of his pants. And his arms ached, *ached*, to pull her soft curves against him again. His hands shook as he adjusted his pants to ease the pressure.

Emily’s gaze dipped down, then shot back to his, her cheeks flooding with color.

He spread his hands in a helpless gesture, struggling for words that would make sense of a kiss that had not only tilted his world but knocked it completely off its axis.

A knock sounded on the main door. “Ma’am, sir, I’m Mr. Hutchins, the manager,” a man’s voice called. “Another patron complained that you were in here together. I’m afraid I have to ask you to leave.”

Emily’s confusion turned to horror. Her eyes silently begged him to do something.

He cleared his throat, then cleared it again before he trusted his ability to speak. “I’m sorry, Mr. Hutchins,” he called out. “My wife and I had an argument and needed some privacy to . . . resolve our differences. We’ll be right out.”

“Two minutes or I’m sending the police in after you.” Footsteps sounded outside the door and rapidly faded away.

Emily shoved the door to the handicapped stall open and ran into the main bathroom. She turned on the water, wet a paper towel, and pressed it to her heated cheeks.

Devlin watched with regret as the disheveled seductress disappeared and was replaced by the all-business policewoman. She patted down her hair, adjusted her clothes, and whirled around to face him. The only sign of the passion they’d shared was her lips, still swollen from his kiss. Which just made him want to kiss her all over again.

She held out her hand. “Give me back my gun.”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry, Emily—”

“Detective O’Malley,” she snapped.

He sighed. Did she really expect him to call her that after sticking his tongue down her throat? The woman didn’t have any idea how much she’d affected him. Which was probably a good thing.

“I can’t give you the gun,” he said. “Not yet. Not until it’s safe.”

“Safe? For whom?”

“For me. I don’t want you shooting me just because of a misunderstanding.”

“Misunderstanding?” she squeaked. “I hope you’re referring to the kiss, because what happened in that alley was no misunderstanding. That so-called friend of yours shot at us. And there was someone else there, on top

of the building, someone who took the first shot. He had a silencer. What is going on?"

"The kiss wasn't a misunderstanding. It was . . . incredible."

Her eyes widened. When he didn't say anything else, she said, "And the alley? The shooting?"

"Give me a minute."

"For what?"

He grinned and held his hands out in a gesture of helplessness. "To come up with a plausible-sounding lie?"

She rolled her eyes. "Now *that* I believe. Nothing you've told me so far has been the truth, has it? Well, I'll tell *you* the truth. Kidnapping a police officer will get you in prison for decades, and that's just the first charge I'm going to slap on you if you don't tell me what's really going on and give me my gun. Now."

"All right. If that's what you want." He reached for his belt and unbuckled it.

"What are you doing?" Her voice rose an octave.

"Giving you what you want." He unzipped his pants.

Her face turned a rather charming shade of red. "Stop that right now," she squeaked.

He watched her as he slid his hand into the top of his boxer briefs and slowly pulled out her pistol. The waistband snapped against his stomach. Emily jerked and hit her head against the wall behind her.

"Here you go." He held it out toward her. "I didn't have a holster. That was the only place I could put it. Sorry about that."

Her breasts rose and fell as her breaths rasped in and out. She reached for the gun, her fingers touching his, sliding across his skin to the butt of the pistol.

"I've got it," she whispered. "You can let go."

He shuddered. "You're dangerous." His voice was thicker and deeper than usual as he ever so carefully adjusted himself and then zipped his pants. As he buckled his belt, she stepped around him, holding the gun down at her side. At least she wasn't pointing it at him. Yet.

Progress.

"We're going back to the police station," she said, her voice quiet.

"We need to talk first."

A knock sounded and the door opened. “You two, out, now,” Mr. Hutchins said.

“Oh, good grief.” Emily fished her badge from inside her blouse where it hung on a chain around her neck and held it up.

“I’m a cop. This man is a witness to a crime. I need a few more minutes. Get out.”

The man’s brows climbed into his hairline. He jerked back into the hallway and shut the door.

“Huh. That was easy,” she said. “I must have sounded pretty threatening.”

Devlin gestured toward her hand. “Actually, I think it was the gun you were pointing at him.”

“What?” She looked down and blinked, as if surprised to realize she was pointing the gun toward the bathroom door. She groaned and thrust it into the holster at her waist. “That’s like the fourth or fifth time in the past twenty-four hours that I’ve pointed a gun at a civilian. I blame you.”

He grinned.

She narrowed her eyes.

He cleared his throat and forced a sober expression, but it wasn’t easy. The woman was utterly adorable, especially when she was pissed off.

She pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and called Tuck, giving him a quick account of what had happened in the alley.

Devlin’s good humor fled. That stunt he’d pulled, kissing her to distract her, had distracted *him* as well. How many minutes had passed since they’d entered the diner? Cougar and his handler could be anywhere by now, or right outside, waiting for them to emerge.

Emily ended the call. “While SWAT gears up to secure the area outside, you can explain what was really going on in that alley.”

He ignored her question and considered their options. SWAT was certainly capable of getting Emily out of the diner and into the police station unharmed. But what about later? When she went home? Devlin would rather keep her with him so he could watch over her. But wouldn’t it be better if he used himself as bait and led them away from the police station? Maybe, in the short term. It was a temporary solution at best because Emily was still vulnerable as long as EXIT thought she was a threat.

There was another option—tell Emily the truth about EXIT so she'd fully understand the danger. She was an intelligent woman. Faced with the facts, she'd have no choice but to seek protective custody until the danger was over. No; Devlin had learned enough from his law-enforcement family to know that wasn't a good solution either. When budgets got tight and Emily couldn't produce any evidence to back up her claims, the protection duty would be canceled. She'd have to go into hiding for the rest of her life, always looking over her shoulder.

No. Impossible. That wasn't fair to her, not when it was Devlin's fault that she was in danger in the first place. One bad decision—allowing her to ride with him in his truck to go see Alex—had set everything in motion. If he'd made her get out, she wouldn't have seen him kill Hawley's abductor and wouldn't have done what no one had the entire time he'd been an enforcer: connected the dots and realized he was an assassin.

He had to figure out how to ensure her safety long-term. That meant talking to Cyprian again, trying to reason with him so he'd call his dogs off and leave Emily alone. For now, Devlin would just have to allow her to go back to the station under SWAT's protection. He could make it even safer for her by going out the back and making sure Cougar and his handler saw him. As long as they were trying to kill him, he'd at least have the peace of mind of knowing they weren't going after Emily.

"Start explaining, Devlin," she repeated, sounding annoyed that he hadn't answered her yet. "And don't think you can kiss me again to stall for time. I'm onto your game." Her right hand hovered over her holster, but her gaze dropped to his mouth, as if she were thinking about their kiss.

The thought of pulling her into his arms and going for round two had him hardening again. What was it about this one specific woman that was so addictive, so compelling? She was nothing like Arianna, his fiancée. She had been kind and sweet, tall and willowy thin, with legs that could have graced a fashion-show runway. He'd always thought of her as the perfect woman. And then he'd met Emily, a little spitfire with generous curves who was a full foot shorter than he was. Arianna would have been horrified if her long, honey-blonde hair was ever out of place. But even though Emily's shoulder-length brown hair was messy half the time, he thought it looked absolutely perfect on her. The unruly curls reflected her personality and had him longing to tug on them to see if they'd bounce back like a spring.

“Devlin?” She stared at him, waiting for his explanation about the alley. She was all business and completely unaware that she was confusing the hell out of him and turning his perfectly planned, organized, categorized world upside down.

The alley. He had to make up a lie about the alley. No problem. He was good at lying. Lies were useful. They were shields against the ugliness of reality. A carefully crafted lie could mean the difference between life and death. So it didn’t bother him at all to lie to Emily right now to protect her—even though he wished he didn’t have to.

He drew a steadying breath and schooled his features into a look of embarrassment. He wished he knew how to blush to make the lies he was about to tell more convincing.

“I might have . . . taken advantage . . . of Steve’s sister and taken off without leaving a number. The other guy, on the roof, that was his brother. They came out here for some old-fashioned justice—a shotgun wedding, so to speak. When you entered the picture, I think it spooked them. Things got out of hand.”

She frowned, weighing his answer. “I can totally see you taking advantage of some naïve young woman and making enemies of her family. Probably got her pregnant too.”

He gritted his teeth but held on to his sheepish look, barely.

“I don’t buy the part where they got spooked and started shooting. I identified myself as a police officer.”

He shrugged. “Did you smell Steve’s breath? I figure he and Jack pumped up their courage with one too many beers before they confronted me. Alcohol and good judgment don’t exactly mix.”

She narrowed her eyes. “It’s what, nine o’clock in the morning? And you expect me to believe they’re already drunk?”

Shoot. He hadn’t thought of that.

“What about the silencer?” she demanded. “Did you think I didn’t notice one of the guys had a noise suppressor? Your average Joe doesn’t exactly walk around with expensive, illegal equipment like that.”

“It’s not illegal if you register a suppressor with the ATF. Steve and Jack are typical gun nuts. They probably have concealed weapon permits too.”

Uncertainty flickered in her eyes. He tried not to feel offended that she was buying his story so easily. He wasn’t in the habit of seducing innocent

young women and taking off like a coward after getting them pregnant.

“I’m not saying I totally believe you,” she said. “You may have made this all up on the fly. But I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt. For now. We need to get across the street and sit down for another interview. I already had a boatload of questions for you even before that fiasco in the alley.”

“Sure, let me call Alex first so he can sit in on the interview.” From the aggravated look on her face, he could tell she didn’t like that, just as he’d hoped. He pulled out his cell phone to complete his bluff.

She hurried forward and wrapped her hand around the phone. Since he didn’t let it go, that meant her hand was essentially holding his. He found that he didn’t mind that one bit. He grinned. She snatched her hand away and backed up a few steps, her face flushing a delightful pink.

“There’s no reason to involve a lawyer,” she said. “I’ll make you a deal. I won’t press charges against you for this debacle, as long as you answer a few harmless questions and you *don’t* call Alex.”

“What kinds of questions?”

“I want Steve’s and Jack’s full names so I can follow up with them. There’s a whole host of charges I’ll lay at their door.”

He nodded his agreement. He could make up a last name to go along with the fake first names.

“And I want to talk to you about what you do at EXIT.”

“No.”

She blinked. “No?” Her cell phone beeped. She grabbed it impatiently and took the call. A few seconds later, she shoved the phone back in her pocket. “Tuck’s outside. The SWAT team is set up and ready to cover us in case those two yokels decide to start shooting again. The area is secure. Let’s go.” She headed toward the door.

“Wait.”

She turned, her brows raised in question.

He braced his legs in a wide stance and crossed his arms. “If I’m not under arrest, there’s no reason for me to go to the police station.”

Her mouth firmed into a tight line. “You’re not under arrest only if you agree to the deal I offered. The man who killed Shannon Fisher and the unidentified victims in that basement is holding at least two other women right now doing God only knows what to them. All I’m asking you to do is

answer some questions to help me find them so I can save their lives. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

Of course it did. But he also knew Kelly Parker and anyone with her couldn't be saved by Emily and her fellow cops. It was becoming increasingly clear that Kelly was the bait in a trap to catch *him*. The killer would keep her alive, maybe even provide proof of life at some point, to lure Devlin to wherever she was being held. Did he care about her suffering? Of course. Which meant he had to come up with a plan to save her without charging full speed ahead and getting himself killed. Because once the killer eliminated his main prey—Devlin—he'd have no reason to keep either of the women alive.

He braced himself for his next lie. If Emily thought he was bad to supposedly get a woman pregnant and abandon her, she was going to despise him after this next one.

"Finding and saving those women is your job," he said. "I have other things to do that are a lot more fun than sitting in an interrogation room."

The shocked, disgusted look that crossed her face was no worse than the way he felt inside. Like a jerk, and a damn coward. But if sacrificing his pride kept her safe, so be it. He had to get outside and offer himself as bait to lead his enemies away from the diner before she went out the front. He strode past her to the bathroom door.

"Stop, Devlin, or I'll shoot."

He slowly turned around. Seeing his sexy little detective pointing a gun at him again seemed every kind of wrong, especially when his blood was still raging from the hot kiss they'd just shared.

"Seriously?" he said, faking shock. "You're drawing on an unarmed man? *Again?* What will Drier say about that? Or Alex? I smell a lawsuit."

She stomped her foot in frustration.

The urge to laugh at her childish action had him clenching his teeth. She was the perfect blend of innocence, naïveté, and just plain stubbornness. Before he did something they'd both regret—like kiss her again—he slipped out of the bathroom.

A quick side trip through the kitchen too quickly for anyone to even question his presence and he was down the back hallway, standing at the rear exit. Now all he had to do was make it to some kind of cover—without

getting shot—and lead Cougar and his handler away from Emily, all without a weapon of his own to return fire.

Simple. No problem. He shook his head and cursed his decision to go to the police station this morning. Then again, if he hadn't, he wouldn't have gotten to kiss Emily. If he were killed in the next few minutes, at least he'd die with that intoxicating memory still lingering on his lips.

He cracked the door open and scanned the nearby buildings. Then he flung the door wide and took off running.

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Chapter Twelve

EMILY SHUT THE conference-room door behind her and crossed the squad room. Tuck's face was alight with curiosity as he scooted his chair beside her desk, like a lion lying in wait for his prey.

"Well, what did they say?" He waved toward the glass-walled conference room as if she didn't know who "they" were.

After spending the past half hour being grilled by Lieutenant Drier and the FBI about the alley shootout and whether it could be connected to the case, she wasn't likely to get confused on that point. Since Pierce and Tessa Buchanan were among the agents in the conference room, it had been particularly challenging to explain what had happened and why she hadn't brought Devlin in to give a statement.

It would have been *less* challenging if she'd told them the whole truth. Embarrassment had kept her quiet about the more intimate details. But something else had kept her from mentioning what she'd said to Cyprian about EXIT and Devlin's possible role in the company. Why? She supposed part of it was that Drier and Tuck had already shot down her theories about EXIT. But there was something else. She didn't want to get Devlin into any trouble.

Yesterday, concern for Devlin wouldn't have stopped her. But today, after that life-altering kiss, and after he'd risked his life—again—to save her, everything had changed. Whether she wanted him to or not, he was starting to *matter*. The irony wasn't lost on her. She was tasked with

upholding her city's laws. Devlin might possibly be a criminal; one of the worst kind, someone who killed for money. How she could care about him even a little bit was baffling. Especially since lying to protect him could impact her ability to solve the case.

All she could think of to excuse her actions was that she knew, deep in her bones, that there was more to Devlin than he showed to the world. She'd caught several glimpses of the good in him—like every time he helped another person, like Virginia Hawley, or risked his life for them, like he'd done for Emily. It was that core of goodness inside him that had her craving his company, wanting to get to know him better, and wanting to help him get out of whatever mess he'd gotten into as a result of his connection with EXIT. In short, *she* wanted to save *him*.

Maybe her momma was right. Maybe she should have been a doctor instead of a cop, because lying to the FBI and her boss was every kind of wrong for someone in law enforcement.

"Earth to Emily. Hello," Tuck's voice called out.

She was standing by her desk, staring at the conference room but not really seeing it.

"You okay? I think you might have fallen asleep on your feet."

She latched onto that excuse as she sat. "Yeah, I suppose I need to go home per the original plan and get some shut-eye."

"Agreed. But not until you give me the scoop. I'm sure Drier wasn't happy that SWAT had to be called out when he's trying to brief the FBI on the case in time for the press conference."

"Understatement. He blames me for making him split our resources since he has to send a CSI team to the alley and canvass the area for witnesses. But since the FBI was with him, he kept his growls to a dull roar. I'm sure he'll make up for it later."

"And?"

"And not much. The scoop is mostly what you already know. Our efforts to find the missing women have failed so far. Since time is of the essence if we're going to find them alive, Drier swallowed his pride and asked the FBI for help. He's reviewing the case with them right now. As for the shooting in the alley, they're all in agreement that it's probably unrelated."

Tuck leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs at the ankles. "What about Devlin Buchanan? They think it's a coincidence he was involved in

two different police incidents in two days, but the incidents aren't related? What about his brother and sister-in-law? What did they say about it?"

"Officially, Pierce and Tessa agree with the others. The two events are unrelated, just coincidences. Unofficially, I got the impression both of them were worried about Devlin. I imagine they'll be calling him as soon as the meeting is over. Good luck with that. I tried calling him a dozen times when he left me in that diner. He's not answering."

Tuck's eyes narrowed. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were worried about him."

She shrugged, pretending indifference. "I need to take his statement on the shooting to get me out of hot water with Drier. But on top of that, yeah, there are a couple of gun-toting crazies after him for some country justice and I don't know where he is. Of course I'm concerned. I'd be concerned about *anyone* in those circumstances."

He shook his head. "Nope. I'm not buying it. I think you're obsessed with this guy. I think you care way more about him than you would the average citizen on the street."

"I am *not* obsessed with him," she whispered, casting an anxious glance around the squad room. "How about we drop him as a subject and brainstorm the case?"

"What about that nap you're supposed to take?"

"In a few minutes. Humor me."

He rested his forearms on her desk. "All right. Let's start with the house where the victims were found."

"Owned by the city." She quoted the facts from memory. "Forcibly seized by eminent domain five years ago for a construction project. Funding was cut. Project canceled. No one lives there. And none of the neighbors live close enough to notice if some homeless guy, or a serial killer, took up residence."

"What about the previous owner? Maybe he's the killer and is squatting on the property that was taken from him."

"The team located the previous owners late last night and ruled them out. They're senior citizens with mobility issues and live in another state hundreds of miles away."

"Okay, I call that a dead end." He tapped his fingers on his leg. "I think it's interesting that we found only skeletons in the basement, no recent kills.

I wonder if the killer used that house as his playground at first, then moved to a new location, the one where Hawley was briefly held. If so, why did he bring Hawley back to that basement?"

"Excellent question, but I'm out of theories right now," she said. "What about a background report on the deceased vic we've identified—Shannon Fisher? Wasn't the night crew supposed to pull that together?"

He hesitated, then sighed and leaned back to grab a piece of paper off the top of his desk. "I probably shouldn't let you look at this."

"Why not?"

"It might send you off on a tangent."

She snatched the report. One key word immediately caught her attention. She drew a sharp breath. "Shannon Fisher was a tour guide for EXIT? Was that listed on the missing persons report her parents filed?"

"I knew you'd zero in on that. And yes, it was on the MPR too. Things are happening so fast, I didn't catch that yesterday when we figured out Fisher was one of the vics. Regardless, the detective who filed the MPR did his due diligence. He called human resources at her place of work and asked about her. They said no one there knew she was missing because she was on long-term leave."

"I spoke to Cyprian yesterday. He didn't mention anything about that."

Tuck shrugged. "Why would he? He's the CEO, and it's a big company. He wouldn't know or interact with every employee. Human resources wouldn't have had any reason to tell the CEO about an employee going missing."

"Who was her direct boss?"

"Some low guy on the totem pole, according to HR. You're welcome to review the MPR, but I really think this EXIT tie-in is just a coincidence."

Her stomach dropped. No, it wasn't a coincidence. It couldn't be. The odds had to be astronomical against two people connected to the case—Shannon and Devlin—working as "guides" for the same company when it didn't even have an office in Savannah. Alarm bells were going off in her head again about EXIT Incorporated, but this time she wasn't sure what to do.

She had to speak to Devlin. She had to get him to talk to her, to explain. Earlier, she'd been so convinced he was some kind of assassin. But could an assassin hold her so tenderly in his arms, as he'd done less than an hour

ago? Maybe the secrets he was hiding were something completely different. But if she spoke to him and he couldn't come up with a reasonable explanation for the links between the case and EXIT, she'd have no choice. She'd have to go to Drier, and the FBI, and make them listen. Her instincts told her EXIT was involved in the abductions and murders. She just didn't know how, or why.

Tuck gave her a funny look. "Aren't you going to try to convince me that EXIT is involved after all?"

She slowly shook her head. "No. I think I'm going to have to look into this on my own before we go down that road again."

His brows rose. "On your own? What does that mean? We're partners. In case you forgot."

"I know, I know. But there's something—" Her cell phone rang. She grabbed it like a lifeline while Tuck folded his arms, not looking happy with her at all. When she saw the number on the display, her pulse sped up.

"Who is it?" Tuck asked.

"Devlin. Sort of."

He frowned and waited while she took the call.

"Uh-huh," she said. "Uh-huh. Okay. Don't lose him. We're on our way." She shoved her phone into her pocket. "When I got back from that fiasco across the street, I *might* have asked one of the rookies to keep an eye on Buchanan's truck in the parking lot. And I *may* have asked him to tail Buchanan if he returned to the truck."

"Damn it, Emily."

"Come on, Tuck. I'm punch-drunk. There's no way I can maintain a tail without being seen. Besides, you're way better at that than me. I need you to drive."

He rolled his eyes and grabbed his keys.

"HE'S TAKING US on a tour of the Historic District." Emily clutched the armrest as Tuck took another turn. Devlin's white pickup truck was two blocks in front of them. Tuck had maintained the tail like a true pro, passing the truck when it slowed for a turn, driving down parallel streets, picking up the tail at the next major intersection. "He must know we're following him,

but I don’t see how. You’re better at following people than anyone else I know.”

“You don’t sound too happy about that.”

“I’m confused. Devlin’s driving like he knows someone is following him, almost like he *wants* someone to follow him. But he couldn’t have spotted us. What gives?”

The truck slowed, took another turn. Tuck continued straight, zipping to the next corner, pulling over to wait and see if the truck went down the side street. Seconds later, it roared past. Tuck waited until two more cars drove by before pulling out behind them and taking up his position again.

Emily squinted against the bright sun, her sleep-deprived eyesight nowhere near what it normally was. “Do you have binoculars in this thing?”

“Glove compartment.”

She flipped it open and papers flew out onto the floor as if propelled by a spring. “Really, Tuck? Do you ever throw stuff away? How do you *find* anything?”

“I have a system. The binoculars are in a small black case on the bottom right, all the way in the back.”

She shoved her hand where he said and immediately found the case. “Huh. You really do have a system.”

“Told you.” He grinned.

After zooming the cheap binoculars in on the truck, which was about ten car lengths ahead now, she said, “I’ll be damned. That’s not Devlin.”

“He’s tall, has dark hair sticking out of the edges of his baseball cap, and he’s driving Buchanan’s truck. Who else would he be?”

She lowered the binoculars. “I don’t know. But I don’t think that’s him. Devlin’s shoulders are broader.”

She cringed, immediately wishing she could take the words back. She shot a look at Tuck. He was staring at her, his brows raised.

He opened his mouth to say something.

“Don’t,” she warned. “Don’t go there.”

He clamped his mouth shut and watched the road.

The truck turned another corner.

“We’ve been down this street before,” Emily said. “This is a waste of time. Pull him over.”

“So you can admire his broad shoulders?”

“Tuck . . .” she warned.

“Okay, okay. How about justification, though, so I don’t get fired or sued by his lawyer?”

“I’ll make something up. If the driver *is* Devlin, I’ll remind him he forgot to give me the last names of those yokels in the alley. If it’s not him, we can arrest the driver for stealing the truck. Or something. Don’t worry, I’ll figure it out. Just pull him over. Please.”

“It’s your party.” He flipped his grill lights on and floored the accelerator, weaving through traffic and quickly catching up to the truck. The driver immediately put his blinkers on and eased to the curb.

“Well, that was easy,” Emily grumbled.

“Did you expect him to take off?”

She shrugged and popped her door open, arriving at the driver’s side just ahead of Tuck.

The driver rolled his window down and grinned. “Morning, Officer. Is there a problem?”

Definitely *not* Devlin. Devlin’s shoulders were indeed broader, thicker. His jaw was chiseled, his lips firm yet sensual. His eyes were a cloudy gray. This . . . imposter . . . had brilliant, azure blue eyes that were both striking and off-putting at the same time. From the waist up he seemed stocky, like she’d expect a man on the short side to look.

Suspicious, she leaned partially into the window and looked at the truck’s seat. She shook her head and pointed so Tuck, who was now standing on the other side, could see what she’d seen.

“Are you in the habit of sitting on a pillow when you drive, sir?” she asked sarcastically.

“Actually, yes. Easier on my back. Was I speeding, Officer?”

“I have no idea. Take the hat off.”

“If this is a strip search, let me warn you, I’m commando today.” He winked.

She very deliberately rested her hand on her holster.

He yanked his hat off and tossed it to the floorboard. Dark, shaggy hair dropped down to brush against his shoulders.

“Who are you?” Emily demanded.

He held his hand out the window. “Gage Thomas. Pleased to meet you.”

She ignored his hand and flashed her badge. “Why are you driving Devlin Buchanan’s truck?”

A look of dawning understanding crossed his face and he gave her a sheepish smile. “Is that why you pulled me over? Did you think I’d stolen his truck? I assure you, ah, Detective O’Malley, right? You flashed that badge so fast I’m not sure I caught it.” He leaned over toward the passenger window. “I didn’t see *your* badge, Officer.”

Tuck looked amused but wisely didn’t smile at Emily. He held his badge up longer, then put it away.

“Detective Tucker,” Gage said. “Nice to meet you too.” He turned back to Emily. “I’m just doing Devlin a favor. He got hung up, asked me to drop his truck off at his house. He was worried about leaving it in the police lot. Didn’t know if it would get towed if it sat there too long. Is that a problem?”

“That depends. Do you have proof that Mr. Buchanan asked you to take his vehicle?” Emily asked.

“Detective O’Malley,” Tuck said, a warning in his voice.

“I’ve got this, Detective Tucker,” Emily said. “Proof, Mr. Thomas? That you’re authorized to drive this vehicle?”

“So you *are* worried I might have stolen the truck. That explains why you two were following me.”

Tuck leaned into the window opening. “You knew we were tailing you?”

“Of course. Spotted you back on Bull Street about fifteen minutes ago. If I’d known you were cops, I would have pulled right over. Honestly, I thought a carjacker might be after me, so I kept driving through the Historic District. I was close to calling 911 before your lights turned on. I sure was relieved that you turned out to be cops.”

The look of disappointment on Tuck’s face was comical. Devlin had spotted Tuck following him yesterday. Now Gage Thomas had spotted him today. Tuck’s pride might never recover.

“Proof?” Emily repeated.

“Of course, just a minute.” He grabbed his cell phone, which was sitting on the seat beside him. He punched a few buttons, then turned it around to face her. “He texted me half an hour ago, as you can see. And the keys are in the ignition. I didn’t have to hotwire it, not that I’d know how.” He grinned again and added a wink that just upped his creepy factor.

“Can you verify Mr. Buchanan’s phone number for me?” she asked. “I’ve been trying to reach him, but he isn’t picking up.”

Gage rattled off the number.

Her shoulders slumped. “That’s the same one I have.”

Tuck crossed around the front of the truck toward Emily.

“Don’t know what to tell you,” Gage said. “That’s the number he texted me from, the same number he’s had for years. Maybe he’s out of cell range.”

“Do you expect to see him soon?”

Tuck put his hand on Emily’s arm. “I think we’re done here.”

“I have a few more questions,” she insisted.

“We’ll ask them later, the next time we see Buchanan. Sorry for the inconvenience, Mr. Thomas.”

“No problem. Have a good day, Officers.”

Tuck pulled Emily away from the truck, back to the car. When the truck pulled away, she shook his hand off her arm.

“Why did you do that?” she demanded.

“Because you’ve totally lost perspective and you know it. I’m taking you home. Don’t make me call the lieutenant and have him order you to go to bed. Your tank ran out hours ago and you’re making all kinds of bad decisions.”

“I can drive myself home. I don’t want you to have to come get me in the morning. Just take me back to the station and I’ll go home from there.”

He gave her a suspicious glance but didn’t argue.

A MINIVAN WAS the last vehicle Devlin would choose to drive for pleasure. But as a hiding place, it was ideal. Especially with dark-tinted windows and the middle seats removed so he could sit on the floor unseen. Add to that a black blanket covering his body to block out the light from his cell phone and the dozens of similar grocery getters parked nearby in this garage and he felt relatively secure. Or as secure as he could be with an unknown number of people searching for him—Cougar and his handler, for sure; Gage, once he joined the hunt; plus whoever had set this whole thing in motion, unless that unknown person was content to just call the shots,

manipulate the system by framing Devlin as rogue, and let Gage and the others do his dirty work.

The agreement Devlin and Gage had made this morning after Cyprian's call meant Gage would delay going after him a little while longer. But friendship could stretch only so far before Gage had to act. Otherwise Cyprian would realize Gage was helping Devlin and would put out an EXIT order on Gage too.

He'd been hiding here for the past couple of hours, ever since escaping through the back of the diner and leading his pursuers on a chase through the streets of Savannah. They'd come close to catching him a few times. But he'd finally managed to shake them. For now. Making sure Emily didn't have to worry about two assassins gunning for her while SWAT escorted her to the police station had made the mad dash worth it.

His phone vibrated. *Finally*. Gage's number flashed across the screen.

"How'd it go?" Devlin asked.

"Not the way you'd hoped. I didn't see anyone in the police lot. And the only tail I picked up was that detective of yours."

"O'Malley?"

"That's the one. She had another detective with her. They seemed like a team."

"Tuck."

"Affirmative."

"You're sure you didn't see any enforcers?"

"Positive."

Devlin scrubbed his jaw, which was sporting more stubble than usual since he'd left his house in such a hurry this morning and hadn't trimmed it up. He'd hoped his enemy—the one behind all of this—would have watched his truck in the police lot and followed it to see if it led to him. Then Gage could have snapped a photo of the man and Devlin could have taken it from there. He'd figure out who his enemy was and eliminate him.

"Thanks, Gage. It was worth a try. You called Cyprian before picking up the truck, like I instructed?"

"Of course." He laughed harshly. "I'm playing this by the book, covering my ass. I can't let him think I'm helping you. I told him that after missing you at your house I went to the station to see if you'd show up there, maybe to answer more questions from the police. I saw your truck

and took it to keep any sensitive information you might have hidden inside from falling into the wrong hands."

"You think he bought it?"

"I didn't give him a reason not to. Dev? This is the last time I can help you. From here on out, I'm on mission. You know what that means."

"That the next time we bump into each other, we'll finally find out who's the better assassin."

Harsh laughter echoed through the phone. "I hope you find a miracle and straighten this out with Cyprian before it comes to that. Good luck, my friend."

"Take care." He ended the call and dropped the phone into a thermos of water. The phone was destroyed, along with Gage's chances of tracing it now that he was actively hunting Devlin. Even though he was using burn phones, they could still be traced, but as long as he kept his time on each call to a minimum, the risk was much lower than if he wasn't using a burn phone.

The *overall* risk of being caught, however, was *not* low. Enforcers all had the same training. They knew one another's tricks. Adding Gage to the mix had been a brilliant move on Cyprian's part. Gage knew Devlin better than anyone else. Which meant all of Devlin's normal hiding places were off the table. He still had resources his friend didn't know about—go bags, hidden vehicles, cash—but every future decision he made had to be preceded with a question: does Gage know about this?

He set the thermos aside and dug out the satellite phone he had in the go bag beside him for just this purpose: calling Cyprian. Convincing his boss that he was innocent wasn't something he expected to be able to do, though; not after seeing those pictures on his kitchen table and certainly not if Cyprian believed Devlin had abducted his favorite enforcer, Kelly.

But that wasn't his goal.

His goal was to convince Cyprian that Emily wasn't a threat. He needed to make sure that his pursuers were told to back off and leave her alone. But he'd also have to be careful how he went about it. He didn't want to put Gage in danger by revealing that he'd helped him.

He noted the time on his wristwatch before punching in Cyprian's number, figuring he probably had about two minutes before his boss could

triangulate his position. If any of his pursuers were close by and Cyprian gave them his location, things could get dicey fast.

The line clicked. Let the games begin.

“Devlin, this is a surprise.” Cyprian’s smooth voice sounded through the phone.

“Sorry to bother you twice in two days.”

“No bother. I’m always happy to hear from you. As a matter of fact, I need to see you. I’d like you to come to headquarters so we can talk.”

Devlin stiffened. “That’s why I called. Some rookie calling himself Cougar cornered me in an alley a few hours ago. He said you wanted to see me. The funny thing is, he had a gun on me at the time. As you can imagine, that left me with a few . . . concerns. Especially since his handler never showed himself and the two of them shot at me . . . *and a cop*.”

A deep sigh sounded into the phone. “Let’s not waste time with subterfuge.”

“Meaning you admit you issued an EXIT order for me?”

“There’s no point in denying the obvious.”

“Damn it, Cyprian. What exactly do you think I did that warrants an execution?”

“You’re *the Enforcer*. You know the rules better than anyone. What’s our most sacred rule?”

“Our families can’t be harmed.”

He hesitated. “Well, yes. Of course. But *after* that. The most important vow each enforcer makes is to never kill another enforcer. Unless they’ve gone rogue. You broke that rule, Devlin. Now you have to pay the price.”

Devlin’s hand tightened around the phone. He couldn’t mention the pictures Gage had shown him without revealing that Gage had helped him. “You’re talking about Shannon. I discovered her remains yesterday when I assisted a police officer who was in trouble. I didn’t know it was Shannon until late last night, when the police confirmed her identity. Did you know she’d been reported as a missing person by her family? I sure as hell didn’t. How could she have been missing for four months without you knowing about it?”

“Careful, Devlin. It sounds like you’re accusing me of something.”

“Ditto.”

Cyprian laughed, sounding genuinely amused. “Touché. Shannon was on extended leave between missions. She was burned out, needed a break. I had no reason to suspect anything had happened. I assume, of course, that you’re calling to tell me you didn’t kill her. I would expect no less.”

“She was a skeleton when Detective O’Malley and I discovered her remains. I’ve been on a mission for the past four months.”

Harsh laughter sounded through the phone. “Good try. I’m sure the police were convinced of your alibi because of the receipts EXIT provided them. But you and I both know your mission was . . . flexible, with some downtime. If you wanted to kill Shannon, you could have fit it into your schedule. It’s not like Montana’s on another continent. Try again.” His voice shook with anger.

“You really *do* think I killed her, don’t you?” Devlin asked.

“I wouldn’t have issued the EXIT order otherwise.”

Frustration curled inside him. “What evidence do you have against me?”

“Does it really matter?”

“You’re damn right it does. I’ve been nothing but loyal to EXIT’s mission for over a decade. I deserve to know what kind of trumped-up proof someone is using against me.”

“I’ve seen the pictures you took of Shannon,” Cyprian accused. “There’s evidence in the pictures that proves your guilt.”

Damn. He wished he could mention the garrote, and that anyone could have copied his design. “What evidence? How did you get pictures if I supposedly took them? I certainly wouldn’t have sent them to you if I had.”

“I’m not going to debate you on this. You were sloppy. That’s the end of it.”

Devlin kneaded the back of his neck. This was a nightmare. “Ask yourself why I would hurt Shannon. There are usually signs when someone’s going off the grid. You and I both know that. This job is hell on a person. Not everyone can handle it. But when enforcers lose it, when the work we do warps them and twists them and they can no longer see the good, the signs are there. Did you see signs with me? I know you didn’t because there weren’t any. Take another look at your so-called evidence, but this time, ask yourself how it could be faked. Because I guaran-freaking-tee the evidence *is* fake. *I didn’t kill her*.”

A deep sigh sounded through the phone. “I’d love nothing more than to believe you, Devlin. And even though it shames me to admit it, knowing what you’ve done, I feel empathy for you. I can’t imagine what you all go through. But the work we do is essential. We eradicate evil in the world to save innocents, to keep our country safe, to keep our families safe. I can’t turn a blind eye when one of my enforcers, regardless of who he is or if he’s been like a son to me through the years, goes bad. It’s my duty, my burden as the head of this company.”

“Damn it, Cyprian. What do I have to do to convince you I’m being framed?”

“Nothing. You can’t.”

The conviction in his boss’s voice shocked Devlin. Cyprian was an intelligent man. He had to know it was ludicrous for Devlin to have taken the pictures and sent them to him. So there must have been something else that had Cyprian convinced, in addition to the pictures. Something so damning there was no doubt in Cyprian’s mind of Devlin’s guilt.

“Why not?” he asked quietly. “What do you have that convinces you so absolutely of my guilt?”

Cyprian didn’t answer. He’d obviously said everything he intended to say on the subject.

Devlin checked the digital display on his watch. He was dangerously close to the two-minute mark. He had to hurry. “Who’s handling Cougar?”

“You know I’m not going to tell you that.”

“Whoever it is, tell them to leave Detective O’Malley alone. She said some stupid things in the alley this morning. She was reaching, throwing out theories to see if anything stuck. But she doesn’t *know* anything. I haven’t told her *anything*. She’s not a threat to EXIT. Promise me you won’t let anyone touch her. Do I have to remind you of rule number three, Cyprian? Never kill a cop.”

“As long as the detective isn’t a threat to our mission, she’s safe.”

“That’s not an answer. Have you issued an EXIT order for her?”

The line clicked.

“Cyprian?”

No answer. Had he lost the connection? He pulled the phone back. No, the connection was fine. Cyprian had hung up. He’d stayed on too long. Cyprian had his location. He threw the blanket off and bolted from the van.

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Chapter Thirteen

WHEN EMILY TURNED in to her driveway, something sparkling on her lawn caught her attention. She pulled into the garage, forced her aching body out of her car, and trudged out to the lawn. Pieces of broken glass that had once been the streetlight lay beside a large rock. At least now she knew why the light had been out last night. Some neighborhood kid must have been playing target practice. She'd forgotten to call the city to fix it, but calling would have to wait another day. The exhaustion she'd been holding off had kicked in, making her lids heavy, her movements sluggish. Once her head hit the pillow, she probably wouldn't wake until tomorrow afternoon.

Once inside, she slogged her way through the house toward her bedroom. Had she ever been this tired before? The closest she could remember was back in college, when she'd stayed up all night cramming for finals two days straight. Going without sleep was a bad idea back then and an even worse one now.

She'd meant to go straight home this morning after Tuck had driven her back to the station, but a report had been waiting on her desk for her to review. Then a detective who'd been wanting her opinion on a case for days stopped by. She'd felt obligated to listen to him while he droned on about his case. And then she gave him suggestions for developing new leads. One thing led to another, and morning had become afternoon before she'd finally escaped. Now the thought of her head hitting the pillow sounded

better than chocolate, better than really good, sweaty sex, better than both—together.

Unless, maybe, if the sex was with Devlin. It might be worth more sacrificed sleep to lick an entire jar of hot chocolate off his body, paying special attention to a few specific, extremely interesting parts of his anatomy. She giggled, then clapped her hands over her mouth. She was not a giggle type of girl. Ever. And what in the world had made her have *those* kinds of thoughts about Devlin? Obviously she was more exhausted than even she'd realized.

Another giggle escaped as she swayed on her feet in her bedroom doorway. She crossed the room and stowed her gun in the top drawer in the bedside table, then hurriedly shed her clothes, not even bothering to stuff them in the hamper.

Her mother would have been horrified.

That thought elicited a whole host of giggles. She couldn't quite ignore her proper upbringing enough to go to bed dirty, so she took a quick shower. Big mistake. The warm water relaxed her muscles like limp noodles. Barely able to stand anymore, she grabbed a soft, thin T-shirt and panties from her top dresser drawer and yanked them on while she stumbled across the room. Her last thought as she collapsed onto the mattress was that her mother would have been scandalized that she didn't pull the comforter back first.

She fell asleep with a smile on her face.

THE TWO-CAR GARAGE across the street from Emily's house was hot and sticky, but Devlin had performed stakeouts in far worse conditions. He'd been surprised that Emily had come home so early in the day. It was only a little past noon. Maybe she hadn't slept well last night, or she wanted to review her case notes somewhere away from the noise and bustle of the squad room. Either way worked for him. At least he knew where she was and that she was safe.

It had taken him several hours to shake Cougar off his tail. Just seconds after exiting the minivan, he'd been crouching behind an SUV two rows

away when Cougar had wheeled into the parking garage. That had made it tricky—and time-consuming—to sneak out without being seen.

Once he was out, he'd worked his way through the downtown area until he was certain his shadow was gone. After that he'd retrieved one of his stashed cars, along with a special go bag with the electronic surveillance equipment he needed for his next task—keeping watch over Emily. The bag also had the weapons he'd need to fight Cougar and his handler and whoever else was after him, if it came to that.

Watching her house from his car was too obvious in a residential neighborhood. Someone would have called neighborhood watch eventually. So, instead, he'd slipped into the garage in the house across the street. It was a risky move, since her neighbors were home. But it gave him the added advantage of being close by if he needed to get to Emily quickly.

The major downside to his hiding place was that the neighbors could decide at any time to leave the house—by way of their garage. Which was why he'd wedged a glove from the homeowner's gardening supplies underneath the door that led into the garage. Not a long-term solution, but it should give him enough warning to escape through the valet door into the side yard.

He hoped his vigilance would prove unnecessary. Cyprian was too honorable to ignore Devlin's warnings that Emily wasn't a threat without checking the facts. In a best-case scenario, he'd cancel the EXIT order and she'd be safe, leaving Devlin to focus on his self-assigned mission—finding Kelly Parker.

Her name hadn't come up in his conversation with Cyprian. Either he didn't know Kelly was missing or he *did*, and that was the real reason Cyprian had issued an EXIT order. That seemed like the more likely scenario. Anyone who hurt Kelly would be number one on Cyprian's kill list. The *only* way Devlin could turn this around was to find her, alive.

But right now he had to focus on watching Emily and figuring out if she even needed his protection. Finding where she lived had been ridiculously easy. A simple Internet search for the name O'Malley had yielded only one possible match: E. O'Malley. He'd broken into her house a few hours earlier to verify it was the *right* house and to familiarize himself with the layout. She had a security alarm, but it was a cheap, mass-market model that any self-respecting burglar could disarm in a couple of minutes.

It had taken Devlin less than one.

Pictures on the walls had confirmed it belonged to Emily. She either had a large family or a lot of friends, maybe both. A quick search confirmed she lived alone. No roommates, no pets, which made his job easier. But that would also made Cougar's job easier, if he showed.

Devlin twisted one of the knobs on the dual-purpose watch that was also a receiver for the tiny hidden cameras he'd set up outside of Emily's house. The crystal-clear display showed the front view. A few taps on the screen and he'd checked all four sides of her property. As of 1:15 p.m., all was quiet and Emily was safe.

The hours dragged by. Sweat trickled down his neck as the garage baked beneath the hot summer sun. He'd prepared for the heat, keeping hydrated with bottles of water and energy drinks. And he had a covered bucket for when his bladder was full. Occasionally he cracked open the garage's valet door to make sure the way was still clear if he had to leave in a hurry. Those brief moments allowed a tiny bit of cooler, fresher air inside, but there was no true relief from the toasty temperatures until well after the sun had set and the garage plunged into darkness.

He rolled his head on his shoulders and stretched, then took a few turns around the cars in the garage as he had every hour to keep his muscles from cramping. He settled back on the floor and went through his routine—tapping the display on the watch, studying each camera view. Everything looked as it should. He was about to lower his watch when something at the back of the house had every one of his muscles tensing.

What had he seen? There, near the back door. Movement at the kitchen window. Emily? Had she gotten up for a drink? A dark shape passed another window. The shadow was too tall and broad to be made by the petite woman he'd held in his arms earlier today.

Someone had broken into Emily's house.

CHOKING! CAN'T BREATHE! Can't . . . breathe!

Emily jerked awake to the scratchy feel of cheap cotton filling her mouth. She tried to draw in a deep breath, but the material tickled the back

of her throat, making her cough and gag. Something hard and unyielding kept her from opening her eyes.

What's happening to me?

She forced herself to breathe through her nose instead of fighting the cloth. Slow, shallow breaths. Was she still asleep? In the grips of a nightmare? She tried to reach for whatever was forcing her eyes shut. Her hands jerked short. Cold metal jangled and chafed against her skin. *Handcuffs!* Someone had cuffed her hands to the bed. Oh, God. She was blindfolded, gagged, and restrained.

She tried to scream, but it came out a muffled moan against the gag.

"Don't fight it," a male voice said from beside the bed. "It will only make it hurt worse. I'm really sorry, Detective. Killing you goes against my training, but an EXIT order has been issued. I don't have a choice. Cyprian doesn't change his mind on these things. Ordinarily, I'd have killed you while you slept. Quick and painless. But I need you. For a little while anyway. My apologies."

His *apologies*? What kind of twisted lunatic tied someone up, threatened to kill them, and apologized for it? In spite of his words, she didn't believe he had any regrets. She sensed his excitement, the thrill of anticipation. The only person he was fooling was himself.

She tried to kick toward the sound of his voice, but her legs pulled up short. They were cuffed, just like her hands. She was staked out on the bed like an obscene offering to some primal beast, a sacrifice.

Tears pricked the backs of her eyes. Not tears of pain or even fear. They were tears of rage at the indignity of being treated this way. She tried to speak, hoping the intruder would be curious about what she was saying. If she could get him to remove the gag, or even remove her blindfold, she might have a chance. A chance to figure out what was happening, to make a plan. Talk to him. Stall for time.

"It won't be long now," he said. "You're the perfect bait. Ace thinks he'll feel guilty for involving you, that he'll feel compelled to save you. That's what we're counting on."

Bait? *Who* would feel guilty? Wait . . . that voice. There was something familiar about it. Where had she heard it before? She tried to push the gag out of her mouth with her tongue. The material was wadded up tight, held

in place by tape that pulled and contorted her cheeks as she fought against it.

“You’re making this harder on yourself,” he chided. “No need to suffer. Relax. I promise I’ll kill you quickly. You won’t feel a thing, or at least not much.”

The horrifying words said in such a nonchalant tone made the hair on her arms prickle.

A rush of air swirled through the room.

She jerked against her bonds, expecting the crushing blow of a bat or the sharp, biting thrust of a knife sliding between her ribs. She tensed, waiting for the inevitable blow.

A muffled curse sounded from the foot of the bed. Something heavy fell to the floor. Another rush of air. Awful sounds, someone . . . choking, gagging.

Footsteps. The mattress dipped and sagged beneath someone’s weight. The hard warmth of a knee pressed against her right side. Her captor must have been standing by the bed, bracing his bent leg on the mattress as he knelt over her.

She protested against the gag and tried to twist away. The metal bit into her wrists again, holding her tight.

A hard tug and the blindfold was suddenly gone. She blinked against the overhead light, trying to focus on the man leaning over her, his hands doing something with the cuffs on her right wrist.

Devlin Buchanan. She stared in confusion, unable to associate him with the voice she’d heard moments ago. But what other explanation was there? Her confusion gave way to shock and horror. She’d been a fool to think he wasn’t involved in the deaths of those women, or to doubt her first impression that he was some kind of assassin. Now he was here to silence her, to keep her from exposing the truth. Oh God, how could she have been so wrong? How could she have kissed him and fantasized about making love with him if he was capable of such heinous crimes?

Her wrist jerked. The cuff fell away. She balled her hand into a fist and aimed a punch at the handsome face that hid the monster within. His left hand whipped up and her fist slammed into the flat of his open palm. The blocked blow zinged through her arm, making her cry out.

“Be still so you don’t hurt yourself again.” His words eerily echoed the words she’d heard seconds earlier. But the voice seemed different—deeper, with the snap of authority that had been missing before.

He leaned over her again, his hands working at the cuffs on her left wrist. She blinked up at him, her right arm throbbing from her failed attempt to hit him. When the left cuff fell away, she didn’t try to hit him again. Confusion paralyzed her. Was Devlin the man who’d attacked her? If so, why would he free her without hurting her?

He bounced off the mattress and moved to the foot of the bed, his warm hands gently lifting her right foot. Click. The third cuff fell away. He was definitely freeing her. Then . . . he wasn’t the one who’d handcuffed her in the first place?

She tore the tape away from her mouth. The white-hot pain made her stiffen and gasp against the cloth still in her mouth. Blinking away the hot tears that had started in her eyes, she pulled out the wad of cloth and took a blessedly deep breath of air, then another.

A gagging, wheezing noise had her sitting up and straining over the foot of the bed while Devlin worked on the last handcuff.

There, on the floor of her bedroom, the man from the alley—Steve—lay gasping for air, his eyes wide, desperate, his fingers frantically gouging bloody tracks in his neck. Her hands flew to her own throat. This must be the man who’d attacked her, the voice she’d heard earlier.

“What’s wrong with him? What . . . what did you do?”

Devlin glanced at the man flopping on the floor like a dying fish, as if he’d forgotten about him. “He was going to kill you.” Apparently, he thought that was all the explanation needed. He pulled the cuff off her ankle, shoved the handcuffs in his pants pocket, and turned to the chest of drawers against the wall.

Emily scrambled off the bed and knelt by the man on the floor. He was barely moving now. His fingers, like claws, convulsed in spasms against his neck, his eyes bulging, unfocused. The overhead light glinted on a thin, shiny line pressing deep into his flesh. Bile rose in her throat. It was a wire, pulled so tight blood seeped around it.

She gently lifted his head, following the wire with her fingers, trying to find a way to remove it.

“You’re wasting time.” Devlin threw something onto the bed.

“Saving a life is never a waste of time.”

“Depends on the life.”

She blinked up at him, shocked at the bitterness in his voice. But he was already riffling through the dresser drawers again. She plucked at the wire. Her probing fingers found a bump at the back of his neck. She leaned down to look. The ends of the wire were twisted together with nothing left to grasp. Beneath the sickeningly efficient garrote were two discarded pieces of wood with tiny pieces of broken wire sticking out of them.

“Good Lord,” she exclaimed. “You used the wood as handles and snapped them off so he couldn’t remove the wire.”

He tossed something else onto the bed.

She pulled her hands from beneath the man’s head and turned his face toward her again. Her shoulders slumped. It was hopeless. There was nothing she could do for him. He was gone, his pupils dilated. When she felt for a pulse against his bloody neck, his wrist, there was simply . . . nothing. Taking a deep breath, she struggled against the urge to throw up.

Don’t contaminate the crime scene. Don’t contaminate the crime scene.

Two strong hands grasped her shoulders and pulled her to her feet. She looked up into the coldest eyes she’d ever seen. How could she have thought they were gray before? They were black, without a hint of mercy or remorse. The eyes of a murderer.

“Get dressed,” he ordered.

She blinked and looked down at herself, only now realizing she was facing him in a see-through T-shirt and panties. Her cheeks flushed with heat.

He waved toward the bed. “Hurry.”

An outfit lay on top of the comforter—a black, lacy, barely there bra she’d bought on a whim but had never had the courage to wear, jeans, a navy blue scoop-necked T-shirt. White sneakers sat beside the jeans with a pair of socks draped neatly over them.

“I have to call this in.” She slipped around him and hurried to the bedside table. Her phone should have been on top. It wasn’t.

“Against the wall,” he said.

Three feet away from the table, broken pieces of metal and plastic littered the carpet, pieces that were barely recognizable as the phone they’d once been.

“Why did you do that?”

“I didn’t. Cougar did.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder without bothering to look at the dead man lying on the floor.

“I thought his name was Steve. He’s the man from the alley, right?”

He nodded.

She gritted her teeth and yanked the drawer open. Empty. “He took my gun too?”

“No. I did.” He patted his waist, bringing her attention to her gun, shoved into his waistband. He grabbed the jeans off the bed and tossed them to her.

“We don’t have time to chat,” he said. “If you want to go outside in nothing but panties and a T-shirt, I sure won’t mind the view. Otherwise, stop talking and start dressing.”

She tossed the pants onto the bed. “I don’t know how you knew that man was in my home, that he’d attacked me. I’m grateful that you . . . that you saved me. But I’m not leaving a crime scene. I’m going to call this in from the wall phone in the kitchen. I’ll be right back. Don’t touch anything else. You’ll contaminate the evidence.”

She headed toward the bedroom door.

A dark shadow separated from the others in the hallway. Emily stumbled to a halt. A rough shove from Devlin sent her sprawling to the carpet just as a man ran past her into the room. She rolled and jumped to her feet, whirling around to face the threat.

Devlin and the intruder grappled for control in the middle of the room, like two grizzly bears locked in mortal combat. Devlin grunted, his right forearm braced beneath the other man’s chin, slowly forcing it up and back. The fingers of his left hand circled the other man’s wrist, down low by his thigh. Emily stared in horror at the long serrated knife, pointed at Devlin’s stomach, inching forward.

The knife wobbled, slipped, ripping Devlin’s shirt, revealing a Kevlar vest beneath it.

“Tour guide, my ass.” Emily looked left and right, searching for some kind of weapon. Her gun: Devlin had it tucked in his waistband. The cords in his neck and arms bulged as he pressed against the other man’s jaw while trying to wrestle the knife away from him.

She sprinted forward, ducked under Devlin's arm, grabbed her gun, and spun away from the two men. Bracing her feet apart, she aimed her pistol at the man who was trying to stab Devlin.

"Drop the knife."

The man's eyes widened, as if he'd forgotten she was in the room. He suddenly twisted, pulling Devlin in front of him, blocking her shot.

Devlin yanked one arm free and slammed the man's knife arm, sending the weapon flying across the room, burying itself in the carpet inches from Emily's bare feet. She yelped and hopped out of the way. The intruder shoved Devlin back and ran out the door.

Emily ran after him, sweeping her gun out in front of her.

"Emily, damn it, wait!" Devlin yelled.

He tackled her from behind, throwing her to the floor, blanketing her body as the door frame where she'd been standing exploded into sawdust.

Pfft, pfft. The soft puff of noise echoed through the hallway. Devlin's body jerked with each sound. He twisted his arm beneath Emily, still covering her, and grabbed her gun. Angling his arm beneath hers, he aimed back toward the doorway. *Bam! Bam! Bam!*

Running footsteps echoed across the hardwood floor of her hallway as the gunman gave up—for now—and escaped from the house. The front door slammed shut and silence now reigned in her small house.

She pushed against Devlin, his heavy weight pressing her into the carpet.

"Can't breathe," she choked out.

He rolled off her with a groan.

"I'll call for help." She scrambled to her feet and ran out the door. Once in the kitchen, she grabbed the wall phone before turning to look back down the hall. She let out a surprised squeak. Devlin was right behind her, a ferocious expression on his face. He grabbed her right wrist, the one holding the phone.

"You still don't get it, do you?" The fingers of his other hand rubbed beneath the edge of his vest where it covered his right kidney.

Her gaze followed his movements. She saw the two holes in his shirt, only now acknowledging what her subconscious had registered earlier. He'd taken a bullet for her. *Two* bullets. Bullets that would have ripped through her body if he hadn't covered her with his own. The Kevlar vest he

wore had saved him. But she knew he must have paid for his chivalry with some deep, painful bruises and sore or cracked ribs. If the shooter had aimed for his head, Devlin would be dead right now. All because he'd tried to save her. *Had* saved her. Twice in the span of ten minutes, from two different men.

Her hands started to shake. She let go of the phone and allowed him to put it back on its hook.

"You're right," she said. She drew a deep breath to steady herself. "I don't get it. But what I do get is that you were almost killed tonight because you were protecting me. I'll hold off on that call until you explain. What is it that I don't get? What's going on?"

He shook his head, clearly exasperated.

"Do you have a Kevlar vest?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Get it."

"It's at the office. I'm a detective now. I don't need to wear it every day like I used to. Why?"

"We'll get you one at our next stop."

"Our next . . . what?"

"Where are your keys?"

She shook her head. "No, no, no, no, no. You are *not* taking my car. You're not going *anywhere*. I have a million questions for you, like how you knew those men were coming after me. And how you all managed to get inside my house without tripping my alarm. And why didn't you call the police or warn me that you expected intruders instead of going all commando and almost getting yourself killed?" She pointed to the couch. "Sit down. I'll call for a CSI team. I'll take your statement at the station."

"You're *not* calling the police or going downtown. *We* are leaving; both of us, together, right now. My car is parked down the street, too far away if our friend with the gun is waiting for us to step outside. So we're taking yours. It's our best option to make it out of here alive. Where are the keys?"

She gritted her teeth and stepped around him to a hook on the wall. "Fine," she said, tossing him her car keys. "Go on. Get out of here. Since you saved my life, I'll even give you a few minutes before I put a BOLO out on my car." She grabbed the phone again.

The phone jerked. The line went dead. She held it away from her ear, her mouth dropping open when she saw the cord, sliced cleanly in two, dangling from the receiver. She blinked up at Devlin, her eyes widening as he slid a rather large knife into a holder on his belt.

"What are you—*oof*!" Her breath left her in a rush and her world tilted as he hoisted her onto his shoulder. She gasped at the feel of his warm fingers on her thighs, dangerously close to her bottom, reminding her that she was still wearing only panties and a T-shirt. She squirmed and tried to push herself off him.

He tightened his hold and strode with her through the living room.

"Let me go," she demanded.

He didn't even slow down. Gone was the grinning, sexy man she'd kissed in the diner. In his place was the deathly quiet, dangerous stranger she'd questioned in the interrogation room.

"At least let me get my clothes on." She tried to flip off his shoulder.

His fingers squeezed her thighs in a painfully tight grasp.

She gasped and stopped her struggles.

His grip immediately eased.

As he carried her into the garage, Emily lifted her head, frantically looking around for some kind of weapon.

Devlin opened the rear door on the driver's side of her car and dumped her onto the backseat. She scrambled up on her knees and dove toward the other side. He grabbed her ankles and yanked, hard. She fell onto her stomach, knocking the breath right out of her. Devlin released her ankles and slammed the door shut. Opening and closing her mouth like a fish on dry land, Emily struggled to breathe, but nothing was getting in. Her vision began to go dark.

Finally, air rushed back into her lungs. Her vision cleared. Scrambling to her knees again, she lunged for the door handle and popped it open. Devlin stood in the opening, a roll of duct tape in one hand, two pairs of handcuffs dangling from the other.

She held her hands out in a placating gesture. "That's not necessary. I'll cooperate. Really. I will. What do you want me to do?"

Click, click. Too fast for her to react, he'd snapped the cuffs around her wrists and shoved her backward onto the seat. She raised her feet to kick him. *Click, click*, a second set of cuffs went around her ankles. The metal

grazed against her existing cuts, shooting fire up her legs. She glared up at him and let forth with a string of curses that would have made her brothers blush.

Ignoring her outraged struggles, he put his hands beneath her arms and heaved her into a sitting position. He snapped her seat belt in place, then looped duct tape from the handcuff chain to the belt, locking her hands at her waist.

"You're kidnapping a police officer," she accused. "Every officer in the state of Georgia will be searching for me. You won't get away with this."

He shook his head, as if he was about to lecture a small child who didn't understand the complexities of the English language.

"No one is going to look for you, Emily. They won't even know you're missing. You're going to take a leave of absence, or a previously unplanned vacation. I don't know what kind of story Cyprian will spin, but he'll spin one. And it will work. I tried to convince him you weren't a threat, but obviously I failed. He sent two assassins after you tonight. They might have screwed up, but the mission remains. Which means the guy who got away —Ace, one of the meanest, most lethal sons of bitches at EXIT—will be back. He'll try to kill you again, and again, and again, until I kill him or he kills you. And in the meantime, Cyprian will ensure there's a cover in place so none of what happened tonight can point to him or EXIT."

He swept his hand to encompass her house. "This mess will be cleaned and covered within the hour. Don't kid yourself that your buddy Tuck will come looking for you. He won't. He won't have a reason to look. He'll be convinced you left of your own free will."

She shivered beneath the certainty in his tone. "You're insane. No one could cover this up. What about the damage those bullets made in the door frame of my bedroom? Or the dead man on my bedroom floor?" She looked down at her hands, her stomach tightening at the dried blood on her fingers, beneath her nails, from when she'd tried to save Steve, or Cougar, or whatever his name was. "What about the blood on the carpet? Or the scratches on my bedposts from the handcuffs?"

He gave a soft puff of laughter. "EXIT isn't exactly inexperienced with this sort of thing. Anything—or anyone—can be erased. Covering up a scene like this quickly would be a problem for one man. But I guarantee

Ace already called for a team of cleaners. They'll be here within minutes. Which is why we have to get out of here. Now."

His impassioned speech and the word "cleaners" sent chills straight to her belly.

"What's going to happen to me?" she whispered, unable to hide the fear that had crept into her tone.

His hard expression softened with regret. "I'm sorry you got mixed up in this, Emily."

He reached his hand toward her face. She jerked back before he could touch her.

His jaw tightened again. "Looks like you and I are in this together now." His voice was a harsh rasp. "Where I go, you go."

"Which means?" she prodded.

"Which means . . ." He ripped a piece of duct tape off the roll in his hand. "You and I are about to be erased."

Before she could react, he slapped the piece of duct tape over her mouth.

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Chapter Fourteen

EMILY'S FORD FUSION bumped through the collection of potholes that could barely be called a road, its springs squeaking in protest. She tensed, trying to get her bearings. Where was Devlin taking her? There weren't any streetlights this far out, no way for her to see where they were going. Trees blotted out the stars overhead, leaving nothing but pitch-black windows and a vast expanse of nothingness.

A bead of sweat broke out on her forehead when Devlin pulled the car to a stop a few minutes later. He cut the engine and headed to the back of the car. Emily craned her neck, trying to see what he was doing, but it was like staring into a dark abyss.

Until he opened the trunk. Light seeped from around the edges, but she couldn't see what he was doing. After he'd handcuffed her in the car in her garage, he'd gone back inside for a full minute. When he'd returned, he'd popped the trunk and put something inside. Whatever it was, he was getting it now.

Something scraped against the opening. Shivers sent goose bumps across her skin. Her fingers dugs into her palms. Her heartbeat thudded in her ears. The passenger door popped open, startling her, making her cry out against the duct tape.

Like an unfeeling robot, Devlin leaned in, knife in hand—the same ugly six-inch blade he'd used to cut the phone cord.

Oh God. No! She jerked back violently and fell sideways, banging her head on the opposite door.

His brows rose in surprise. He looked down at the knife he was holding and flushed a dull red. “I’m not going to hurt you. I’m just going to cut the duct tape binding your wrists to the seat belt. I need you to hold still. Okay? Can you do that?”

The soft reassurance of his tone broke through her panic. She wanted to believe that he wouldn’t hurt her. After all, he had saved her life. But any kind of trust she’d had in him had died a quick death the moment he cut the phone cord and threw her over his shoulder. Still, if she was going to survive, she had to obey him, at least until she could figure out a way to escape.

Nodding behind her gag, she braced herself to fight him if he was lying and made any sudden moves with the knife. If he was going to hurt her, she wasn’t going to make it easy.

One quick slash and her hands were no longer taped to the seat belt. She let out a shaky, relieved breath. But her wrists were still cuffed, like her ankles. Even if she managed to knock him silly with her closed fists, she’d only be able to hobble and would never get away before he came after her.

He slid his knife into its sheath and leaned toward her again. She tensed and shrank back, but it didn’t matter. He released the seat belt, scooped her into his arms and lifted her out of the car in one smooth motion. When he turned, the interior lights and the open trunk light illuminated what lay on the road. One of her rolling suitcases: the biggest one, the one she used on those rare occasions when she went on a real vacation.

The significance of that open, *empty* suitcase sent a fresh rush of panic through her. How many times had she heard of a victim’s body being found in a suitcase, tossed in a ditch like garbage? She violently renewed her struggles. He squeezed her against him, painfully tight, but this time she didn’t give in. Panic unlike anything she’d ever felt before had her writhing and twisting in desperation. He squatted down, depositing her into the suitcase. She immediately raised her knees, lashing out with her legs as hard as she could, catching him full in the chest.

He grunted and wobbled back on his heels but didn’t fall.

Emily desperately tried to heave herself over the side of the suitcase, but Devlin grabbed her, relentlessly forcing her back down. His overwhelming

strength immobilized her with terrifying ease.

Tears pricked her eyes, shaming her. She was so. Damned. Scared. She couldn't think of any reason for him to put her in a suitcase unless he was going to kill her. She shook her head back and forth, whimpering against the gag, pleading with her eyes, begging him not to hurt her.

He frowned down at her. "Stop looking at me like that. I told you I'm not going to hurt you. I have to transfer you to another vehicle without anyone seeing you. That's why I have to put you in the suitcase. You'll be in it only fifteen, twenty minutes tops."

He was saying something. She could make out some of the words. But the haze of panic that engulfed her garbled everything. She bucked against his hands, trying to break free.

He pushed her back down.

No! She fought to get away, but his hold was impossible to break. She collapsed back into the suitcase, exhausted from her struggles, her breaths wheezing against the gag.

His jaw tightened. "I know you must hate me. *I'd* hate me if I were in your position." He leaned down, as if to make sure he had her absolute attention. "I am everything you believed me to be when you interviewed me at the station and worse. Which means if I wanted you dead, you'd already be dead. I wouldn't have risked my neck fighting those two men at your house if I wanted to hurt you. Do you understand what I'm saying? The man who got away, the one who tried to shoot you, is scouring the city right now, using every resource he has to find you. He'll be looking for your car. For you. I'm going to switch cars again at the airport, where I've got another car sitting in long-term parking. I need you to be quiet, and calm, and lie in the suitcase so if anyone sees me, they'll see only a lone man getting into his vehicle. They won't remember a man and a woman. Nod if you understand."

He was everything she'd believed him to be and worse. Assassin. Killer. Murderer. Her blood rushed in her ears. She couldn't catch her breath, couldn't draw enough oxygen through her nose. She moaned against the gag. Her airway was blocked. *Help me, help me!* Her chest ached. Her vision blurred. Oh God, she was going to die.

"Emily? Emily?"

The words sounded tinny, like they were coming from far away. Her world went dim. Suddenly she was home again, lying in bed. A strange peace fell over her.

Strong, gentle hands slid beneath her and lifted her up. She was surrounded by warmth. A brief sting of pain tugged against her mouth. Warm air suddenly rushed into her starving lungs. She drew in deep, gulping breaths, her eyes squeezed tightly shut. Where was she? The peace she'd felt before began to fade.

"It's okay," someone whispered against her hair. "It's okay." A gentle hand stroked her back, up and down, up and down, cradling her against a hard chest, like a lover, rocking her slowly back and forth. She snuggled more deeply into his embrace, breathed in his comforting scent. He'd saved her. This man, whoever he was, had saved her.

"No one's going to hurt you, Em," he whispered. "I promise."

That voice. That familiar scent, subtle, spicy, like expensive aftershave. Calling her Em as if she were special to him. The voice reminded her of something, someone, holding her close, his lips capturing hers in a searing kiss that warmed her all the way to her toes. A forbidden kiss, because the one who'd been kissing her was all wrong for her, on the wrong side of everything she believed in.

Devlin!

Her eyes flew open. She was in Devlin's arms. No, no, no. This was all wrong. He was going to kill her. He was going to put her in a suitcase and throw her away. She shoved against his chest and screamed. A cloth clamped down over her nose and mouth, its sickeningly sweet scent setting off alarm bells in her mind.

He was drugging her, killing her. No! A curious weakness flowed through her veins. Her hands fluttered against his chest like a bird against the bars of its cage. She twisted her head to the side and gulped a deep breath of clean air.

The cloth clamped down over her nose and mouth again.

She struggled, but it was no use against his superior strength. Her vision blurred. She held her breath as long as she could. Her lungs screamed. One breath; she had to have just one breath. She sucked in a deep gulp of air through the cloth, recoiling against the thick, sweet mixture.

Everything went black.

EMILY WENT LIMP in Devlin's arms. He threw the cloth off her face and pressed his fingers against the side of her neck, checking her pulse. Strong. Her breathing was shallow but steady. He let out a shaky breath and cradled her unconscious body against his chest, stroking her back through her soft cotton T-shirt. He needed a minute. Hell, he needed a dozen.

The panic and accusation in her eyes had shaken him to the core.

His marks—the people he was assigned to eliminate—were pure evil. They thought nothing of strapping bombs on innocent children and sending them onto buses full of more innocent people to blow them into so many pieces their family had nothing left to bury. They raped, tortured, brutalized others, relishing their pain. Yet, more often than not, when they were finally standing face-to-face with their executioner, their eyes were filled with arrogance, scorn, hatred. No remorse. No guilt. And on the rare occasion when one of them looked at Devlin with fear or panic, it didn't bother him. At all. Not once. Until now.

The terror in Emily's eyes, even though all he'd wanted to do was protect her, had nearly killed *him*.

Trying to soothe someone, reassure her, was a skill he'd forgotten long ago. Which probably explained why he'd screwed up so thoroughly. Killing Cougar with the garrote had made sense at the time. It had freed his hands so he could grab what Emily needed and get her to safety. It had also freed him to react if Cougar's handler showed up, which he had. But when he'd made those decisions, he hadn't taken into account the impact they would have on Emily—and he damn well should have.

She wasn't an evil criminal or a terrorist. She was innocent, good, and deserved better treatment. Her strength and courage amazed him. Not many people, law enforcement or not, would have gone into that basement without backup. But Emily had, because she hadn't wanted a victim to suffer even another minute waiting for help to arrive. She'd also stood up to *him*, countless times. And after nearly being killed, she'd had the gumption to order him to sit on the couch while she took charge of the crime scene. She was a strong woman, until he broke her.

He fervently hoped he hadn't broken her permanently, that she'd recover from what he'd put her through and would be the same sassy, funny, brave woman she'd been before he'd battered his way into her life a few days ago.

Unfortunately, her ordeal was far from over. Until he could convince her that he meant her no harm, that he was her best chance at survival and that she needed to work *with* him instead of *against* him, she would have to remain his prisoner. Which meant when she woke up tomorrow morning from her drug-induced sleep and realized what he'd done and where she was, her terror was going to start all over again.

He reluctantly carried her back to the suitcase and gently lowered her inside. Where moments ago he hadn't thought twice about putting her in a suitcase, now, seeing her lying there, remembering the fear in her eyes, he was feeling something he hadn't felt in a long time.

Shame.

He reminded himself that he had no choice, but he was starting to wonder if he'd handled this entire situation wrong from the beginning. He stared down at her, thinking about his options going forward. As much as being in the suitcase had scared her, wouldn't being tied up and blindfolded in the back of a van scare her even more? He certainly couldn't let her sit in the passenger seat beside him. She was a cop, and after tonight, she knew without a doubt that they weren't operating on the same side of the law.

It didn't matter that EXIT was sanctioned by the government—even though it was a private company—its existence was a dirty secret not acknowledged in polite circles. When the official alphabet agencies failed—CIA, FBI, NSA—EXIT cleaned up their messes, did the lowly jobs they were too good to do. Or too inept to do.

EXIT did an enormous amount of good in the world. But none of that would matter to someone like Emily, not when the good was achieved by doing some bad, sometimes a whole lot of bad. Could she ever go back to the life she'd once had? After what had happened at her house, the odds seemed low. Cougar and Ace wouldn't have gone after her if Cyprian had rescinded the EXIT order. But if the order was solely based on what she'd said in the alley, there was still a chance Cyprian would dig a little more and decide Emily really wasn't a threat. Maybe he hadn't had time to do that or to call Cougar and Ace off before they'd attacked. Until he knew for sure, one way or the other, all he could do was keep her safe while he tried to find Kelly. Maybe after Devlin proved to his boss that he wasn't the one who'd killed Shannon and abducted Kelly, Cyprian would be willing to

listen to what he had to say about Emily. And he'd cancel his orders. Maybe.

It was the only way she could ever go back to her former life.

He steeled himself against his sympathy for her. He'd continue with his original plan. He'd keep her drugged until they reached his destination. After that . . . well, he'd have to take it one minute, one hour, one day at a time and see what happened.

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Chapter Fifteen

NIGHTMARE COULDN'T BEGIN to describe the dream Emily had just had. She groaned and snuggled into her pillow. She'd have to make Tuck swear never to let her work almost two days straight again with next to no sleep. Her mind had gone into full-fledged hallucination mode. She'd imagined being tied up, gagged, shot at—the list went on and on.

Those crazy pictures in her head must have played havoc with her body too. Nausea coiled in her stomach. The pressure of an oncoming headache told her if she didn't take something soon, she'd have a full-blown migraine in a few hours. She rubbed her temple and something brushed against her nose. She swatted at it, and her fingers tangled in what felt like a smooth plastic string.

She forced her sleepy eyes open and blinked to focus. Not a string, a cord. She held it up and followed it to where it disappeared an inch below the collar of her shirt. It was attached to a plastic circle taped above her heart. An electrode? Was she in a hospital? No, wait, what was going on? The images, last night, they *had* been a nightmare, hadn't they?

The ceiling above her shined white in the dim light. But instead of the smooth plaster in her bedroom, there was a metal grid of acoustic tiles. She bolted upright in the bed.

"Don't panic, Emily. You're safe."

She whipped her head toward the deep, all-too-familiar voice. *Devlin*. He was sitting about ten feet away on a folding chair, watching her.

Through a floor-to-ceiling wall of bars.

She wasn't hallucinating. The nightmare was real.

She pressed her hand to her chest, a wave of dizziness surging through her as her heart sped up, thudding in her ears. What *was* this place? The room behind Devlin was large but windowless, with crude stairs hugging the far wall, ending at a trapdoor in the ceiling. She drew several shaky breaths, willing away the dizziness.

Calm down. Use your training. Catalog your surroundings and look for an exit, a way to escape.

The room—the *cell*—she was in was about ten by ten, furnished with the bed she was sitting on and nothing else but what appeared to be a heart monitor attached to the wall. Green digital numbers flashed and zigzag lines darted up and down across the screen. The far wall had an open door that led into a bathroom—a luxury she was sorely in need of at the moment.

She looked at Devlin again. Her initial panic faded beneath a red-hot rush of anger. It poured through her like molten lava, burning through her veins, cauterizing her fear, settling in her gut like a dormant volcano ready to incinerate anything in its path.

"Where am I?" she demanded.

His expression turned wary at her tone. He stood and pushed his chair out of the way. "We're underground, outside of Savannah. In a bunker, more or less."

"Is this where you bring your prisoners to interrogate them?" she accused, pressing her hand to her stomach as a wave of nausea churned through her.

"When necessary. Yes."

His deadpan response to her half-serious accusation left her shaken. The urge to throw up was becoming more urgent.

"I don't feel so great. What did you do to me?" She pulled at the plastic circle on her chest.

"I'd rather you didn't—"

She tossed the circle and cord to the floor.

"—take that off." He sighed deeply. "But since you're conscious and talking, I suppose I don't need to monitor your heart rate anymore. You said you don't feel well. Are you in pain, nauseated?"

“I imagine I feel the way anyone would who’s been knocked out with chloroform. Yes, I’m nauseated. Yes, my head is throbbing. And my mouth feels like cotton.”

“It wasn’t chloroform; far too dangerous. People don’t always wake up after a dose of that. I used a derivative of sevoflurane and—”

“I’m not interested in the list of chemical compounds you used. You shouldn’t have drugged me in the first place. What did you do, knock me out and . . .” She narrowed her eyes, curling her fingers against the sheets. “You stuffed me in that suitcase, didn’t you? Then kept me drugged until you could put me in here. What kind of person does that?”

He shrugged, seemingly unconcerned with her opinion of him. “I did what I had to do to keep you safe. You’re alive. That’s what matters.”

“You’re one of those ends-justifies-the-means kind of people.” She shook her head. “How could I have ever . . .”

“Ever . . . what?” he asked, his voice soft.

“Doesn’t matter.” She shook her head, grimacing when that made her growing headache throb even worse. She pressed her hand to her temple again.

“You should take something for that or you’ll end up with a migraine,” he said. “One of the side effects of the drugs, I’m afraid. There’s bottled water and medicine in the bathroom, along with your clothes and toiletries, so you can shower or soak in the tub if you prefer.”

Her clothes? She looked down and realized she was still wearing a thin T-shirt and panties and nothing else. The indignity of her situation had the smoldering anger inside her flaring again. But her near-to-bursting bladder meant that confronting him about what he’d done, and finding out what he *planned* to do, would have to wait. She braced her hands on the mattress and swung her legs over the side.

“Don’t try to stand,” he warned.

“If you expect me to docilely follow your commands, you’re going to be severely disappointed,” she bit out. She stretched her toes toward the floor.

He swore. Keys jangled. Metal creaked.

Emily slowly slid off the bed. But when her feet touched the floor, her wobbly legs wouldn’t hold her up. She kept sliding, right into Devlin’s arms.

He scooped her up and cradled her against his chest, his dark brows an angry V. “Are you always this stubborn?”

“According to every single person who has ever met me, yes.”

He laughed, his irritation gone as quickly as it had appeared. She hated that the deep sound of that laugh and the beauty of his smile still had the power to send a warm thrill zinging straight to her belly. She should punch that smile off his face and make him let her go. But she wasn’t sure she had the strength to stand.

“Bed or bathroom?” he asked.

Unable to look at him as she answered, she said, “Bathroom.”

He took her through the doorway, kicked the toilet lid down, and gently set her on top of it. His brow furrowed with apparent concern as he squatted down in front of her.

“Don’t underestimate the effects of the drugs that are still working their way through your system. You’re going to be weak and wobbly for a few more hours. Take it easy.”

“I can pee by myself. Get out.”

His lips twitched. “Good to know. But I’ll still be a shout away if you need help with, ah, anything.”

When he closed the door behind him, she slumped weakly against the back of the toilet. Her bleary eyes settled on the bottle of pain pills on the counter and—thank God—a giant pink bottle of Pepto-Bismol. Next to that was a neatly folded stack of clothes he’d obviously grabbed from her house. Probably when he’d grabbed that horrible suitcase. She shuddered and downed the pills, using the Pepto as a chaser, before following that with a deep drink of water.

Twenty minutes later, after a hot shower and brushing her teeth, she felt almost human again. A warm bath had sounded ridiculously appealing, but she’d worried that she wouldn’t have the strength to get out of the tub on her own. At one time, having Devlin help her and see her naked would have been a fantasy come true. But now that he was her enemy, it would be beyond humiliating.

Without a blow-dryer in sight, she blotted her hair on a towel and left it hanging free to her shoulders to dry on its own. Her tennis shoes squeaked against the wooden floor as she stepped into the cell. Devlin was sitting in the folding chair again, reading something on his phone. But this time the

cell door was standing wide open. She stood beside the bed, debating whether to try to run past him. When he stepped to the open door and braced his hands on the bars, blocking the exit, she had her answer.

She noted with interest that he still had his gun in a holster on his belt and the knife sheathed on the other side. She down on the bed and prepared to ask him all the questions swirling through her mind. Once she had the information she needed, she'd pressure him to let her out of the cell. Or distract him somehow while she grabbed his gun and left *him* locked up in here instead of her.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"Let's skip the small talk and not pretend we're anything other than enemies."

He slowly shook his head. "I'm not your enemy, Emily."

"Right, because *friends* drug each other, tie them up, and stuff them into suitcases."

"They do if that's what it takes to keep their friends alive."

"Yeah, about that. That's the part where you lose me. Because I don't understand any of this. What's going on? Why did Cougar and that other guy—"

"Ace."

"Whatever. Why did they come after me?"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Emily, but the less you know the better."

"Better for whom? You? If you were in my place, wouldn't you want to know why this was happening?"

His look turned guarded. "I can't answer your questions without putting you more at risk. You'll just have to trust me about that. The only way you may be able to return to your life the way it was is if I can convince the people who are after you that you aren't a threat."

She blinked. "*May* be able to return?" She swallowed hard. "Are you saying I was right all along? I was fishing, reaching, when I originally accused you of being an assassin. But Cougar talked about an EXIT order, making it sound like a contract on my life. If that's true, if EXIT really is a front, then what happened at my house makes a twisted kind of sense. It was my conversation with Cyprian, wasn't it? When I told him my assassin theory, that's when he put out that EXIT order, right? That's why—"

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Devlin shoved away from the bars and strode to the bed. He stopped less than a foot away, staring down at her, his face a mask of worry. “Tell me you’re generalizing about your conversation. Please tell me that when you spoke to Cyprian, you did not say I was an assassin.”

For the first time since interviewing Devlin, she began to comprehend that the way she’d been throwing her theories around might have been a horrible mistake. She’d always felt a certain invincibility as a member of the law-enforcement community: respected, supported by the majority of citizens who believed in the laws that made society function and kept people safe.

But what if there really were huge corporations like EXIT Inc. to whom the law didn’t matter? How could she fight an entity like that if she was in their crosshairs?

Her hands started to shake. She clasped them together, hoping Devlin wouldn’t notice. “No, I wasn’t generalizing.” Her voice was barely a whisper.

He stepped closer and put his hands on top of hers. She should have snatched her hands back, but the concerned look on his face brought up all her fears again and, instead, she clutched his hands with hers.

“Tell me what you said to Cyprian.”

“I wanted to shake the tree, see what fell out. So I . . . ah . . . bluffed my way through the conversation. I *might* have implied that you had confessed to being an assassin for them and that you had told me . . . um . . . everything.”

He closed his eyes, a pained look crossing his face.

She fought down the panic rising inside her. “It seemed like a good idea at the time, a scattergun approach, throw crazy theories out and see what happens. But I’m guessing now it probably wasn’t the brightest thing I could have done.”

He laughed bitterly. “No. It wasn’t.”

Earlier, when he’d faced a man with a knife or dove in front of a man with a gun to protect her, he’d seemed strong, confident, invincible. Now, at this moment, he was none of those things. His gaze darted around the cell without really seeing anything, as if he were considering different courses

of action, reading through an invisible playbook in his mind and discarding every option as unfeasible.

“You really are a hired assassin?” She wanted him to deny it, but when his dark gray eyes stared back at her, unblinking, she knew the truth. She tugged her hands out of his and wrapped her arms around her waist.

He dropped his hands to his sides and took a step back. The earlier worry on his face was gone. He’d steeled his deceptively handsome features into an unreadable mask.

“I don’t . . . understand,” she whispered. “You . . . kill people. For money.”

“Yes.”

Her gaze flew to his. “You work for the same person as Cougar and Ace.”

“Yes,” he repeated, his voice firm, matter-of-fact.

“But . . . but instead of letting them kill me, you risked your life to save me.” Her fingers dug painfully into her skin as she stared up at him. Anguish and confusion washed through her. “Why? Why did you do that?”

“It’s . . . complicated.”

Her shock gave away to anger again. “Killing people isn’t complicated, Devlin. It’s wrong. Plain and simple.”

“Is it, Emily? Wrong? Simple? If a terrorist plans to maim and kill dozens of people and someone like me takes him out before he can destroy all those lives, is that wrong?”

“Is that what you’re saying you do, Devlin? Kill people you think are bad *before* they commit a crime?”

“What would you say if I said yes?”

“I’d say that’s wrong. Simple. That you have no right to judge someone else. That’s not how society operates. We have rules, laws, for a reason, to keep us all civilized, to keep us all safe. I’d say that you’re deluding yourself if you think you’re a hero for making preemptive strikes against people you perceive as evil. That makes you just as bad as the people you kill.”

The skin around his jaw tightened. “Now who’s judging? I may not be a hero, but I’m not a damn hypocrite either. You police say you want to protect people, but you come to their aid only *after* a crime has been committed. That’s not protecting. That’s just cleaning up the mess when it’s

too late.” He leaned forward, his dark eyes flashing with anger. “If the police had done what they should have done, if they’d really cared about helping people, Arianna wouldn’t have died.”

The pain in his voice, and the surprise on his face, told her he’d said more than he’d meant to say. He drew a ragged breath, obviously struggling to get his emotions back under control.

“Who’s Arianna?” Emily whispered.

He stiffened. Without another word, he turned and left the cell, locking the door behind him.

It was only then that Emily realized she’d forgotten to try to grab his gun.

SHE MUST HAVE dozed off because all of a sudden, Emily jerked awake and sat up in bed, disoriented, trying to get her bearings. Without a clock or a watch or even windows, she had no real perception of how much time had passed since her devastating conversation with Devlin.

Since leaving her in the cell, he’d spent most of the time sitting at a desk in the middle of the other room. Ignoring her repeated questions and requests that he let her out, he’d focused entirely on the laptop in front of him, occasionally printing out information and making handwritten notes. Twice he went through one of two doors on the right side of the room. But he ignored her when she asked where those doors led.

He must have been behind one of those doors again because she didn’t see him anywhere. A few minutes later, one of the doors opened and he stepped through it.

He was dressed all in black, right down to his boots. The telltale thickness beneath his shirt told her he was wearing Kevlar. His knife was sheathed, hanging from his belt on one side, his holstered pistol on the other. But what had Emily paying close attention was the network of elastic bands fitted over the top of his head, connected to a chinstrap. Attached to the front, currently tilted up out of the way, was a piece of equipment she’d never used but recognized—night-vision goggles. He was dressed to go out into the night, maybe to tangle with some bad guys. So what did that mean for *her*?

Without a glance in her direction, he headed to the stairs. Was he going to leave her behind? Panicked, she hopped off the bed and ran to the cell door, yanking on it even though she knew it was locked. “What are you doing, Devlin?” she called out.

He didn’t answer and started up the stairs.

“‘*Take the key and lock her up,*’” she yelled. “Is that what you’re doing? You’re going to just leave me to rot here like those other women in that basement in Savannah? Like Shannon Fisher?”

He froze, his hand clutching the handrail. Even in profile, from twenty feet away, tension was evident in every line of his body. She immediately regretted her outburst. In spite of what she’d learned about him—that he was the assassin she’d originally feared him to be—she was confident he would never hurt an innocent person, especially a woman. His sacrifices for her, if nothing else, told her that. But the idea of being locked up, helpless, alone, was more than she could bear.

“Please,” she said, hating that he’d forced her to beg. “Please don’t leave me here to die.”

“You’re safer here than outside. I’ll be back soon.” He jogged up the stairs and disappeared through the trap door.

Please don’t leave me here to die.

Emily’s parting words echoed in Devlin’s mind as he paused at the edge of his property, looking down the sloping front lawn at his house. The accusation in those words, the comparison between him and the animal who’d butchered those women, had sent a hot rush of fury through every muscle in his body. But the underlying anguish in her words had sent guilt crashing down on him. For years he’d performed his job without doubts. Since meeting Emily, he was questioning every decision and, for the first time in years, asking himself whether what he was doing was *right*.

He still didn’t know the answer.

Contrary to what Emily must think of him, taking a life was never something he took lightly. It was a distasteful, necessary consequence of actions his marks had taken. A last resort when other forms of justice had failed. Thankfully, not all of his missions involved executing someone. The

majority centered around reconnaissance, intelligence gathering, or escorting operatives from various alphabet agencies to and from sensitive locations. On occasion he even provided evidence to law-enforcement agencies—anonymously, of course—to point their investigations in the right direction. But never before had he forcefully abducted someone who wasn't his mark, someone who'd done nothing to warrant such treatment. It didn't feel right. But what was the alternative? Let her go free, only to die at the hands of an enforcer?

The solution, whatever it was, would have to wait. Right now he needed to be on his game, in case anyone was out here watching his house to see if he'd come back. Originally, he'd planned to use only the hidden bunker—a brisk thirty-minute hike away—and not come near the house itself, but while he'd sat watching Emily, waiting for her to wake up, he'd begun weighing the risks of sneaking back to the house versus the rewards.

Hiding in the bunker long-term wasn't an option. He had to find Kelly. To do that, he needed information. Which was why he was here.

Technically, it was already Sunday morning, a little after one o'clock. Ace was, hopefully, asleep somewhere, licking his figurative wounds. But he might have asked Cyprian to assign him a group of newbies, more probationary enforcers like Cougar to keep an eye on all of Devlin's known properties overnight, just in case he showed up at one of them. Which meant a team could be close by.

He had security cameras inside and outside the bunker, accessible through the panel in his bedroom, so he could check on Emily while he was here. That helped assuage some of his worries about leaving her alone. The trapdoor entrance at the top of the stairs was locked and concealed. There was no reason to worry that anyone would find it. And if all went as planned, he'd be back in less than an hour.

Keeping to the tree line and using his night-vision goggles to see, he circled around to the bolt-hole a hundred yards behind the house. He'd read about bolt-holes—secret exits—in a book on castles years ago and thought that sounded like an excellent strategy. Since then he'd ensured he had one in all of his hideouts, just in case he needed to get out in a hurry undetected. Except this time, he was going to use the bolt-hole to get *in* undetected.

The bushes had grown thick around the concealed entrance. It took several minutes of careful trimming with his hunting knife to make a space

big enough for him to slide into the tunnel. About ten feet in was a steel door secured with an electronic lock and keypad. He entered the code and jogged down the tunnel the rest of the way. A second door required another code, and then he was sliding the wall panel back and stepping into his master bedroom. The house was dark, but there was enough light from the moon filtering through the pinhole openings around the cords in the window blinds to make the goggles still useful.

He accessed the hidden security panel in the wall and pressed his thumb to activate the wall scanner. He swiped his finger across the screen, checking each camera angle of the house, both inside and out. All clear. Even the long winding road that led to the house was deserted.

He keyed in an access code to check the camera views of his other properties, including the bunker. Each view displayed the GPS coordinates so he could easily direct fellow enforcers to one of his hideouts if he ever needed help. Of course tonight that was the last thing he wanted.

Again, everything appeared as it should. He flipped back to the picture of the clearing where the bunker's entrance was hidden and keyed in another code. A picture of Emily inside the cell filled the screen. He grinned when he realized what she was doing—testing every bar to see if it was loose.

He switched the display back to the view outside the bunker so he could check it again. Then he went into the master closet. A panel in the back wall slid open to reveal a collection of Kevlar vests, which was the main reason he'd come. He used the vests for missions in which he had to escort someone through hostile territory. Right now, with Ace, Gage, and possibly others after him and Emily, this definitely qualified as hostile territory. He selected the vest that seemed most likely to fit her and closed the panel.

After shoving the vest into a go bag that doubled as a backpack, he opened the wall safe, unlocked the metal box, and grabbed the binder of dossiers. He'd been in too big a hurry this morning to get it before he'd left. With what was happening now, he figured the information in that binder might help him figure out who had the most to gain by getting rid of him.

He was about to close the safe when one of the wallet-sized pictures inside drew his attention. A tall blonde with a deep tan smiled up at him. And for one second, two, he could look at her and return that smile,

remember the feel of her soft hair sliding through his fingers, the sexy little moan deep in her throat when they kissed.

But then the moment passed, and the hurt and pain washed over him, just as fresh as the day she'd been murdered.

Arianna. *His* Arianna. His fiancée. *God, how he'd loved her.* But he hadn't been able to save her.

Unbidden, images of Emily swirled through his mind, as they had so often from the moment he'd met her. She wasn't classically beautiful, and yet she took his breath away. He loved her perky nose, her freckles, her maddeningly curly, unkempt-looking hair. But what intrigued him the most was her courage, her strength, even her moral center that had her condemning him because he didn't live up to her ideals. He admired her for her beliefs, even if he didn't agree with them.

He didn't know why, after all these years, that Emily was the one who tugged at his emotions, consumed his thoughts, when there was no possibility of a future between someone like him and a cop. But he did know one thing: above everything else, he wanted to protect her. He couldn't save Arianna, but he would save Emily, whatever it took.

He started to put Arianna's picture away. But without knowing if he'd ever be able to return, he suddenly couldn't bear to leave the picture behind. He slid it into the binder and packed it with the Kevlar vest in the backpack. He slid the straps over his shoulders and checked his watch. Only thirty-five minutes had passed since he'd left the bunker. He was making good time. Which meant he could do one more thing before he left.

He crossed to the window beside the bed, the one where the pictures of him and Shannon had been taken the one night they'd made love. The angles of those pictures indicated the camera would have been mounted on the right side of the window, probably about halfway up, near the head of the bed pointing across and toward the footboard.

He pulled the blinds back, not really expecting to see anything since so much time had passed. But if the person who'd placed the camera was sloppy, they might have left a round circle on the glass from the suction cup that affixed it to the window. Just knowing the size of the circle might help him calculate the maximum weight of the device. A clue like that would further narrow down the types of cameras that could have been used. Alone, that told him nothing. Added to other clues, it might paint a picture that

could help him identify whomever was framing him—and whoever had Kelly and the two other women Hawley claimed to have seen.

As he'd expected, the glass was clean, with nothing indicating a camera had ever been there. Of course. Nothing was ever that easy.

He let the blinds slide back into position and something thumped against the glass. He flattened himself against the wall and waited. Five seconds. Ten. Nothing. No other sounds drifted in from outside. He carefully lifted the edge of the blinds to look out and immediately realized what he'd heard. The *camera* had bumped against the glass. It was still there—mounted on the back of the blinds, its lens positioned to capture a full view of the bed and the room through one of the pinholes where the strings threaded through the slats.

A red light blinked on top of the tiny camera. It was on and still transmitting. Which meant whoever was receiving that transmission had seen him tonight. They knew he was in the house. And since he'd scrolled through the security panel to check on Emily, they also knew she was in the bunker.

And they had the GPS coordinates.

Cursing viciously, he tore through the house, not bothering with the bolt-hole. He ran out the front door and sprinted up the opposite slope, pumping his arms and legs in a full-out run. And as he ran, he did something he hadn't done since the day he'd lost Arianna.

He prayed.

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Chapter Sixteen

THE TRAPDOOR CREAKED open at the top of the stairs. Emily tightened her fingers around the bars of the cell, obscenely grateful that Devlin was returning. She'd tried to convince herself he wouldn't really abandon her, that he wouldn't leave her locked in the cell all alone to die. But she really didn't know. He was an enigma: kind, caring, or passionate one moment, binding her and stuffing her in a suitcase the next.

While he was gone, she'd tugged and twisted on every bar in the cell, all thirty of them, hoping to find a loose one. But they were snug and tight, and she'd come close to sinking to the floor in despair. Now she stood by the door, wondering why he hadn't come down the stairs yet.

A pair of boots came into view, descending toward the main room, moving slowly, almost . . . hesitantly. Wait . . . those boots, those pants, those weren't what Devlin had been wearing when he left. He'd been wearing all black. The person on the stairs was dressed in green camouflage.

Emily shoved away from the bars, backing toward the bathroom as quickly as she could without her sneakers squeaking as they tended to do. She was just a few feet from the door when the owner of those boots stepped down another stair, in full view now, carrying a machine gun. He looked straight at her.

She lunged through the bathroom doorway.

Rat-a-tat-tat, rat-a-tat-tat. The deafening sound of automatic gunfire echoed through the cell. Bullets blasted through the plaster wall between the cell and the bathroom, raining dust down on her like a burst of snowflakes. She scrambled on her knees toward her only cover, the tub, and dove over the side. The mirror above the sink exploded into hundreds of jagged shards.

The glass rained down on her like hot coals, pricking her skin. She bit her bottom lip to keep from crying out and scooted as far down as she could. Another barrage of bullets slammed through the wall. She gasped and covered her ears, squeezing her eyes shut.

Boots echoed in the outer room as the gunman approached the cell. Another pair of boots echoed on the stairs. Emily's stomach sank. *Two* gunmen. Two men were after her, trying to kill her.

Metal clanged against metal. They were trying to bust the lock on the cell door. She was trapped. She'd examined every inch of the place earlier. There wasn't anything in here she could use as a weapon. And the outer walls were solid concrete. What was she going to do?

Something hot and wet dripped on her arm. Blood. A quick swipe of her hand across the side of her head came away bright red. Tugging a towel down from the rack beside the tub, she pressed it against her scalp. She peered over the side of the tub. There had to be *something* she could use to defend herself. The lid on the toilet tank maybe? It was heavy enough to do some damage if she could manage to hit one of the gunmen without him shooting her first.

A shout sounded from the other room, followed by a burst of gunfire. A dull thud echoed through the cell. Then nothing.

Emily waited, barely breathing. Five seconds went by. Ten. Still nothing. Suddenly, a loud metal creak sounded from the other room. The cell door! They must have broken the lock.

She shoved up out of the tub and lunged toward the toilet tank. Footsteps sounded in the outer room. Grabbing the heavy ceramic lid off the back of the toilet, she held it like a bat and waited. As soon as the footsteps sounded outside the door she started her swing.

"Emily, it's—*oof*." The lid slammed against the man's chest just as he stepped into the bathroom. He fell backward across the threshold with a

muffled oath. The lid crashed to the floor, shattering and spraying ceramic shards across the room.

Emily blinked in surprise. “Devlin?”

He pushed himself to his feet and stood in the bathroom doorway, shaking the dust and ceramic pieces from his hair. “Guess I deserved that.”

She pressed her hand to her throat. “I don’t understand . . . where are the —”

His brows drew down. “You’re all cut up.” He grabbed her hand and turned her arm toward the light, then gave her other hand the same careful inspection, as if they had all the time in the world. Blood welled from dozens of cuts on both of her arms.

“It must have been the mirror,” she said, “when the bullets came through the wall. I’m okay, didn’t even know I was cut.” She tried to lean around him to look into the other room, but he wouldn’t budge. “The gunmen, Devlin. Where are—”

He grabbed her shoulders and turned her, feathering his hands through her hair. “You’ve got a nasty laceration on your scalp too. You need stitches.”

Exasperated, she pulled away from him. “Enough about my cuts. The gunmen, are they—wait, stitches?” She reached her hand up, but he knocked it away.

“Don’t touch it. I’ll have to put some disinfectant on it before I sew it closed.”

She blinked. “You? No way. You aren’t getting anywhere near me with a needle.”

A loud thump echoed through the other room. He grabbed her wrist. “We can argue later. There are more guys out there, trying to break through the trapdoor. We have to get out of here. Now.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to do all along,” she complained.

He ignored her and tugged her through the doorway.

Her eyes widened as he pulled her at a run through the open cell door. The two gunmen she’d been so worried about lay on the floor, outside of the cell. One’s neck was twisted in an eerily familiar angle. The other was lying in a pool of blood. Both stared sightlessly up at the ceiling. A cold chill shot up her spine.

Another loud thump sounded overhead. Devlin stopped at the base of the stairs, looking up at the trapdoor he must have come through just moments earlier.

“How many are there?” Emily asked.

“Don’t know. I took out one before I came inside. I didn’t see anyone else, but it sounds like there might be two or more out there. The bar I threw over the door is still holding, but it won’t last much longer. We’ll use the bolt-hole.” He tugged her away from the stairs, toward one of the two doors on the far wall.

“Did you recognize any of them? The men you . . . killed?”

“No.”

“Do you think Ace is after us, or other former *friends* of yours?”

“Ace was never my friend.” The way he spat the name “Ace” made her wonder what might have happened between the two of them in the past.

He yanked the door open and pulled her inside a small room that resembled a closet. A huge crash sounded in the outer room. Had the trapdoor been breached? Devlin slammed the door closed and grabbed a hinged metal bar mounted beside the wall. He shoved the bar down, across the door.

“This way.” He reached up high on the far wall and slammed his fist on a discolored patch of wood. Panels in the wall slid back. Where the closet door had been wood, the door that was now revealed was steel. He opened it and pulled her inside the pitch-black entrance into a tunnel. When he shut the door behind them, a dim row of lights turned on overhead. He pulled two thick bars down across the door just as the thumping began again from somewhere inside the bunker. Except that it was much louder this time, closer.

“They’re trying to break through the closet door,” Devlin said. “Run, Emily. Run.”

They both took off down the tunnel. He stayed behind her, his hand at the small of her back, as if to encourage her to keep going. The tunnel was long, with several twists and turns.

“It’s just past the next curve,” he announced.

“What is?”

“The way out.”

The tunnel ended at another steel door. They both stopped, her gasping for breath, him not even winded. He yanked a backpack off his shoulders that she hadn't even noticed until then and squatted down.

"Put this on." He pulled a Kevlar vest out of the bag.

Enormously relieved to have some kind of protection, she took it without question. It fit much better than she'd hoped but still hung low enough to rub against her thighs.

He tightened the straps and shook his head. "That's the best I can do. You're so damn tiny."

Since she'd always struggled with a few extra pounds, his words made her want to laugh. She supposed everyone was tiny next to him. He pulled a Sig Sauer 9 millimeter from the bag and held it out to her. Not sure what he intended, she took a quick step back. His answering frown had her blinking in astonishment when he shoved the gun into her hand.

"You're giving me a weapon? I thought I was your prisoner."

"I thought I was protecting you. But I was wrong."

"Wrong about what? Kidnapping me or locking me up?"

"If I hadn't taken you from your house, you'd be dead by now. I have no regrets about kidnapping you. But locking you up and leaving you without a way to defend yourself was an error in judgment." He pressed a section of the wall at eye level. It slid back to reveal an electronic keypad.

"So holding me against my will is okay as long as I . . . what, have a gun?"

He didn't answer and typed on the keypad. Steel tubes mounted to the door retreated into the wall and it popped open a couple of inches with a hiss, like air escaping a leaky tire.

Banging noises sounded back toward the tunnel entrance. The gunmen must have breached the closet and were trying to break into the tunnel. Emily's hand tightened around the gun. She knew what Devlin was offering. He'd given her a way to defend herself. She could stay and fight the men who were trying to kill her or go with him and continue to be his prisoner. She was a good shot, one of the few things she'd excelled at in the academy. Once the men were in the tunnel, she could duck down and wait for them to round the last curve. With the element of surprise on her side, she figured her odds of success were good. And then she'd be free, no longer anyone's prisoner.

Devlin shoved the door wide open and looked back at her, frowning. “Emily. You’re standing there like you have a choice to make. Let me clear that up for you. You don’t. You’re coming with me.”

His authoritarian tone put her on edge and made the decision for her. She turned the Sig Sauer on him. “I’m not taking orders from you anymore. And I’m no longer your prisoner.”

He didn’t seem concerned about the gun in her hand, probably because he was wearing Kevlar. She tilted the gun up, toward his head. That got his attention.

“You want to make your own decision?” he bit out. “Fine. You have two options. Option one: I head out this door while you stay here. I figure those guys will break through the wall to get around the steel door in a matter of minutes. And the enforcer in charge of them won’t be far behind, maybe a few hours if you’re lucky. Even if you manage to hold off the first wave, once the next wave arrives, you won’t stand a chance. Option two—”

“Wait, *enforcer*? What’s an enforcer?”

He shook his head impatiently. “Think of it as a badass assassin. There’s a lot more to it than that, but from your perspective, and what you need to know right now, assassin works.”

She swallowed hard. “Like you? You’re an . . . enforcer?”

He nodded.

“And the men after us *aren’t* enforcers?”

He laughed without humor. “Not hardly. They’re someone’s lackeys. My guess is that Ace sent them, but Gage might have. They’re an advance team sent to soften us up.”

Soften them up? Her hands started to shake. She clenched them tighter around the pistol. “What’s the second option?”

“We make a truce. If you do exactly what I say, go exactly where I tell you to go, we just might make it.”

A loud crack sounded from the mouth of the tunnel.

“We don’t have much time,” Devlin said. “Decide.”

Going with him made sense. It was the safest choice. But she couldn’t stop remembering the terror of being lowered into that tight, dark suitcase, of waking up in a drug-induced fog, of being locked in a cage like an animal, not knowing if she’d ever get out.

“I think I’d rather die than be locked up again,” she whispered, keeping her gun pointed at him.

He winced. Regret etched tiny lines around his eyes. “Maybe you’re right that I shouldn’t have forced you to come with me in the first place. And maybe I shouldn’t have locked you up. But I did what I thought I had to do at the time to keep you safe. If you come with me now, we can be a team, find the missing women together. That way I’ll be able to protect you from my enemies and you’ll be able to do what you want to do—solve the case. You won’t be my prisoner. But don’t ask me to leave you here to die, Em. I can’t do it. I *won’t* do it.”

Stunned at his offer, and the conviction in his voice as he called her Em and said he wouldn’t let her die, she searched his eyes for some kind of sign that he was lying. Her instincts told her he was telling the truth. And the fervent way he’d used the shortened version of her name made her *want* to believe him.

“You won’t restrain me again? And we’ll work together to solve the case? Why do you even care about the case?” she asked.

“Because my boss, Cyprian, thinks I’m the one who killed Shannon Fisher. And he thinks I’m holding the missing women, one of whom is Kelly Parker, a co-worker and friend. I want my life back just as much as you want yours. The only way to get it is to rescue Kelly and prove my innocence.”

“Kelly Parker? You know the identity of one of the missing women?”

He nodded. “There’s information in my backpack that can help us find her and figure out who is behind all of this.”

Another loud *crack* sounded from the tunnel, much louder than the last.

Devlin stiffened.

Emily tightened her hand on the gun. His offer was the carrot that had her mouth watering. Solving the case, finding those women alive, would prove her worth once and for all—to her boss, to her family, to *herself*. It wasn’t a noble reason to want to save those women, but she didn’t shy away from the truth. She wanted this, needed this. But after everything Devlin had done, how could she blindly trust him to keep his word? She didn’t think he was lying, but what if he was?

She hadn’t been kidding when she’d said she’d rather die than be locked up. If he was going to take her prisoner again, she’d rather stay in the tunnel

and take her chances.

“Why should I trust you? How do I know you aren’t toying with me, that you won’t try to kill me as soon as I lower my gun?”

Before she could even blink, he knocked her arm up and wrenched the pistol out of her grasp.

“Because if I wanted to kill you, you’d already be dead.”

She slowly lowered her now empty hand.

“Choose, Emily.”

“Op . . . option two.” Her voice shook so hard she could barely form the words.

He shoved the gun back into her hand, grabbed her other hand, and pulled her out into the night.

DEVLIN STUCK THE needle into Emily’s scalp.

“Ooouch,” she hissed between clenched teeth. “That hurt.”

“Don’t be such a baby about a handful of stitches. I’ve dug bullets out of myself with nothing but a bottle of whiskey to numb the pain.” He stuck the needle in again.

She jerked away. He grabbed her shoulders and yanked her back.

“At least you had the whiskey,” she grumbled.

He held back a smile. “Good point.” The moon was almost full tonight, but he still needed her to hold a penlight to help him see well enough to sew her up. “Move the light a little to the left.”

“Which left, yours or mine?” Without waiting for his answer, she moved the hand that was holding the penlight up. The light pointed off into the bushes. He sighed, adjusted the position, and started stitching again.

“Do you think we lost them?” she asked.

“Lost is a relative term. They’ll find our trail eventually. But if I didn’t think we were safe to stop running for a few minutes, I wouldn’t have stopped.”

She nodded, knocking the needle and thread out of his hands. Again.

He dropped his hands to his sides.

Emily glanced back at him. “Oops, I did it again, didn’t I? Hang on a second.” She aimed the penlight on the forest floor. “Here it is. It fell right

beside my gun.” She grabbed the needle from beside the Sig Sauer on the ground and handed it to him.

“Disinfectant.” He held his other hand out.

“Right.” She grabbed the spray out of the go bag cradled in her lap.

He sprayed the needle, well aware of how easily infection could set in out here in the woods, especially since the wound had been open the whole time they’d been running after escaping from the bunker. As soon as he was confident that no one was following them, or at least that they weren’t close enough for him to hear them or catch a glimpse of them with the night-vision goggles, he’d found an enclosed spot in the middle of a ring of thick trees and stopped to treat Emily’s wounds.

Two more passes of the needle, in conjunction with Emily’s hisses, and he was done. He used his knife to cut the thread and handed his stitching supplies to Emily to stow back in the first-aid kit. “Finished.”

“It’s about time.” She reached up to feel the stitches.

He slapped her hand away. “Don’t. We need to keep it clean to avoid infection.”

She dropped her hand to her lap. “Well, at least you’re done.”

He reached past her and pulled some gauze, tweezers, and antiseptic cream out of the kit. “I’ve just gotten started. Stretch your left arm out on top of your thigh. You’ll need to hold the penlight for me again.”

Her frown could have felled a tree.

“Please,” he added, once again fighting the urge to smile.

She blew out a breath and rested her hand on top of her leg.

“Light?” he asked.

“For someone who isn’t supposed to be my captor anymore you sure are bossy.”

“For someone who had the courage to pull a gun on me, twice, you sure are whiny.” He added a wink to soften his insult.

Her eyes widened. Devlin hadn’t even tried to hide his grin this time. Since they’d agreed to work together, the dynamics of their relationship had changed. He felt free to tease her and was enjoying her honest, unguarded reactions far more than he would have expected. Then again, honesty was so rare in his business, it was refreshing to speak openly and trust the person he was with not to lie to him.

He sat cross-legged beside her and began to meticulously pull tiny shards of glass from her cuts while she held the penlight.

“Dev, since we’re basically partners now, tell me why you decided to become an assassin. How did you get mixed up with a company like EXIT?”

Since she hadn’t even seemed to notice that she’d shortened his name, like a friend—or a lover—might do, he steeled himself against showing any outward reaction. But just knowing that she was comfortable enough with him to do that sent a flash of heat straight to his groin. He forced himself to focus on her wounds and her question instead of the blood roaring in his ears.

But her question wasn’t an easy one to answer.

He made quick work of her left arm and rubbed the first-aid cream on all of her cuts before moving to her other side to perform the same careful ministrations to those cuts.

“Did you hear me?” she asked.

He paused, his tweezers poised above a piece of glass. “I heard you. Arianna. She was the reason I joined EXIT.” Saying her name out loud hurt less than he’d expected. He gently pulled the sliver out and tossed it aside.

“You mentioned her before, when you locked me in the cell. You said if the police had done their job, she wouldn’t have died. Who was she? Your girlfriend?”

“Fiancée.” He pulled out another sliver and dropped it to the ground.

Emily’s soft, warm hand settled over his. “What happened? How did she die?”

Her hand on his felt good, too good. He moved the tweezers to another piece of glass, forcing her to drop her hand. He pulled out the sliver, moved to the next one.

“EXIT had been after me to join them for months. Cyprian himself recruited me. He’d somehow accessed my scores on aptitude tests, knew my grades, had heard about my success in sports. At first, he talked about me becoming a guide. For a guy like me, being paid obscene amounts of money to train, learn survival skills, and get free trips to exotic locations was incredibly tempting. The deal was that I’d begin my physical training while still in school. I’d receive a regular, generous paycheck while

pursuing my degree. And once I graduated, I'd move to Colorado, EXIT's headquarters, until I was a full-fledged guide."

"I'm sensing you said no."

He set the tweezers down and took the penlight from her, looking for more glass. "You'd be right. My family means everything to me. I couldn't see leaving them for months at a time. I didn't want to disappoint Alex either, getting a college degree and then basically doing nothing with it. And I was already in love with Arianna and thinking about asking her to marry me. Taking a job that involved a lot of travel didn't fit in with my plans."

"How did Cyprian take that?"

"He seemed fine with it, understood. He didn't ask me again." He shoved the penlight in his pocket and put the tweezers in the first-aid kit before rubbing antibiotic cream over her wounds.

"But you obviously said yes eventually. What happened to change your mind?"

He hesitated, then finished rubbing the cream on her arm before answering. "A lifetime career criminal released from prison because of overcrowding raped and butchered her."

Her face twisted into a mask of sympathy. "I'm so sorry."

He gave her a sharp nod. "Two days later, Gage came to me."

"Gage. You mentioned him before too. Wait, he drove your truck yesterday, from the police station."

"Yes. He's an enforcer too. And my best friend."

Her brow furrowed with confusion. "But in the tunnel you said Gage might have sent those men after us. Your best friend is trying to kill us?"

He let out a deep sigh. "Cyprian thinks I've gone rogue, that I'm out of control, a danger to the company and to others." At her startled look, he clarified, "A danger to innocent people, as opposed to the people I normally . . . deal with. Gage is just following orders."

"Huh. Some friend. You said he approached you in college, after your fiancée was killed."

"He told me about EXIT, about my true mission, explaining about the tour guide part being a front. He said I could protect people, save hundreds, thousands of lives by taking out terrorists, foiling plots against the government, against innocent civilians. And then he told me he knew who'd

killed Arianna. Cyprian had used the resources of EXIT to look into her murder and knew before the police who'd murdered her." He watched her closely. "Gage had already located him. He was hiding out in his old neighborhood. If I agreed to join EXIT, Gage would take me to Arianna's killer."

Emily sucked in a breath. "You killed him."

"Yes. And I don't regret it."

"I see." She looked at the trees surrounding them, at the leaves and twigs on the ground, anywhere but at him. "Well," she finally said with a small laugh, "maybe I'm not the only one who makes lousy decisions under pressure."

He thought about arguing with her, trying to convince her that joining EXIT was the right decision. But what would be the point? She was a cop. He . . . wasn't. They had completely different views of right and wrong.

Still, the sudden awkwardness between them when they'd been so comfortable with each other moments ago bothered him. He tugged the go bag toward him and snapped the first-aid kit closed, settling it into the bottom of the bag.

"You feel you make bad decisions under pressure, huh?" he asked as he zipped the bag closed.

"Always. I don't know what it is, but if a life is on the line, my logical thought processes tank."

"It's the adrenaline. When you get scared, like in the tunnel—"

"I wasn't *scared* in the tunnel," she snapped. "I really thought I could take those guys on."

The urge to smile was back. Emily had that amazing power over him, to take him from the dark side and into the light in just a matter of minutes without even trying.

"Okay," he amended. "When you're *not* scared, but you're in a tense or traumatic situation, adrenaline rushes through your body. It makes your heart race, your respiration increase, your blood pressure go up. If you don't know how to calm down, think through the rush, and use it to your advantage, you'll make mistakes."

"I'm well aware of what adrenaline does. But I don't see how I can use that to my advantage."

“Adrenaline can increase your strength, numb you to pain, heighten your other senses. But it’s only an asset if you can control it.”

“And how do you control it?”

He strapped the go bag on his back and pulled her up with him. “Are you always this curious?”

“Pretty much. It drives my co-workers crazy. How do you control it? The rush?”

A crackling noise sounded off to their left. Devlin yanked the night-vision goggles out from beneath his shirt and shoved them on his head. He peered through a break in the shrubs and stiffened.

“Get down. Be quiet,” he whispered. He grabbed the Sig Sauer off the ground and shoved it into her hand before pulling his own gun out of its holster.

She took the Sig, popped the clip, and checked the loading. “Okay, so how are we going to do this? We need a plan.” She popped the clip back in and looked up.

Devlin was gone.

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Chapter Seventeen

THERE WAS NO sign of Devlin. Emily turned in a full circle looking for him. How could a man his size move so quietly and disappear like that? She curled her hands around the gun in frustration. What was she supposed to do? Stand here, wait, do nothing? Neither of them knew how many gunmen were after them. What if he was outnumbered, or ambushed? If he'd bothered to ask, he'd realize she was a good shot. He needed her, whether he would admit it or not.

Wait . . . was she doing it again? Making another bad decision under pressure? She bit her lip, hesitating. Devlin obviously didn't want her help or he'd have taken her with him. He'd pretty much told her to stay put by telling her to get down and be quiet. Emily didn't want to interfere if he had everything under control, especially given her bad track record.

She sat on the ground, determined to wait, not to interfere. Without a phone or a watch, she had no way of knowing how much time was passing. The warm breeze that occasionally blew through the bushes clacked the branches against each other, but other than an occasional owl hooting nearby, no other noises disturbed the silence of the night.

Had it been twenty minutes? Thirty? She no longer thought that Devlin would abandon her, as she'd feared in the cell. But why hadn't he come back by now? The only answer she could think of was that he was hurt—or worse—and *couldn't* come back.

After everything he'd done, all the risks he'd taken to keep her safe, she owed it to him to do the same. Sitting here when he could be lying somewhere bleeding wasn't something she could do for even one more minute. She'd waited, had given him plenty of time to come back. She'd played it his way. Now it was time to play it her way.

Decision made, she stepped around the ring of trees as quietly as possible, looking for some kind of sign to tell her which way Devlin had gone. With only the light from the moon filtering through the trees, it took far longer than she would have liked, but she finally found a footprint—a large footprint, like the kind Devlin's boots would make. With a direction to follow, she headed out.

Fifty yards in, she stumbled over a log. She fell hard, on her side, clutching her gun in both hands to keep from dropping it. Her shoulder and hip throbbed, but nothing seemed broken. Venting her pain with a good shout or a few choice curse words would have made her feel much better. Too bad she had to be quiet. She shoved the gun into her waistband and braced her hands on the ground to push herself up. The wet, sticky dirt had her recoiling and sitting back on her haunches.

Blood. Her fingers and palms were covered in it. She jerked around to look at the log. Not a log. A body. *Oh, no*. She scrambled over and rolled the man onto his back. Relief flashed through her when she saw it wasn't Devlin, but relief turned to nausea when she took in the gruesome details. The stranger's throat had been slit from ear to ear. Blood soaked the front of his shirt, releasing a metallic, pungent odor that was already beginning to draw flies.

Bracing herself for the unpleasant task ahead, she slid a hand beneath him, feeling his back pocket to see if he had a wallet. Nothing. She did the same on the other side, but again, nothing. Wrinkling her nose with distaste, she gently patted his shirt, then the rest of him. No identification.

He wasn't wearing a gun. In the dark she couldn't do more than a cursory search. Not that it really mattered. Even if he were holding a gun when he was killed, the semicircular angle of the laceration on his neck told her it was made from behind, by a man taller than he was drawing a knife across in an upward arc. This wasn't a justified killing according to any laws she lived by. It certainly wasn't self-defense to attack someone from behind.

She swallowed hard and stood. One bad guy down, justified or not. How many more were out there? And where was Devlin?

The only thing she could be sure of was that she was on the right path, as evidenced by Devlin's handiwork lying at her feet. He had definitely passed this way. Based on the body's current position, she made her best guess about which way he'd been going and started out in the same direction, hoping it would lead her to Devlin.

A few minutes later, she found more evidence of Devlin's passing through—*another body*. The dead man lay on his side, next to a pine tree, his neck obviously broken. That seemed to be a favorite way of killing for Devlin. How could he seem so kind while helping her and yet care so little about human life? She couldn't reconcile the two sides of him, especially after seeing two of his recent kills.

Feeling sick to her stomach, she searched the body for ID as she had the other man. But again, he wasn't carrying anything to tell her who he was. This man was unarmed as well.

A muffled shout sounded from somewhere up ahead. She clutched her pistol and took off at a jog, which was the fastest she could go in the near dark without running into a tree or falling over a root. Another shout sounded, then a guttural curse, followed by a smack, like a fist slamming into human flesh.

Shadows moved between the oak trees just ten feet away: two men locked in combat, their arms wrapped around each other, struggling for the advantage. Devlin, unmistakable in the dark because of his height, suddenly twisted and dropped down, breaking the other man's hold. The man stumbled, trying to catch his footing. Moonlight flashed on steel. Devlin plunged his knife into the other man's stomach and jerked the hilt, tilting the blade up in a sickening move that sliced through the man's vital organs. The man was dead before his body even hit the ground.

Emily must have made some kind of noise because Devlin spun around in a crouch, as if to spring at her. Her gun shook so badly in her hands she probably wouldn't have hit him if she'd wanted to shoot him, which she didn't. She slowly lowered the pistol and clutched a hand to her throat, sickened by what she'd seen.

Devlin straightened, stepped over the body of the man he'd just butchered, and picked something up at the base of one of the trees. His gun.

He shoved it into the holster at his waist and faced her. Only six feet separated the two of them, but the distance felt as wide as the Grand Canyon.

“I told you to stay put.” His voice was barely above a whisper. “There’s still at least one more gunman out here somewhere. I saw his tracks.”

She shoved her gun into her waistband and shook her head. “You just . . . disappeared. I was . . .” She broke off and looked at the dead man again, his stomach distended and obscene with the knife hilt protruding from it. “I was worried about you,” she finished. “But it looks like I should have been worried about this man, and the others I found, instead.” She raised her gaze to meet his. “How do you sleep at night after the things you’ve done?”

He laughed harshly. “So I should introduce myself and give them a chance to draw their weapons first, to make it a fair fight? No thanks. That’s called suicide. Not my game.” He headed back to the dead man, braced his boot on the man’s hip and yanked his knife out with a sickening sucking sound. After wiping the blade clean on the man’s pants, he returned to Emily.

“Since you decided not to stay where I left you, you might as well come with me to find our last friend. I *am* going to find him. And when I do, I’m going to kill him. Not because I’m a monster who enjoys taking lives but because I don’t want to die today, and I don’t want *you* to die. It’s that simple. We either take these men out or they take us out. Don’t look at me with your shocked expression, judging me, expecting remorse. I do what I have to do to survive. And I sleep just fine, thank you very much.”

He stepped past her, his long angry strides carrying him back through the trees, quickly fading into the darkness.

She hurried to keep up. “Devlin, wait. Devlin, please, at least slow down.”

He stopped and waited until she caught up with him, then started walking again. He paused in a patch of moonlight shining through the branches overhead and studied the ground before continuing forward. He was hunting the last man. And she hated him for it.

“Can’t we just get out of here?” she asked. “There’s no reason to try to find the other one. He’s probably on the run, trying to save his own neck after what happened to his friends.”

Devlin abruptly stopped.

Emily had to stop and turn around to face him.

“How long were you on foot patrol before you became a detective?” he asked.

“Almost three years. Why?”

“Including your time in the academy?” He sounded surprised.

“Yes.”

“Hmm.” He started walking again.

She had to jog to keep up. “Was there a point in there somewhere?”

“There would have been, if you had the experience to back it up.”

She rushed to get in front of him again, forcing him to stop.

“What is that supposed to mean?” she asked. “Seriously. I just want to understand.”

He shrugged. “Just that you’re a baby cop. Without enough real-world experience to give you an appreciation for human nature. You’ll just have to take my word for it when I tell you that the kinds of men who are after us—who *were* after us, except for our last remaining friend—are hard-core. These types of men aren’t going to stop and let us go on our merry way. Which is why we can’t fall back into defensive mode. I have to find this last guy before he finds us.”

He put his hands around her waist and moved her out of his path, as if she were a table lamp. He was about twenty feet away by the time she recovered from her shock and hurried after him.

“Devlin, wait,” she called out. “Your legs are much longer than mine.”

“Keep your voice down,” he said in a hushed tone as he turned around to wait. “Emily, look out!”

She whirled around, clawing for her pistol. Before she could get it out, a man jumped at her from the cover of trees and knocked her gun to the ground. She shrank back from him just as something metallic flashed in the moonlight. The man screamed and stumbled back, clutching at the hilt of a knife, now buried in his arm.

Devlin was suddenly there with them, shoving her none too gently out of the way. She watched in horror as the man who’d screamed yanked the knife out of his arm and tried to stab Devlin with it. Devlin dove out of the way and slammed his boot against the man’s knee, making a sickening crunch. The man’s agonized scream echoed through the trees as the knife

dropped from his fingers. He fell to the ground, rolling back and forth, clutching his knee with his one good hand.

Devlin calmly picked up his knife and started toward the writhing man.

“No, no, no!” Emily hurried forward and jumped between the two of them, holding her hands up. “Devlin, please, stop. He’s injured. He’s not a threat to us.”

He gave her an exasperated look and pushed her out of the way again.

“Don’t kill me,” the man cried. “Please, have mercy.”

Emily grabbed Devlin’s arm. “He’s surrendering.”

“Did you get a good look at his face?” Devlin demanded.

“His . . . what? His face? No. Why? What difference does that make?”

He started to sheath his knife, but he looked at the blood on the blade and pitched it a few feet away. He pulled out his penlight and shined it on the man’s face. The man blinked and turned his head away from the light, but not before Emily saw what Devlin was talking about.

“The tear tattoos on his cheek? That’s what you wanted me to see?”

“Yes. I assume even a *baby cop* knows what they mean. Three tears, three kills. He’s a gangbanger, a murderer. He doesn’t deserve mercy.”

“Quit calling me a baby cop. And none of that means it’s okay for you to . . . to . . .” She waved her hand, searching for the right word. “It’s not okay to just execute him.”

She rushed around him, ignoring his curses, and stood a few feet from the man who was lying on his side, whimpering.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

He shot a look at Devlin.

“Ignore him,” she demanded. “Look at me. What’s your name?”

“Brad,” he wheezed between clenched teeth. “Brad Robinson.”

“Where do you live? In Savannah?”

“Yes. Call an ambulance, lady. Please. I need a doctor.”

She looked at Devlin, who was already pulling out his phone. *Yes.* She was making progress. She turned back to the injured man. “We’ll get you help. But tell me who hired you. Why are you after us?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” His mouth tightened.

“Brad Robinson,” Devlin said. “Surprise, surprise, you’ve got a criminal record.”

Emily looked back at Devlin. He swiped his thumb across the screen on his phone. She hurried over to see what he was looking at.

“You Googled him? I thought you were calling 911.”

“No, I didn’t Google him. I looked up his criminal record, courtesy of a backdoor into the state’s prison record system. Let’s see. Convenience store robbery for starters. Oh, and it looks like our Mr. Robinson is not only a gangbanger, he’s a rapist. Started with his thirteen- and fourteen-year-old cousins when he was seventeen. Served only one year in juvie for that. Then he graduated to manslaughter, and let’s count them, one, two, three rapes as an adult offender—that we know of. The only reason he’s out of prison is because he turned state’s evidence, testifying against his cell mate, who supposedly gave a jailhouse confession to armed robbery.”

“I need a doctor,” the man cried.

Devlin held the phone for Emily to see the report. “Is this the kind of man you think deserves mercy, Em? How many more women do you think he’ll rape if we let him go?”

She clenched her fists in frustration. “You still can’t kill him in cold blood.”

“Why not? I’ve been doing that for years and it’s worked fine so far.”

“But it’s *wrong*. My God, Dev. How can you be so cold, so unfeeling? Don’t you care about anyone?”

He stiffened. “I’m not cold and unfeeling, Em. I don’t do what I do because I *want* to hurt people. I do what I *have* to do so the decent people in this world don’t suffer the way Arianna did.”

She gasped, belatedly wishing she could take back what she’d just said. “I’m so sorry. I wasn’t thinking about Arianna when I said that.” She lifted her hand to cup his cheek.

He jerked away before she could touch him, his jaw clenched so tight the skin turned white. He circled around her and crouched beside the man on the ground.

“Who hired you?” Devlin demanded. When the man didn’t answer, Devlin slammed his pistol against the side of the man’s head.

The man cried out and held his hand up. “Stop, please. Don’t hurt me!”

Emily bit her lip. She should pull her gun, demand that Devlin stop. But she couldn’t make herself do it, not after hearing the agony and pain in his voice when he’d told her about his fiancée’s murder.

“Who hired you?” he repeated.

“I don’t know. It was all done over the phone. We were supposed to kill both of you and provide proof of death to get our money.”

“How were you going to provide proof of death?”

The man whimpered.

Devlin shoved his gun against the man’s temple. “I’m not asking again.”

“Pictures of the corpses,” he choked out. “And a finger from each of you.”

Emily pressed her hand to her throat.

“Where were you supposed to send proof of death?” Devlin asked.

The man started blubbering again. “We were supposed to get a phone call in a couple of days with further instructions. That’s all I know. I swear!”

Devlin studied him, as if weighing his words for the truth. He finally rose and leveled his gun at the other man’s head.

Emily gasped and started toward him, determined to step between the two if necessary. But she stopped when Devlin looked at her.

“This really matters to you? You don’t want me to kill him?”

“Y . . . yes. Yes, of course it matters. I don’t want you to kill him.”

He gave her a curt nod. “All right. I won’t kill him.” He moved the gun lower. *Bam! Bam!*

Robinson screamed.

Emily ran to Devlin. “You said you wouldn’t kill him!”

“I didn’t. I *cured* him. He’ll never rape another woman or child again.” He shoved his gun in his holster and calmly walked away.

Robinson rolled back and forth on the ground, screaming and moaning as he clutched himself.

Devlin had shot him in the groin.

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Chapter Eighteen

IT TOOK ONLY a few minutes for Devlin to find and hot-wire the Jeep the dead men had been driving. But in that time Emily must have asked him fifty times to call 911 to help the rapist he'd left bleeding in the woods. Didn't she realize the sacrifice he'd made for her already in not killing that evil scum? He'd thought that sparing the man's life would have made her, if not happy, at least grateful. Apparently not.

The sun was just coming up when he steered the Jeep the last few bumpy feet out of the woods and pulled onto the two-lane highway.

"Devlin—"

"All right, all right. We're far enough away that you can call 911. You can pull the GPS coordinates where we left Robinson from the text message I sent myself."

Her brows rose in surprise. "You planned all along to let me get help for that man."

"It seemed important to you. Don't stay on the line very long. I'll have to destroy the phone to keep them from tracing us."

She rested her hand on the top of his leg. "Thank you. You're doing the right thing."

Since he was having trouble breathing with her hand riding so high on his thigh, he didn't try to talk. If he knew she would have touched him like that for sparing Robinson, he would have spared all four men to see what *that* would have gained him.

After Emily completed the anonymous call, she followed his directions, turning off the phone, smashing open the battery housing against the dashboard, then throwing the pieces out the window.

“There’s another phone in the go bag behind my seat.”

Her breast brushed against his arm as she reached past him for the bag. He gritted his teeth and shifted his legs to ease the pressure against his pants. If he ever got her naked, he’d probably last all of fifteen seconds before the pleasure killed him.

He passed a shaky hand across his brow as Emily sat back in her seat, phone in hand, and fastened her seat belt. She handed him the phone and he shoved it in his pocket.

“You okay?” She frowned. “You’re sweating.”

“It’s July.” He flipped the air conditioner on high.

She gave him a funny look, probably because it was already cold inside the car.

“Earlier you said you had something in the bag that might help us figure out who’d taken those women. Is it that binder I saw?”

“Yes. It’s got dossiers on all of the enforcers, plus recent mission details.”

“Great. I’ll just—”

“No, don’t bother. I’ll get it.” He thrust his arm at a crazy angle behind his seat before she could torture him again by brushing her breast against him and wiggling that gorgeous ass in the air. He yanked the bag out and dropped it on the front floorboard between her feet.

“I could have done that, but, uh, thanks.” She glanced through the windshield before flipping the binder open. “Are we going to another hideout to brainstorm the case?”

“Can’t. Gage knows all my hideouts. We’ll have to get a motel room. Most motels don’t allow check-ins this early. For now, we’ll just drive around.” The thought of sharing a motel room with her had him sweating again. “Do you like music?”

“Of course. Who doesn’t?”

He turned on the radio and tuned it to the first thing that came on. Country music wasn’t his usual style. He preferred classic rock. But he was desperate for anything to take his mind off the curvy, sexy woman sitting two feet away.

A couple of hours later, with his libido finally in control, he turned down a gravel road. It had been a close call for a little while back there. But thankfully, Emily was blissfully unaware of the internal battle he'd raged not to pull the car over and beg her to let him make love to her. And since he'd never begged anyone for anything, he was more confused than ever over his growing fascination with her.

"Where does this road lead?" Emily asked.

"If you stay on it long enough, it'll take you to I-16 and on up to Macon. But we're driving only 1.2 miles in."

"One point two, huh? That specific?"

"I can give you the GPS coordinates if you prefer."

"I'm sure you could. What's 1.2 miles down this road?"

"This." He turned down what appeared to be little more than a walking trail—to discourage strangers from using it—and parked the Jeep behind a tall row of bushes that hid it from the road.

He cut the engine and waited.

Emily looked all around, then shrugged. "I don't see anything but trees and bushes."

"That's because you're not supposed to. Come on. We're switching vehicles."

A few minutes later, they'd traded the Jeep for a black Dodge Charger that had been hidden under some camouflaged netting and were back on the road.

She shook her head in wonder. "Do you have vehicles hidden all over the country?"

"Just here in Savannah, mainly."

"We're still in Savannah?"

"About half an hour outside. I've been driving in circles, more or less, to make sure no one was following us."

"I'm impressed. You seem to know every back road and shortcut around. But if more, um, enforcers are after us, why are we hanging around? Why not head a few hours outside of town?"

"Because everything the killer's done so far has been centered around where I live and where my family lives. I think the killer is close to Savannah, if not in the city itself. I want to stay in the general vicinity so we

can move fast once we figure out who he is and where the women are being held."

The song on the radio suddenly cut off in midnote as a news announcer broke in.

"The body of a murdered young woman has been found at a house outside of Savannah."

Devlin turned the volume higher.

"Although police won't confirm if the woman's death is connected to Virginia Hawley's abduction last week, sources close to the investigation said off the record that there's a high probability that both women were abducted by the same man. Next of kin have been notified. The dead woman is Nancy Thomas, a sophomore at the University of Georgia in Athens."

Devlin sucked in a sharp breath and slammed his fist onto the dash.

"Did . . . did you know her, that woman, Nancy Thomas?" Emily asked.

He didn't answer. He couldn't. He was too furious to form coherent words. Why? Why would the killer go after Nancy of all people? She was young, innocent, one of the kindest women he'd ever known.

At the next gravel road that opened on their right, he jerked the wheel and punched the accelerator. Fifty feet in, he brought the car to a shuddering halt, barely missing a stand of trees beside the road.

Emily sat frozen in shock as he jumped out of the car.

He hurried into the cover of trees and didn't stop until he'd reached a clearing out of sight of the Charger. After yanking out his pistol, he paced back and forth. He wanted to shoot something. Hell, he wanted to kill something. No, not something. Some *one*: the man who'd murdered Nancy.

Memories swirled through his mind.

Nancy at the zoo, laughing with her school classmates while they threw peanuts at Devlin. And Devlin forcing a smile as he planned his revenge against Gage for suckering him into being a field-trip chaperone.

The delight on Nancy's face the following weekend when Devlin bought her a puppy. Gage had nearly had a stroke at the thought of house-training a

dog when he'd just installed brand-new, expensive carpet throughout the house. Revenge had been very sweet indeed.

Nancy calling him from college, crying about a fight she'd had with her brother about her wanting to major in criminal justice.

Devlin fervently hoped Nancy and Gage had been able to heal their differences before she was killed or Gage would never forgive himself.

His pacing brought him to the stand of trees by the road. He caught a glimpse of Emily's pale, concerned face watching him from the passenger window and whirled around again, his hand tightening on his gun. When he was out of sight of the car, he stopped, his breaths coming in deep, painful gasps. What was going on? Who had he so royally pissed off that they would, on top of everything else, kill an innocent young woman of nineteen just to squeeze the pressure around him even more? He had little doubt that she'd been killed in some way that would point the finger at him. All he had to do was make one phone call to confirm it.

He shoved his pistol in the holster and pulled out his latest burn phone. What he was doing was stupid, foolish, a mistake. He knew it. But he couldn't *not* have made that call, no matter what. Because this wasn't just about him, or Kelly, or even Emily anymore.

He punched in a landline number he rarely called but knew by heart, and rested his forehead against a pine tree. One ring. Two. Three. In the middle of the fourth ring, a bitter, raw voice came on the line.

"Gage Thomas."

"I'm sorry to hear about your sister," Devlin whispered, his own throat raw even though he hadn't been crying.

"You bastard. Why did you do it? Why Nancy?"

"It wasn't me, Gage. I swear it. I didn't kill Shannon. And I didn't kill Nancy. You know I adored her. I would never, ever hurt her."

"You beat her, stabbed her, nearly fucking cut her head off with that damn wire you're so fond of. And you left her lying on my front porch like garbage. Don't tell me you *adored* my baby sister." He broke down, crying into the phone.

Devlin blinked back the answering moisture in his own eyes. He could feel his friend's pain just as if it were twelve years ago all over again and Devlin was jogging around the corner of the dorm only to see the police

crime-scene tape around Arianna's car. Her long blonde hair hanging out of the driver's side door, brushing against the pavement.

"I let you escape yesterday morning even though I had an EXIT order for you," Gage snarled. "And until I found out about Nancy, I'd done nothing, *nothing* about that order. I couldn't do it. I couldn't go after you. But all of that has changed."

Devlin stilled. "It's all changed? What do you mean? What have you done, Gage?"

"What I'm *going* to do is kill you. Right now, I have a funeral to plan, but once I explained to Ace what you'd done, he was more than willing to assist me in a little quid pro quo. Turns out, he doesn't care about the rules any more than you do, especially rule number one*: Enforcers' families are not to be harmed in any way*." The line clicked.

The blood drained from Devlin's face. Gage had just sicced Ace on his family. He took off toward the car in a sprint, punching numbers into his phone as he ran.

EMILY CLUTCHED THE armrest as Devlin took another sharp curve going way too fast. The Charger tilted dangerously to the right, the wheels wobbling and lifting off the pavement.

"Devlin," she squeaked, her stomach plunging like a roller coaster going over a steep drop.

He eased up on the gas and the wheels dropped. Another tight curve and then the road straightened out before them. Devlin punched the accelerator. How fast was he going? Eighty? Ninety? On a two-lane rural road on which anyone could pull out in front of them at any moment.

"Please," Emily tried to reason with him, speaking calmly, slowly. "Please slow down. You're going to get us killed."

He didn't seem to hear her. If anything, he sped up. He held the phone to his ear and slowed for another curve, barely. The wheels screeched but held.

"Devlin, please. You're scaring me. What happened back there? Slow down."

"Pierce," he barked into the phone. "What took you so long? Forget it. Where are Maddie and Nikki?" A few seconds later, "Get them somewhere

safe. I've got some bad people after me, and they've threatened to go after my family." His hand tightened around the phone. "What? No, right now. Now! Okay, okay. I'll explain later. Just do it. And watch your back."

The fingers of Emily's right hand ached from holding on to the armrest so hard.

Devlin repeated the same series of warnings over the phone to his brother Matt, telling him to get his wife, Tessa, somewhere safe and to hide with her. Then he made yet another call but hung up a few seconds later. Whoever he'd called hadn't answered.

The rural areas faded away and they roared into Savannah's Historic District. Devlin's jaw tightened as he was forced to slow down drastically to avoid early morning church goers and tourists.

"Where are we going? Does this have something to do with Nancy Thomas?"

He weaved around a car and made another call.

"Judy, it's Devlin. Yes, hi. I need to speak to Braedon. It's urgent." He listened for a few seconds. "No, I tried his cell. He's not answering. Is he on a construction site?" Another pause and he suddenly slowed, turned right. "I'm a few blocks from there. Thanks."

"Devlin, for the love of God, please tell me what's going on."

"I don't have time, Emily." He jerked the wheel and pulled to an abrupt halt in front of a big white house. Emily's seat belt locked as she was thrown against it. Her breath left her in a rush. She struggled to draw in some air. Finally, her lungs expanded again. She drew several deep, gasping breaths.

And reached for her gun.

Devlin leaned forward, peering past her through the passenger window. A Dumpster sat in front of the house. Tools and lumber sat in the yard beside it, but there wasn't anyone around. He grabbed his phone again. "Yes, Judy, Devlin again. Braedon's not here. No one's here. Yes, yes. Lunch? At my father's house? Got it. Thanks."

Emily shoved the muzzle of her gun against his rib cage.

Devlin froze.

"We're not going anywhere until you tell me what's going on. I mean it, Devlin. If I have to shoot you, I will. It won't kill you with your vest on, but it will damn well hurt. Might even break a rib or two. Start talking."

His eyes narrowed.

“I swear, if you try to grab this gun like last time, it’s not going to work. I’ve got a tight grip on it and I’m—”

He swiped the gun away from her with a quick twist that sent a sharp jolt of pain from her wrist to her shoulder. She cried out and grabbed her arm.

His expression immediately softened. “I’m sorry, Em.” He shoved the pistol in his waistband on his left side, where she couldn’t reach it, and took off again, racing down the street.

He lifted the phone but hesitated. “Are you okay?”

She rubbed her arm. “Yes, if you don’t wreck the car and kill us.”

He slowed, just a little, but it was enough to make her realize he was listening. He called another number, but no one must have answered because he didn’t say anything. He turned the car down a two-lane road that led out of town and picked up speed. Two calls later, he tossed the phone into the console and shot Emily an apologetic look.

“I can’t slow down,” he said, as if knowing she was about to ask. “Ace is after my family now. Alex, Austin, and Braedon should be at Alex’s house, but no one’s answering. Everyone else is accounted for.”

She picked up the phone and scrolled through the last dialed numbers.

“What are you doing? We can’t call 911.”

“I know that. But we can call your FBI brother again; Pierce, right? Don’t you think he could help us? You wouldn’t have to worry about protecting him, and I’m sure he could be an asset in this kind of situation.” She paused with her hand over the redial button. “Or do you have a better idea?”

His lips pursed, but he gave her a quick, sharp nod. “Go ahead.”

Keeping her explanation as vague as Devlin had on his earlier calls, she got Pierce to agree, then put the phone in the console.

“He’s dropping his wife and daughter off at Matt’s lab. That’s where Matt’s going with his wife, Tessa. Since it’s Sunday, no one else will be at the lab to get in harm’s way. Plus your brothers think the lab is a good, defensible position, with concrete block walls. They should be okay there. Pierce will meet you at Alex’s house.”

They were well outside of Savannah now. At the pace Devlin was driving, assuming they didn’t wreck, they’d be at the house in just a few

more minutes. When they topped the last hill before his father's house, Devlin punched the gas pedal all the way to the floor.

Emily stared in horror at the thick, black clouds billowing up into the sky.

Alex's house was on fire.

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Chapter Nineteen

DEVLIN BARRELED UP the long driveway and slid to a stop at the edge of the front lawn, twenty feet back from Braedon's truck and his father's Escalade.

"Lock the doors, Em. Keep your gun close. Ace could still be out there."

He didn't wait for her answer. He slammed the driver's door and raced for the porch, which was already half-obscured with thick, black smoke. As soon as he reached the front door, it flew open, and Braedon staggered outside with Alex draped over his shoulders.

Coughing violently, Braedon dropped to his knees. Black soot covered his nose and mouth. Devlin cast an anxious glance at Alex. His eyes were closed, and Devlin couldn't tell if he was breathing or not.

"Come on," Devlin yelled over the roar of the fire. "You can't stay here. The whole house is going up." He lifted Alex off his brother's shoulders and hurried away from the house, laying Alex down on the cool grass a safe distance from the fire.

Braedon stumbled after him.

"I can't find a pulse. What happened? Was he shot?" Devlin pinched Alex's nose shut and covered his mouth, blowing three quick breaths before starting chest compressions.

"Shot?" Braedon coughed. "Why would he be shot?"

Devlin rushed to cover his mistake. "Why isn't he breathing?"

"Don't know. Heart attack maybe? Smoke inhalation? I was in the kitchen when I smelled smoke. The alarms never went off." He coughed

again and wiped his mouth, smearing black soot across his cheek. “I found him lying in his bedroom doorway.”

“Where’s Austin?” Devlin performed more chest compressions.

Braedon looked around as if he expected his little brother to be right behind him. “He was supposed to follow me. He was right—” Another violent coughing fit wracked his body.

Devlin gave him a sharp look, worried that Braedon’s airway might close soon from the soot. He blew three more quick breaths into Alex’s mouth. The throaty sound of a powerful engine had Devlin jerking his head up. Pierce’s Pontiac GTO was coming up fast, kicking up gravel as it raced up the road toward them.

“I’ve got this.” Emily was suddenly standing beside him. “Go, Devlin! Find Austin.” She cast a worried glance at Braedon. “I called 911.” Her dark eyes pleaded with him for understanding. “I didn’t have a choice.” She dropped down beside Alex and pushed Devlin’s hands away so she could take over the CPR.

“Thank you, Em.” He squeezed her shoulder and took off in a sprint. The front porch was engulfed in flames, making entry impossible through the door. He ran through the yard down the length of the house, desperate to find a way in, but flames poured out of every window, including Austin’s room at the end, across the hall from Alex’s bedroom.

He tore around the end of the house to the back, but the deck was an inferno. He couldn’t even see the sliding glass doors because of the flames and thick, black smoke. Despair threatened to send him crashing to his knees on the ground. How could anyone survive in there?

“Austin!” he yelled. “Austin!” He ran to the last window on the end—Alex’s room. The flames here weren’t as bad, licking at the glass from only one side of the bedroom. He jumped up and kicked the glass. Flames immediately leaped up to fill the opening, fed by the fresh air from outside. Devlin ducked down from the searing heat, forced to move back several feet. The left side of the bedroom was dark, filled with smoke, but so far untouched by the flames. If there was any chance of saving his brother, he had to get inside, now, before the entire bedroom was engulfed.

Damn it, Ace. You are not taking my family away from me!

Whirling around, he ran to the pond behind the house and dove in. He jumped out and ran toward the house, water dripping from his clothes and

hair. The only thing he knew to do was to jump through the window and hope he didn't land in any flames. He hoped the water would keep him from becoming a human torch.

He ran full tilt toward the bedroom, holding his arms up to protect his face from the flames and diving toward the broken window.

Suddenly, someone slammed into him, knocking him to the ground. He automatically reached for his gun but stopped when he saw who was on top of him—his brother Pierce.

"Damn it, Devlin. You idiot. Are you trying to kill yourself?" Pierce shoved him, then hauled him upright. "You have to knock the flames back first." He tossed a fire extinguisher to Devlin and ran with his own extinguisher to the window casing.

Thank God for overprepared, overprotective brothers who had the sense to bring fire extinguishers; Pierce had probably grabbed them from the back of Braedon's B&B Construction truck out front.

Together they blasted the windowsill, temporarily knocking the flames back.

"You or me?" Pierce yelled over the dull roar of the burning roof above them. But Devlin had already stepped back a few feet to get a running start. He clutched the extinguisher and ran forward, diving through the opening, rolling across the floor. The heat was so intense he could barely breathe. He shot a spray of retardant at the closest flames, making a path to the hallway.

"Hurry, the roof's about to come down," Pierce yelled from outside.

He could hear short bursts from Pierce's extinguisher as he beat back the flames to keep the path to the window clear.

"Austin, where are you?" Devlin ducked beneath the thick, black smoke that was already making his eyes tear up. He got down on all fours and scrambled forward as fast as he could crawl toward the hallway. Fire licked at the walls. It was like a damn oven.

"Austin?" He reached the hallway and almost fell on top of his brother, lying facedown, unconscious or worse. His wheelchair was overturned. Part of the ceiling in the hallway had caved in already, making it impossible for Austin to get out that way in the wheelchair. His clothes were charred, probably from when he'd escaped from his room. He'd had the sense to close his door behind him, which was probably the only reason the flames hadn't shot out into this area yet.

Devlin didn’t have time to check for a pulse or give CPR. He had to get Austin out, now, or they’d both die in here. He couldn’t see the window anymore. Thick smoke and flames from the walls obscured everything. Even practically lying on the floor to get beneath the smoke, he could barely breath. The faint sound of sirens sounded from somewhere outside.

“We’re—” He coughed violently and tried again, to let Pierce know to blast the extinguisher inside the room. “We’re coming out!”

A tiny hiss sounded from the window. “My extinguisher is empty!” Pierce yelled.

Damn it. Devlin grabbed the back of Austin’s collar and dragged him behind him as he used short bursts from his extinguisher to clear the way. When he reached the window, he handed out Austin’s limp body to Pierce.

He was about to follow Austin out when flames shot up in front of him, blocking the window and forcing him to back up to the center of the room.

“Devlin!” Pierce yelled from what sounded like far away. “Get out of there!”

Devlin pressed the extinguisher, aiming at the wall of flames in front of him. It shot a short burst, then fizzled. Empty.

Ah hell.

“Dev!”

Searing heat forced him to the right side of the room. He coughed and fell to the floor, desperate for some air. The black smoke on this side of the room was so dark he couldn’t see more than a few feet in front of him. He tried to picture Alex’s bedroom the last time he’d been in it. Alex was fastidious about putting everything where it belonged. And he always had a blanket neatly folded over the top of the recliner.

He scrambled toward where he thought the recliner might be, coughing and struggling to breathe. He bumped against it. Yes! The blanket was there. *Thank you, Dad.* He held it up in front of himself, surged to his feet, and made a Hail Mary run toward the window. Using the blanket like a shield, he vaulted through the opening and dropped to the ground outside.

“Roll, Dev! You’re on fire!”

As soon as Pierce said it, Devlin’s nerve endings screamed the same message. White-hot agony raced up the back of his left leg. He rolled back and forth on the ground. Pierce fell on top of him, smothering the last of the flames with a soaking-wet cloth.

Devlin coughed. The movement rubbed his burned calf against the ground and sent a fiery burst of pain spiking through him. He arched off the ground, hissing through his teeth.

“How bad?” Pierce demanded.

Devlin forced a smile. It hurt like a son of a bitch. “I’ll be fine. Where’s your shirt?”

“I sacrificed it to save your sorry ass. You owe me another one.” He held out his hand to help Devlin up.

“Where’s Austin? Is he still alive?”

Pierce winced. “Barely. He’s by the pond. Come on.”

The burns on Devlin’s leg throbbed as he ran beside Pierce to the water’s edge. But his pain was forgotten when he saw his baby brother lying on his back. His upper body had suffered only minor burns, but the lower half must have practically cooked in the metal wheelchair. And his legs . . . God, his legs.

They both knelt down beside him.

Devlin checked his pulse; weak. Austin’s chest rose and fell in short bursts, his breath wheezing like a severe asthmatic in the middle of an attack. “Thank God he’s unconscious or he’d be in agony.” He frowned and turned Austin’s head. “He’s bleeding.” He shot a glance at Pierce. “Are you sure Matt and the others are safe?”

“I called three times on the way here,” Pierce said. “Tessa and Madison are both armed to the teeth. Matt’s got his hands full keeping them from running over here. But they’re fine.”

Austin moaned, then stiffened.

“We’ve got to get him to the hospital,” Devlin said.

“And once we’re there, you’re going to tell me who did this.”

From the angry, determined look on Pierce’s face, Devlin knew he wouldn’t be able to lie his way out of this one. He gave his brother a stiff nod, hoping to hold him off for now.

They debated how to pick Austin up without hurting him, but just as they were about to try, two EMTs and a fireman hurried around the far corner of the house, pushing a rolling gurney. Behind them were Lieutenant Drier and Devlin’s least favorite detective, Tuck.

Devlin slid his holster out of his waistband and chucked it into the pond with his gun still in it, hoping the weeds and tall grass at the edge of the

water had kept the cops from seeing what he'd done.

Pierce stared at him in shock. "Since when do you carry a gun?"

"I never had a gun." He nodded toward Drier, still forty feet away.

Pierce looked over his shoulder, then narrowed his eyes. "We need to talk."

Devlin sighed. "Yeah. I know." He looked down at his baby brother, his heart seizing in his chest. "Austin has to make it. He *has* to."

Pierce's hands curled into fists. "I'm going to *kill* whoever did this."

"No," Devlin said quietly. "I am."

DEVLIN AND PIERCE ducked down beneath the rotors of the LifeStar helicopter perched in the field in front of Alex's house and followed the EMTs to the chopper's open door. Tuck, Devlin's newly acquired shadow, yelled at him to stay back. Devlin didn't bother to waste a glare on the detective. No one was going to stop him from making sure his baby brother was taken care of.

The EMTs slid the gurney holding Austin into the helicopter and began securing him for the flight.

"Can a family member accompany him?" Pierce shouted above the whine of the rotors.

One of the EMTs shook his head. "Sorry, no room. You'll have to follow in your own vehicle. We're taking him to the trauma center at Memorial. Once he's stabilized, we'll fly him to the Joseph M. Still Burn Center in Augusta."

"Is he going to make it?" Devlin shouted.

The grim look on the EMT's face told Devlin more than he'd wanted to know.

"We have to go, sir. Please step back."

Pierce pulled Devlin with him up the hill to where Tuck waited.

The pitch of the rotors changed as the helicopter accelerated and lifted off. The three of them held their hands up to protect their faces from the dust kicked up by the blades. When the chopper was a speck on the horizon, Pierce and Devlin turned to check on the rest of their family.

Tuck deliberately stepped in Devlin's way.

Devlin tensed, ready to knock the smaller man to the ground if he had to in order to reach Alex and Braedon.

Pierce stepped between the two of them and held his hand out. “I don’t think we’ve met. I’m Special Agent Pierce Buchanan.”

The tactic worked. Tuck shook Pierce’s hand and introduced himself. By then, Devlin was halfway up the hill. His burned leg still hurt like the devil and forced him to go slower than he wanted. It felt like someone was shoving a poker into the back of his calf every time he took a step.

Since no one was standing by the first ambulance, he wasn’t surprised to see the back was empty as he hurried past. Emily stood with her boss, about ten feet back from the second ambulance. Her eyes widened when she saw him, but he didn’t know why.

He rounded the open doors to see Braedon sitting beside an EMT on the right, breathing into an oxygen mask, while Alex lay unconscious on a gurney on the other side, being tended by the second EMT for this ambulance. Although Alex didn’t look much better than when Devlin last saw him, the rise and fall of his chest was reassuring. When the EMT taking care of him gave Devlin the thumbs-up sign, his shoulders sagged with relief.

“How are you, Braedon?” Devlin asked.

Braedon pulled his mask off. “I’ll be fine. I doubt I even need to go to the hospital, but I’ll go so I can be with Alex.”

The EMT put Braedon’s mask back on and received an irritated look in response.

“His oxygen saturation levels are way down,” the EMT said. “He needs to stay on oxygen and be closely monitored in case his airway becomes inflamed and he has trouble breathing. He’ll probably have to stay at the hospital overnight.” He motioned toward Alex. “Your father is doing surprisingly well for someone who had a heart attack.”

Devlin stilled. “There’s no family history of heart disease. He’s only fifty-one.”

The EMT shrugged. “He had no other injuries. Heart disease exacerbated by smoke inhalation seems the most likely explanation. I’m sure the doctors will run some tests and be able to tell you more.”

Only if they look for a puncture wound from a needle and run a tox screen.

Devlin’s hands curled into fists. If Ace were standing in front of him right now, Devlin would tear him apart, limb by limb.

Alex’s eyes were open now. He tugged at his oxygen mask and pointed at Devlin.

“No, sir,” the EMT said. “You can’t talk right now.” He replaced the mask and motioned to the other EMT. “He’s as stable as I can make him. We need to go.”

Alex’s agitation increased. Devlin was pretty sure he knew why. He leaned in, ignoring the EMT’s frown, and squeezed Alex’s hand.

“He’s alive, Dad. Austin is alive. He’s on his way to the hospital right now.”

A look of relief swept over Alex’s face as Devlin let go of his hand and moved back out of the way.

Pierce stepped up beside him. “Is he going to be okay?”

“He supposedly had a heart attack.”

“You’re kidding. He’s fit as a horse.”

Which was why Devlin was so certain this was Ace’s handiwork. It wouldn’t be the first time an assassin had used drugs to fake a heart attack. And unless a coroner had a reason to search for an injection site, those kinds of deaths usually passed muster without raising any suspicions.

“Excuse me, sir.” The EMT who’d been sitting with Braedon was outside the ambulance now, ready to close the doors, but Devlin and Pierce were in the way.

“Wait,” Pierce said. “I’m going with you.”

“I’m sorry, sir, that’s against hospital—”

Pierce climbed into the back and sat beside Braedon, silently daring the EMT to stop him.

The EMT aimed a frown at Devlin as if to warn him. “No one else. I could lose my job.”

“Meet us at the hospital,” Pierce called out to Devlin as the other EMT closed the doors and then jogged to the front. Soon the ambulance was racing down the long driveway.

“Devlin.”

He turned around to see Emily frowning up at him, her brows furrowed with concern. “You need to sit in the other ambulance and get checked out. Half your hair is singed off, and I saw you limping earlier.”

He was about to argue when her subtle head shake had him glancing past her to see Lieutenant Drier and Tuck deep in conversation a few yards away. She obviously wanted to tell him something and didn't want the others to hear it.

"I could probably use something for the pain." Certainly not a lie, but it would have to be a local anesthetic. He couldn't risk taking anything that might slow his reaction times or dull his thinking, not with Ace still out there somewhere, probably close by.

He and Emily moved to the remaining ambulance and sat in the back with one of the EMTs for that ambulance. The second EMT was already in the driver's seat, his image distorted by the fogged glass that separated the cab from the back.

After the EMT examined Devlin's scalp, he tried to get him to lie facedown on the gurney so he could check his burned calf. Devlin insisted on sitting upright but compromised by lifting his foot onto the opposite seat to elevate it for the EMT.

"Scale of one to ten," Emily asked, "how much does it hurt?"

"Barely a two, maybe two and a half," he lied. It was closer to an eight.

The EMT arched a brow. "You must have a high pain threshold. The burns on your scalp are only first degree, but your calf has second- and third-degree burns. We'll need to take you to the hospital for treatment."

"I don't have time to—"

Emily put her hand on his knee. "Dev, if you saw yourself in a mirror, you wouldn't question that you need to get checked out. Your face looks sunburned. Half your hair is gone. And third-degree burns are nothing to ignore. Not to mention my boss and Tuck look like they're plotting to put you in jail if they can figure out a charge that will stick. They're both ticked off that you never gave a statement about the shooting in the alley. They'll be over here any minute."

"Where's my go bag?" he asked, his voice low.

She aimed a glance at the EMT, who was kneeling on the floor, cutting away the charred portion of Devlin's jeans. She lifted her shirt a few inches, revealing a thick pack of papers hidden underneath, half-shoved into the top of her pants.

Devlin raised a brow and grinned. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Probably."

The contents of the binder.

He leaned over and squeezed her hand. “Thanks, Em.”

She smiled and looked toward the EMT again. “Drier asked how we got here.” She winked before continuing. “Of course I told him the truth, that we drove up here with Pierce in his GTO. When he asked who owned the Charger, I told him I thought it belonged to one of your brothers’ friends.”

Her quick thinking and willingness to cover for him was a surprise. If Drier ran the plates on the Charger, he’d find it belonged to one of Devlin’s aliases. That would have been hard to explain if Drier thought he and Emily had driven the car. But since there was no legal reason to search a car owned by someone else, Drier wouldn’t find the burn phones and guns still inside.

Devlin deeply regretted the loss of the guns, but thanks to Emily’s quick thinking, at least he still had the EXIT documents. Having those go public could have been disastrous. And it would have hampered his ability to figure out who was holding Kelly. Not that he’d made any headway on that. Being shot at and having to run into burning buildings was wreaking havoc on his plans.

Eyeing Tuck and Drier, still a short distance away, he asked, “What did your boss and Tuck say when they saw you?”

“Do you want a local for the pain?” the EMT asked.

Devlin nodded. The throbbing in his leg was making it difficult to focus, and he needed to be on his guard in case Ace was still around. While the EMT retrieved the supplies he would need, Emily leaned toward him.

“It was a bit awkward,” she said, in a low voice. “Apparently, the night I left my house, I called human resources to take a leave of absence to care for a sick friend in Florida. Naturally, my boss was upset I hadn’t spoken to him about it. And he wanted to know why I’m not in Florida right now. I told him my friend ended up having someone else help her and I was going to come back to the office in a few days once I’m sure my friend doesn’t need anything else from me. Not sure he believed me. He wanted to know why I’m here with you. I told him you’d finally agreed to let me interview you about the shooting outside the diner. Now *that* he was happy to hear. He’s really ticked that you never went to the police station to give an official statement. And now, with the fire, he’s having a hard time getting past your apparent run of bad luck. I can’t blame him for being suspicious.

You'd better be really careful or he'll figure out an excuse to haul you in for questioning."

"Thanks for the warning."

She gave him a sympathetic look.

"What?" he demanded.

"I asked Drier about Nancy, told him I'd heard about a murder over the radio. He said Nancy flew to Savannah about a week ago but phoned to tell her brother she was visiting with a girlfriend and wouldn't see him for another week or so. From her injuries, it looks like she may have been one of the missing women Hawley mentioned."

Devlin stiffened. "Then she never went home? Never saw Gage?"

She shook her head and straightened as Drier and Tuck reached the back of the ambulance.

Devlin was still trying to digest the information Emily had given him and what it might mean, but, unfortunately, he still had to deal with the two cops in front of him.

"Mr. Buchanan," Drier said, "bad things seem to happen wherever you go . . . dead women in basements, shoot-outs in alleys, and now a suspicious fire."

"Is there a point in there somewhere, Lieutenant?"

"My point is that I'd like you to come downtown to answer some questions."

Before Devlin could tell him what he thought of that request, the EMT stepped to the end of the ambulance. "These burns should really be checked out at the hospital, sir."

Going to the hospital hadn't been in Devlin's plans, but if it kept him from being placed in the back of a patrol car, he'd welcome the chance.

"I'm going with him." Emily moved to the gurney beside Devlin as if to protect him somehow.

The EMT looked like he was about to complain, but Devlin gave him his best deadly stare and the EMT turned away. He pulled one of the doors closed and was reaching for the other when Drier grabbed it.

"Detective Tucker will go with you," Drier said.

Tuck gave Devlin a smug look and hopped into the back of the ambulance.

The EMT grumbled under his breath but didn’t argue. He closed the second door and rapped on the roof. “Let’s go, Rick.”

The ambulance took off and was soon heading down the two-lane rural highway toward town.

When Tuck tried to question him about the case, Devlin ignored him and stared out the back window. He’d leave it to Emily to placate her fellow detective. Devlin had other things to worry about right now.

Like why a car had just pulled out onto the road a hundred yards behind the ambulance, when the only person who lived on this stretch of highway was Alex.

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Chapter Twenty

DEVLIN KEPT AN eye on the road behind them, watching for the Ford Mustang he'd seen just minutes before when they'd gone around one of the many curves. The trees were pressing in close now, which made it even harder to catch a glimpse of the car he was almost certain was following them.

Beside him, Emily was fending off Tuck's questions about where she'd been and why she hadn't told him she was taking a leave. Devlin wished he could help her out, but anything he said would probably make it worse.

"And what happened to your arms?" Tuck demanded. He grabbed her right hand and pulled her arm out straight. "Looks like a glass window exploded all over you. And before you lie about that, like everything else, remember you'll need to come up with a story to explain what looks like freaking homemade stitches on the top of your head. What's going on?"

As soon as Tuck mentioned the stitches, the EMT took charge. He forced Tuck to move over so he could examine her. Based on Emily's curses, Devlin imagined she would rather have put up with Tuck's questions than the tetanus shot the EMT insisted on giving her.

The Mustang suddenly came into view again, rounding a curve about fifteen car lengths back. Too far away for Devlin to see if Ace was driving, or how many were in the car. He waited until Emily looked his way before flicking his glance toward the road. Her eyes widened in understanding

when she saw the Mustang, but she quickly turned back to answer another question from Tuck, playing it cool.

“How much longer until we get to the hospital?” Devlin asked the EMT. They were running without lights or sirens on since no one inside was critical.

“Probably twenty minutes. It’s a pretty long trek to town from out here.”

Twenty minutes. That was a lifetime in which anything could happen if Ace was in that Mustang.

Emily flashed him a worried look.

Tuck frowned and glanced back and forth between the two of them. “Is something going on here that I should know about?”

“Of course not,” Emily said. “Tell me about the case. Do you have any suspects yet? Any idea where the last missing woman is being held?”

He didn’t look convinced by her most recent lie, but he sighed and leaned back against the ambulance wall, looking as if he’d given up trying to get her to level with him.

“We’ve had some additional developments just this morning. In addition to the vic, Nancy Thomas, I already told you about, there was an anonymous 911 call reporting a man had been shot in the woods outside of town. The vic’s name was Brad Robinson, an ex-con who got out on parole over a year ago. Turns out there were three other ex-cons found nearby, and they’d all been killed. I spoke to Robinson before he went into surgery, but he was tight-lipped about the whole thing. Insisted it was an accident, that some hunter had mistaken him for a deer.” Tuck gave a bitter laugh. “Right. A hunter shot him in the groin, twice.” He shook his head. “I don’t know why he’s lying. He won’t even admit he knew the other men were in the woods, even though all four of them were in the same prison together.”

Devlin focused on the road behind them but filed that information away.

“All four knew one other?” Emily said, obviously trying to encourage Tuck to keep talking.

“Definitely. They were childhood friends, held up a convenience store together, and all got sentenced the same and ended up in the same prison, same cell block. Robinson had additional crimes, including rape, but he made a deal which made him eligible for early release. Since they were all paroled within a few weeks of each other, it’s possible they decided to work together on the outside to plan more crimes, probably to start robbing again.

Drier thinks there must have been a fifth man, the one calling the shots for whatever they had planned. But something went wrong and he turned on them."

"I'm not sure what this has to do with the abductions and murders."

"We identified the man Buchanan killed, Hawley's abductor, just last night. There was a mix-up earlier. Someone marked his prints as having been run, but they hadn't. Anyway, once we ran them, we found out he was an ex-con. Lo and behold, he was one of Robinson's former cell mates, also on parole. Which obviously makes us think Robinson is crucial to this case. If we can find out who hired him, we'll find our killer. We're close, Emily. Real close."

"Everybody hold on!" Devlin yelled.

He lunged for Emily just as the ambulance swerved toward the side of the road.

WHEN THE AMBULANCE finally shuddered to a halt on the shoulder of the road, Tuck and the EMT were on the floor. Emily would have fallen too, but Devlin had grabbed her and braced her against the wall right before the ambulance had stopped.

He threw the doors open, scooped her in his arms, and hopped down to the pavement.

"Hold it." Tuck drew his gun as he climbed to his feet. "Put her down, Buchanan. I don't trust you and I'm not letting you take Detective O'Malley wherever you're trying to go. What just happened? And how did you know it was going to happen *before* it did?"

The EMT pounded on the closed, frosted window between the back of the ambulance and the cab. "Rick, what's going on? Why did we stop? Did we have a blowout?"

Devlin quickly set Emily on her feet and pushed her away from him. Then, with lightning speed, he pulled the same trick on Tuck that he'd pulled on Emily in the past. He knocked his arm up and wrenched the gun away in one smooth movement, leaving Tuck standing with his arm in the air and a stunned look on his face.

“Get down,” Devlin yelled. “Everyone down.” He pushed Emily beneath the raised rear bumper of the ambulance and ran around toward the driver’s side of the vehicle, holding Tuck’s pistol. Seconds later, he ran back and pulled Emily to her feet.

“What are you doing, Buchanan?” Tuck demanded.

Devlin ignored Tuck and addressed the EMT beside him. “The other EMT—”

“Rick.”

“He’s not the one who was driving. The EMT, Rick, is on the passenger floorboard. Dead. Has been for a while. Whoever was driving must have jumped out as soon as he stopped the ambulance. The door was standing wide open.”

Tuck swore. The EMT stood frozen in shock.

“Give me my gun, Buchanan. Everyone take cover inside the ambulance while I call this in.”

Devlin ignored him. “Emily, there was a car—”

“—following us, a black Mustang.”

“It pulled off the highway right before the ambulance stopped,” Devlin said. “I think it was a signal. That car can’t be more than fifty yards behind us, around the curve. You’re a sitting duck out here. Get off the road behind some trees and wait there. I’ll find you.” He motioned to Tuck and the EMT. “All of you get away from the ambulance. Take cover behind a tree.”

Emily took off running toward the nearest thick oak, twenty feet off the road.

“Emily, wait!” Tuck yelled after her.

She reached the first tree and looked over her shoulder to see Devlin sprinting into the trees behind her, running back toward the curve where he’d last seen the Mustang. Tuck and the EMT must have decided Devlin was right because they both took off toward Emily.

The three of them ran into the woods and ducked down behind a grove of trees.

The EMT’s face was white and he looked like he might pass out any minute.

Tuck glared at Emily. “What are you and Buchanan mixed up in?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He gritted his teeth and grabbed his phone. He called the dispatcher and reported what had happened, giving the distress signal for “officer needs assistance.”

It would take fifteen minutes, minimum, to get a patrol car out this far. By then, they could all be dead. Emily’s nails tightened around the bark of the tree. What was happening? Things were way too quiet.

Bam, bam . . . bam, bam, bam! Gunshots rang out from somewhere in the woods.

Emily threw herself on the EMT and shoved him to the ground, covering him with her body.

Tuck dove down beside her, glaring at her as if she were the one who was firing.

Another round of shots rang out, then nothing.

Seconds felt like minutes. How long had it been since the last shot? Where was Devlin? Emily counted to thirty before rolling off the EMT and jumping to her feet.

“What are you doing?” Tuck grabbed her leg. “Stay here. Wait for backup.”

She shook his hand off her. “Yeah, I’m not real good about waiting for backup.” She took off running toward the road, realizing this was probably another one of those bad choices she tended to make under pressure. But she also knew that she wouldn’t be able to live with herself if she hid like a coward and did nothing when Devlin might be hurt or trapped and needed help.

When she reached the edge of the trees, she crouched down and cautiously looked out. The ambulance sat on the side of the road with the engine still running. Everything else was eerily silent, deserted.

The sound of an engine revving up had her looking down the road. The car that had been following them earlier, the black Mustang, raced up the road and pulled to a sliding stop behind the ambulance. The driver’s door popped open and Devlin hopped out.

Emily didn’t hesitate. She ran from the cover of trees toward the car.

Devlin ducked back inside and threw the passenger door open for her. She jumped in and closed the door just as Tuck reached the same tree where she’d been standing moments ago. He stood with his hands on his hips as Devlin pulled out onto the road and floored the accelerator.

“I think you might have ruined your chances at getting your old job back,” Devlin said.

“Yeah, well, I think I’m probably not cut out for this police stuff anyway. Mom was right all along. I should go back to school and become a doctor.”

“Your mom was right all along?”

“My entire family is in the medical field except for me . . . well, and one of my sisters, but she volunteers everywhere, so I count her too. My dad is a doctor. Mom’s a nurse. The rest are an EMT, another doctor, and a physical therapist. I am the biggest disappointment in my mother’s life, the bane of her existence. Somehow, even though I’m a cop, I’m the black sheep of the family.”

Devlin grinned. “Finally, something we have in common.”

She laughed. “Yeah, I guess so.” She looked over her shoulder out the rear window. “I don’t see anyone following us so far. What happened? How did you get their car?”

He glanced in the rearview mirror. “I saw only two of them—Ace and a probationary enforcer, probably the one who was driving the ambulance.”

“How do you know he was probationary?”

“Because I know all of the enforcers and I’ve never seen him before. He screwed up, got in Ace’s way, knocked his gun arm. I got two shots off before he returned fire. Ace was wearing a vest, but I managed to wing him in the leg. Made outrunning him to the car a cakewalk.”

“What about his helper? Didn’t he chase you?”

Devlin gave her an are-you-kidding-me look, which told her exactly what had happened. The probationary enforcer was dead.

“What do we do now?”

“Ace will have to get that leg taken care of and regroup, replan. We should be able to lie low somewhere and get a few hours’ sleep. After that, if you’ve still got those papers, I’d like to use that detective brain of yours to list out everything we know about the case and see what kind of theory we can come up with.”

She patted the papers, still tucked into the top of her pants, nestled against her stomach. “Still got them. What about Alex and your brothers? Don’t you want to try to sneak into the hospital to see them?”

His jaw tightened. “Too dangerous, for us *and* my family. I can’t worry about them right now. Pierce will make sure everyone is under guard. He may not know why, or who, but he knows our family is under attack. He’ll move mountains to keep them safe. The best thing I can do for them right now is to catch the bastards behind this. And that’s exactly what I intend to do.”

Sirens sounded from up the road somewhere.

“Tuck called dispatch,” Emily said.

“I figured he would. There’s a turnoff a little ways up, a shortcut to another main road.”

He slowed the car and turned down a dirt road Emily hadn’t known existed. He winced as he made the turn.

“Your leg hurts, doesn’t it?”

“Actually, no. That shot the EMT gave me worked wonders for the pain.”

“Then why did you wince?”

Instead of answering, he pressed the gas harder and sent the Mustang roaring down the road, kicking up dust behind them.

“Devlin?” She looked at him more closely, and that was when she noticed the blood smeared on the driver’s door. She gasped and leaned over him. His entire left shoulder was saturated with blood. And a dark, singed hole in his shirt wasn’t from the fire at Alex’s house. “You’ve been shot. Turn the car around. Now. We have to get you to the hospital.”

“No. It’s not in the muscle, just a flesh wound, more or less. Except that the bullet’s still inside. I just need the bullet out and a few stitches to stop the bleeding.”

“No kidding. And who do you think is going to do that?”

He cocked a brow. “You did say you wanted to become a doctor.”

BY THE TIME they’d made it to a run-down motel on the outskirts of town, Devlin was pale and looked ready to pass out.

“You’ve lost way too much blood,” Emily said. “You should have driven to the hospital instead of here. Sometimes you just don’t have any sense.”

He shut off the ignition, slowly, carefully, as if the slightest movement might cause him agony. “Ace would expect me to go to the hospital to check on my family and to get seek medical attention. By now he’s called Gage, and they’re on the alert. Trust me: we never would have made it through the emergency-room doors.”

Her stomach knotted with tension. “Okay, okay. I’ll quit complaining. Obviously, we need a room. We can argue later about who’s going to pull that bullet out of your shoulder.” She shoved the passenger door open, then stopped. “I need a credit card.”

“No. Use cash. And a fake name.” He dug into his pants pocket, sucking in a breath when that movement apparently jarred his shoulder. She gently pushed his hand away and reached in herself, taking out an alarmingly large wad of twenty-dollar bills.

“Good grief. Do you always keep this much cash in your pants pocket? Where did you get all of this? No, wait. I don’t want to know. I don’t want to know what you get paid for taking people’s lives, whether they deserve it or not.”

He didn’t say anything, just stared out the windshield, his profile stiff.

She shoved the door open and got out.

“Em, fake name. And just register yourself. They’ll be on the lookout for a couple.”

“Don’t I need some form of ID?”

“Here? Are you kidding?”

She looked past the front office with its sagging, rotting roof. Past the small, grungy breezeway that separated it from the rest of the motel. Down the long, two-story rectangular building of rooms with its neon rent-by-the-hour sign lit. “Right.”

It was alarmingly easy to pay cash and give a fake name in exchange for a room key. Emily wasn’t even sure the clerk had looked at her during the entire thirty-second transaction. What was difficult was rousing Devlin to drive the fifty yards from the office to the parking space in front of their lower-level room.

She would have driven herself, but she didn’t think she’d be able to get him out of the driver’s seat, into the passenger seat, and then get him to walk from the car into the motel room. That was just too much effort and probably beyond his abilities right now.

Somehow, through sheer dint of will on his part and stubbornness on Emily's part, she goaded and nagged him into driving the short distance and then leaning on her to stagger into the room.

There were two queen-size beds. She guided him to the closest one. As soon as his knees touched the bed, he gingerly turned and tried to lower himself to the mattress. Emily thought to pull back the covers, but it was too late. Devlin fell on top of the blankets. He sucked in a sharp breath and went stark-white before surrendering to unconsciousness.

Emily tugged the thick stack of papers from beneath her waistband and tossed them on the dresser beside the TV as she hurried to the bathroom. After grabbing the only two towels, she shoved them beneath Devlin's injured shoulder and pressed against his wound to stanch the bleeding.

Once he seemed past the danger of bleeding to death, she tried to think of what he would have done now if he were still conscious. He'd want to make sure no one found them, of course. Was there any way for someone to trace them here? The Mustang; she needed to hide it. If Ace went on a hunt looking for it and saw it parked out front, they'd be dead.

Figuring the risk of leaving him alone for a few minutes was worth it, she drove the car to the equally cheap, seedy motel next door and parked. Then she jogged back to her own motel.

Devlin was still out when she got back. She locked the door behind her, made sure the curtains were pulled tightly shut, then flipped on the lights. It was just starting to get dark outside.

She checked his pulse, his breathing. Both were strong, steady. But he was alarmingly pale, and that bullet needed to come out. He needed medical attention, but he'd been adamant about not going to a hospital. He also needed fresh clothes to replace the bloodied, charred ones he was wearing, not to mention *her* shabby appearance. Neither of them was capable right now of blending in anywhere—except the dive motel where they currently were.

So what could she do? And more importantly, what *should* she do? Her shoulders slumped. She already knew what she had to do, whether she wanted to or not. There really wasn't an alternative. She was about to do something she never would have considered just a few days ago, something that went against everything she'd ever believed in—but that she knew was the right choice for this situation.

She was about to break the law. No, she was about to smash it to smithereens.

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Chapter Twenty-One

A SHARP STAB of pain shot through Devlin's left shoulder. He sucked in a breath and groaned, trying to force his heavy eyelids open. Another jolt of pain. He swore and rolled forward to escape whatever torture was being done to him.

"Settle down, you big baby," a feminine voice said from behind him. "This is nothing compared to what you'd be feeling if I hadn't committed a B and E for you."

B and E? Breaking and Entering? "Emily?" He blinked and tried to focus. Heavy, muddy brown curtains hung over a window a few feet away, next to a dingy door, yellowed with age and something else he didn't want to contemplate. Beneath the rusty-looking peephole, a red-and-white sign warned that checkout was at eleven.

He was in the motel, lying on his right side, with pillows propping him in place. And as he looked down at himself, he realized he was naked. Or at least naked from the waist up. The rest of him was covered with a comforter that had probably been red at one time but was now a faded orange.

How had he gotten into the room? The last thing he remembered was parking outside the motel office. And why was his shirt off? He tried to roll on his back, but the pillows, and Emily's far-from-gentle shove, stopped him.

"What are you doing? And what's this about breaking and entering?"

“I have now officially become a criminal. And now you’ve forced me to take care of you.” She patted his hip as if he were a child, or a faithful pet. “Don’t worry. I think these types of skills must run in families. I’m sure it can’t be all that hard.”

Was her speech slurred or had he imagined that?

“Types of skills?” He looked over his shoulder, his eyes widening at the sight of the lethal-looking hypodermic needle in her hand. Alarm spiked through him, tensing every muscle. “What the hell is that?”

She let out a puff of laughter. “Is the big, bad assassin afraid of needles?”

“The big, bad assassin is wary of anyone wanting to inject him with some unknown drug. I repeat: what *is* that?”

She held up the syringe, displaying the three-inch needle as if it were a badge of honor. “A localized painkiller to numb your shoulder, something I’ve never heard of before. But don’t worry. I Googled it and found a handy weight-to-dosage ratio. Of course, I had to make an educated guess about your weight. And it’s normally used on animals. But I figure it will work just as well on humans.” She patted his hip again. “You can thank me later. After I get the bullet out.”

He stared at her in astonishment. “You broke into a veterinarian’s office?”

She beamed at him. “I did! All by myself.”

Great. He’d completely corrupted a baby cop.

“And you’re using drugs on me that they use on cats and dogs?”

She raised a brow in challenge. “You’d rather I took the bullet out without numbing you first? Before you answer, let me remind you I have only very basic first-aid training. Also, I may have to dig around for a while inside your shoulder to locate the bullet and any fragments. I assume this process will be incredibly painful.”

He groaned and laid his head back down.

She traced a finger across his back, making him arch in surprise. That made his leg and shoulder throb like the devil. But he didn’t care. He was too busy enjoying the unexpected feel of her soft hands roaming over his body. When her exploration stopped on a particularly sensitive spot near his left hip, he cleared his throat and desperately tried not to picture how she’d look naked, writhing beneath him in bed. That was nearly impossible to do

when she kept stroking his skin with those warm, soft fingers, setting his nerve endings on fire. Her fingers fluttered down over his bottom.

He sucked in a breath. “Um, Emily? What are you doing?”

“Admiring one of your tats. The symmetry is off, though.”

She ducked down behind him as if to study his tattoo. The feel of her breath on his hip sent an intense jolt of heat straight to his groin. He groaned again. Now was definitely not the time to have erotic fantasies about her, not when every heartbeat sent an equally unpleasant jolt of pain throbbing in his shoulder and leg.

“Em—”

“Sh, I’m trying to see something here. Is that a . . . yes, it is! This tattoo is covering up a scar. You’ve been shot here before, haven’t you? What happened?” She ran her hand across his left flank.

It took a moment for him to be able to breathe again with the feel of her warm fingers on him. He didn’t know what was worse, the agony of wanting to crush her beneath him or the agony in his shoulder.

“I’m sure I . . . don’t remember. About that painkiller . . . do you think you could go ahead and inject some into my—”

“And this one.” Her fingers slid up his spine, killing him just as surely as the bullet throbbing in his shoulder. “This tattoo is supposed to cover up . . . what, a knife wound? Did someone stab you in the back?”

“Bar fight. Or something. Emily, the painkiller? Please?”

“Oh, sorry.” She giggled.

Giggled? He peered at her over his shoulder again. Seeing her holding that needle in a very unsteady hand had sweat breaking out on his brow. He noticed the slight flush to her face and suddenly had a horrible epiphany.

“Are you drunk?”

She gave him a sloppy smile. “I might have had a wee little bit of whiskey.”

“How much is a little bit?”

“You didn’t think I could do this sober, did you? I picked up one tiny little bottle of Jack Daniel’s at the liquor store to bolster my courage before committing my very first felony.” She jammed the syringe deep into his shoulder.

He clenched his teeth together to keep from doing something embarrassing, like whimpering. Or worse, shouting at her and hurting her

feelings. Thankfully, whatever was in the syringe was potent because the pain began to ebb almost immediately. He drew several slow, deep breaths and forced himself to relax. Or at least he tried to. One particular part of his anatomy was still anything but relaxed, remembering her hands sliding across his skin.

"I don't suppose you could share that whiskey, could you?" he asked when he trusted his voice to work again.

She put the syringe down and held up a pair of silver tongs, snapping them together in a bloodthirsty way that had him suddenly wondering if losing the use of his arm from not getting the bullet out might be safer than letting a tipsy Emily operate on him.

"Nope. Sorry. It's all gone. Now, lay your head down and be still. I have a pesky little bullet to find in this big ol' shoulder here. And then, later, maybe you can tell me all about these interesting tattoos."

He gritted his teeth and buried his face in one of the pillows.

WHEN THE SUNLIGHT seeped in through a tiny crack in the curtains the following morning, Emily was shocked to find herself under the covers on the same bed as Devlin. He was snuggled up behind her, his warm thighs tucked beneath hers. His left arm was wrapped around her waist and his deep, even breaths swirled the hair on the top of her head.

She glanced down, relieved to discover she was dressed—if wearing a shirt and panties was *dressed*. She wasn't so certain about Devlin. The warmth of his body emanating to hers made her think he might be naked. Part of her didn't mind that one bit.

But the other part of her—the part that was just starting to realize the headache pounding behind her eyelids and the nausea roiling in her stomach were because of the ridiculous amount of whiskey she'd consumed last night—*that* part of her wanted nothing more than to escape to the bathroom before she embarrassed herself even further and threw up in front of the man she'd been lusting over.

After attempting to slide out from under his arm without waking him or jarring his injury, she suddenly found herself flat on her back looking up into a pair of dark gray eyes.

“Morning,” he said.

“Uh, morning.” She was relieved to see the glaze of pain gone from them. And his skin had a much healthier tone than it had last night. “Feeling better?”

“Much.” He ran his finger down the side of her face. “Good enough to show you my tattoos, if you’re interested.”

She blinked in confusion. “Your tattoos?”

He sighed. “You don’t remember, do you?”

“Uh, apparently not. And I’m starting to think maybe I don’t want to.” Her stomach chose that moment to twist into another tight knot. She pressed her hand against her throat. “I need to . . . ah . . . take a shower.”

His lips twitched. “A shower, huh? From the lovely shade of green on your face, I’m thinking you need to throw up some of that whiskey you selfishly wouldn’t share last night.”

Her stomach rumbled.

His eyes widened and he immediately let her go.

She ran to the bathroom and just managed to shove the door shut and drop to her knees in front of the toilet before Jack Daniel’s made an encore appearance.

It was a good hour later before she felt somewhat human again. A hot shower had done wonders. So had a cup of the nasty-tasting coffee from the coffeemaker on the bathroom counter. The caffeine had made the horrible taste worth ignoring. Add to that a packet of aspirin she’d pilfered from the vet and she could now face the day with a bit of optimism. Or at least she would have if she had answered Devlin’s question with a lie instead of the truth.

He’d sprung the question on her after he came out of the shower, holding a towel around his waist, and saw the fresh set of jeans, shirt, and underwear Emily had laid out on the bed for him.

“Emily, where did these clothes come from? And the toiletries in the bathroom?”

“The superstore about five miles down the road.”

His eyelids drooped to half-mast. “You drove the Mustang—Ace’s Mustang?”

His overly polite, carefully enunciated questions were starting to make her realize she might have screwed up royally. But she didn’t understand

why.

“I was careful. I used cash. And when I got back here I parked the car in the lot by the motel across from ours.”

When he shook his head, she couldn’t help feeling defensive.

“What’s the problem? Your shirt was bloody. Your jeans were cut up and covered in soot. And my clothes weren’t in much better shape. How are we supposed to blend in looking like that?”

He stared at her, his brows raised. Waiting.

Then it clicked. *Shoot*. “I suppose it’s possible I might have drawn a little attention with my soot-streaked shirt.” When he didn’t say anything, she continued. “And I bought clothes for both a man and a woman, and you might have mentioned earlier that Ace and his thugs would be on the lookout for a couple. And maybe I shouldn’t have driven the Mustang directly from the store to our motel.”

“Bingo,” he said. “Ace would know in order to blend in we’d need more clothes. A superstore is the most obvious place to get them. What time did you go to the store?”

“Probably about eight last night. But no one saw me. If they did, they’d have been here already. It’s past seven in the morning.”

“That’s not how it works. Ace is wounded. It would have taken him some time to get his Plan B into motion. He might not have had anyone at the store when you went there. But if it’s one of the main stores in the area, you can bet his men will be questioning the manager and tricking him into thinking they have a legitimate reason to look at surveillance video. That takes time.” He strode past her to the front window and pulled the curtain back a few inches.

From the way he stiffened, Emily knew her mistakes were about to come back to haunt both of them.

DEVLIN HELD THE curtain slit open so Emily could see what he was looking at.

“I don’t see anyone at all.” The relief in her voice was palpable. “We must be okay.”

“Check the other motel, the one across the parking lot from ours. Watch the last door on the left, bottom floor.”

A few seconds later, two men dressed in black flak jackets stepped outside the room. The word POLICE was written across the back in stark-white letters.

“Those aren’t the kind of jackets the Chatham County police use,” she said.

“I know.” He rushed to the bed to finish getting dressed. His shoulder was starting to throb again, but he didn’t have time to take anything for it.

“The hotel manager must think they’re real police,” she said from her position by the window. “They’re using master keys, going room to room.” She dropped the curtain and turned around. “Maybe they’ll search only that motel since that’s where the Mustang is parked.

“Do you really believe that?”

Her shoulders slumped. “No.”

Putting the Kevlar vest on was becoming a form of torture with his shoulder throbbing so hard.

Emily ran to help him, then insisted on popping some aspirin in his mouth and making him chase it with a cup of lukewarm coffee.

He grimaced and handed the cup back to her. “Thanks. I think.” He checked the loading of the gun he’d taken from Tuck. A full clip. Not enough if he got pinned down in a gunfight, but he hoped it wouldn’t come to that. He shoved it in his pocket; again not ideal, but he’d tossed his holster in Alex’s pond.

When he saw Emily, still dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, his stomach sank. “Please tell me you didn’t leave your Kevlar at Alex’s house.”

“I had to ditch it in the Charger. Drier would have known my vest was still at the office. He’d have asked all kinds of questions. And before you try to give me yours, there’s no way I could run or even bend in that thing. It’s way too big and heavy.”

She was right and he knew it, but it felt every kind of wrong to have a vest on while she didn’t. He crossed the room, relieved that the aspirin was already kicking in enough to dull the throbbing in his shoulder a bit, and peered out the crack in the curtains. “Well, the good news is they’re apparently searching for evidence in each room to see if we’ve been there.”

“Why do you say that? And why is that good?”

“As small as these rooms are, it would take only a quick glance under the bed, in the bathroom, and in the closet to know the room was empty. The most that should take is five or six seconds. They’re taking between thirty- and thirty-five seconds, longer sometimes, probably because those rooms are occupied. That will make it easier to sneak out of here. Plus, it will take them a few minutes to convince the manager of this motel to give them room keys. That buys us even more time.”

Emily shook her head. “I wouldn’t count on it taking them any time at all to get the keys. The manager didn’t even look at me when I got our room. He cared only about the money on the counter. He’s not going to ask about search warrants or probable cause.”

Devlin smiled. “Maybe not. Where’s the car?”

“On the far left, near the Dumpsters.”

“Too far away. We’d never reach it without being seen. We’ll have to wing it.”

“Meaning?”

“If we hadn’t been forced to ditch my go bag at Alex’s house, I’d have some tools I could use to hot-wire a car.”

She winced. “And I’d still have my Sig Sauer and could protect myself instead of counting on you to protect me using the gun you stole from Tuck.” She shook her head. “I should have tried harder to get that bag past Drier. What can we do since you don’t have the tools you need?”

“The answer to that might be too hard for a reforming cop to swallow. I think I’d rather surprise you.”

The look on her face told him she didn’t like the sound of that, which also told him he’d made the right decision not telling her his plan. He just hoped she’d understand and wouldn’t hate him later.

He looked out through the slit in the curtains again. “They’ve finished searching the other motel.”

She joined him by the door. “I don’t suppose that means they’re leaving.”

He grinned. “Now, where would the fun be in that?” He strode toward the bathroom.

“What are you doing?” she called out.

He grabbed the trash can with the bloody towels and bandages she’d used on his shoulder. “Hiding the evidence that we were ever in this room.

Can you lift the mattress a few inches?”

She lifted it and he shoved the whole bloody mess between the mattress and box spring before putting the trash can back in the bathroom. Between the two of them, they hid any evidence as well as they could. Except for the papers she’d taken from the binder earlier, which she shoved into the top of her waistband again, then dropped her shirt back down.

Devlin squeezed her hand in thanks. “Just follow me and do what I say. We’ll have to time our exit just right. But I’ll do everything I can to keep you safe, Em. Promise.”

“You’ve kept me alive this long. I have no reason to doubt you now. But just for the record, I’m a good shot. Get me a gun and I can watch your back.”

“Hmm. I wouldn’t have guessed that from the basement incident.”

She flushed a pretty pink. “Not my best moment.”

He pressed a quick kiss against her lips. He didn’t know which of them was more surprised And since he was thinking about grabbing her for another much hotter, wetter, deeper kiss, he forced himself to turn away. He hurried to the door and waved for her to join him as he looked out the peephole.

“When we go outside, duck down. We’ll use the row of cars out front as cover and slowly make our way toward the office.”

“Got it. Duck down. Do what you say. And pray. You forgot pray. I’ve got that part covered.”

He grinned. “Get ready; they’re about to go into some rooms at the far-left end of our motel. “Wait . . . wait . . . wait . . . okay, go.” He threw the door open and pulled her outside.

He quietly closed the door behind them, then pulled her in between two cars. They hurried to the back bumper, ducking down low as he leaned out to watch for their pursuers. He tugged her to the next car, waited, watched. Another few feet to the next one.

“Down,” he whispered, pulling her with him to the pavement by the trunk. He listened closely to the sounds of feet shuffling, low voices, and motel-room doors opening. They were close, too close.

A few seconds later, he signaled to Emily to move again. They both ducked down and ran to the next car. Their pattern continued until they were almost to the manager’s office.

Shouts suddenly sounded from behind them.

Devlin whirled around. One of Ace's men was standing along the row of cars, looking directly at them, clawing for his gun. Devlin picked him off with a shot clean through the temple.

Emily made a strangling sound in her throat. Devlin didn't have time to apologize even if he'd wanted to. He yanked her in front of him, covering her as best he could.

"Run, Em." He urged her around the side of the car.

The driver's window exploded in as the sound of another gunshot echoed through the air.

Emily screamed and ducked down as glass rained on her.

Devlin grabbed her around the waist and lifted her, setting her on her feet and pulling her forward. "This way!"

They tore off through the breezeway by the manager's office to the grass behind the motel. Devlin pushed her toward the road out front. She was about to learn his Plan B since he didn't have his tools to hot-wire a car.

"What now?" Emily asked, gasping for breath.

Devlin grabbed her and pulled her to the front of the manager's building, right by the road. Running footsteps sounded behind them.

"We're trapped." Emily put her hand on his arm.

"Don't give up on me yet." He kept his gaze focused on the road out front. An engine revved. Plan B came barreling around the curve in the form of a black SUV.

"Come on." He grabbed her hand and ran with her out onto the road, keeping the manager's building between them and their pursuers.

Devlin braced his legs wide apart and aimed his gun at the windshield. Brakes screeched. The SUV came to a shuddering halt.

He ran to the driver's side, pulling Emily with him. "Get in the back."

She gave the pale driver a look of apology as she scrambled inside.

Devlin yanked the driver's door open, reached in past the stunned man to throw the truck in park. Then he unclicked the seat belt and tossed him onto the road, all so quickly the driver didn't have time to react.

"Devlin!" Emily yelled, sounding shocked.

"Habit," he growled, jumping into the driver's seat and slamming the door. He threw the SUV in gear and punched the gas.

The gunmen rounded the corner of the manager's building and spilled out onto the road.

"Get down," Devlin ordered.

Emily dove to the floor. Shots rang out from behind them, pinging against the bumper. The rear window exploded in a hail of glass. Seconds later, they rounded a curve, and the sound of gunfire faded like a nightmare.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

AS IF CARJACKING wasn't bad enough, the next crime Emily could add to her shiny new criminal record was another breaking and entering. She stood in the middle of the family room of a three-bedroom ranch home on a small plot of land just outside of Savannah, turning in a circle. Could she sink any lower? She supposed she should be grateful that Devlin had at least chosen a house whose owner wasn't home.

"You seem pretty calm about all this," she said. "I suppose you do this a lot? Break into people's houses while they're at work?"

"Would you rather we'd hung around outside and waited for Ace or his men to find us?"

She let out a deep breath. "No. Sorry. You're right. I do appreciate everything you've done to keep me safe. And here I am complain—"

He pressed his fingers against her lips. "Don't apologize. And don't thank me either. Let's just work together and see if we can figure out, once and for all, who started all of this and where he's holding Kelly. One thing at a time. You have the papers?"

She patted the packet of pages hidden beneath her shirt. "Right here."

He led her to the dining-room table and she pulled the papers out of her waistband and set them down. "Do you think we're safe here?"

"For the moment, yes." He picked up the top page and skimmed it.

"Devlin, when this is over, if we survive—"

He gave her a sharp look. "Nothing's going to happen to you, Em."

“I appreciate that, and I hope you’re right, believe me. If we do survive, what happens then? Now that you know the company you’ve been working for is wrong, evil . . . what will you do with the rest of your life?”

His dark eyes met hers. “What makes you think that I’ve concluded EXIT is evil?”

She blinked. “You’re kidding, right? They’ve been trying to kill both of us. Personally, I call that evil.”

He gripped the back of the dining-room chair in front of him. “EXIT’s mission remains the same regardless of our current situation. Cyprian wouldn’t have sent Gage and Ace after me if he didn’t truly believe I’d gone rogue and was a threat to others. There’s no evil in that.”

She stared at him in shock. “What about *me*? Your employer has given me a death sentence because I *may* know something about his secret purpose. How is that not wrong?”

“I didn’t say that wasn’t wrong. But Cyprian made an honest mistake going after you. He’s doing what he believes is necessary to protect the company’s mission.”

She shook her head, not wanting to believe what she was hearing. “Are you telling me that if we rescue your friend Kelly Parker, and she convinces your boss you’re innocent, you’ll go back to being an assassin, as if none of this ever happened?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

She pressed her hand to her throat. “What if . . . what if I die, Devlin? What if you get your life back, but one of your enforcers carries out my death sentence? What then?”

A look of pain crossed his face. He quickly closed the short distance between them, grabbed her shoulders, and shook her lightly. “You will not die, Emily. Do you understand me?” His voice was hoarse and raw. “You. Won’t. Die.”

He clamped his mouth down on hers. She shouldn’t have responded. She should have pushed him away. This was wrong. They had completely different moral centers and were worlds apart. But she did respond, drinking him in, molding her lips to his. Because, somehow, whenever he touched her, everything else fell away and all that mattered was how impossibly *right* it felt to be in his arms.

A shudder ran through him and he broke the kiss, but he didn't let her go. He pulled her against his chest and rested his head on top of hers. Emily slid her arms around his waist and held him tight. Nothing was settled between them, but for now, being held in the protective cocoon of his arms was enough.

He stroked her back, her hair, and rubbed his cheek against the top of her head. "I'm sorry about everything that's happened to you," he whispered. "If I could go back in the past and change it, I would. If you understand nothing else about me, understand this." He pulled back and cupped her face. "I care about you, and I'll do everything in my power to keep you safe."

He winced and dropped his hands to his sides. "I'm going to find something stronger than aspirin for this shoulder and maybe . . . sit down a few minutes." He turned and headed down the hall. His slight limp told her his burned leg was hurting just as much or more than his shoulder.

Emily slowly sank into one of the chairs. She supposed what Devlin really needed was some time away from her to compose his thoughts, to center himself. Because she needed the same thing.

He cared about her. And, impossibly, she cared about him too. But it didn't matter. If, by some miracle, the EXIT order against her was canceled and she could go back to her old life, it wasn't like she and Devlin could . . . what . . . date? See each other when he wasn't on a mission somewhere *killing* people?

A rush of anger flooded through her. She shoved the stack of papers, scattering them across the tabletop. A wallet-sized photo fell out from the pages and fluttered to the floor. Emily shook her head and reached down to grab it. A beautiful young woman smiled up at her, her long blonde hair perfectly brushed and lying just right across her shoulders, her makeup perfectly done to look natural but cover every possible blemish. Emily self-consciously lifted her hand to her own makeup-free face. Even if she had a professional cosmetologist to work on her, she could never have the flawless complexion this woman had.

She flipped the picture over and froze. Little cartoon hearts drawn in blue ink marched across the top. And, beneath them, a name: Arianna Ross. *Devlin's Arianna*? When she read the next line, written in exuberant, girlish-looking script, she had her answer—*The Future Mrs. Devlin*

Buchanan. Beneath that, closer to the bottom, was a date. The date the picture was taken? The date they were supposed to get married?

Had Devlin carried his dead fiancée's picture with him all these years? What kind of love would make a man hold on to a memory that long? Emily couldn't help but resent the young woman he'd loved so ferociously, who he still loved apparently, even though she knew it was wrong to be jealous of a dead woman. She couldn't imagine the pain Devlin must have felt when Arianna was killed, must still feel, to be holding on to her memory for so long.

She shoved the picture beneath one of the stacks of papers. Dozens of faces stared up at her from the pages. But one face in particular caught her attention.

Devlin's.

She started to reach for it and stopped. No. She didn't want to know the gritty details. She didn't want to know how many people he'd killed, the way he'd killed them, how *good* he was at his job. It sickened her to know he still, after everything that had happened, felt no shame, no regrets, and wanted to return to that lifestyle.

She shoved his profile page away and pulled others toward her. She needed to make a list, write down all the clues she and Devlin knew about the case, to see if any of these enforcers had a reason to hold a grudge against Devlin. She had a window of time based on Kennerly's autopsy conclusions and could build a time line from that. If any of these enforcers were on a mission, far enough away that they couldn't have killed the women in the basement, then she wouldn't consider them as possible suspects.

Shoving back from the table, she crossed to the family room, looking for paper and a pen. She finally found what she needed in the adjoining kitchen and went back to the dining room.

A few minutes later, she had the beginning of a crude list with three columns—victims, suspects, clues. She'd filled it out from memory based on her work with Tuck and the other detectives, filling in the victim and clues column. Now to fill in the suspect column.

She started to pick up one of the dozens of profiles lying on the table, but her gaze wandered to Devlin's again. Maybe if she read it quickly and satisfied her curiosity, she could get back to work and concentrate.

A short bio was at the top of the page beside his picture—name, birth date, information about his family. It listed skills, proficiency with weapons, details that had her stomach clenching and made her skim past them, until she reached the section halfway down.

Missions.

The font was small, as if to ensure all of the necessary information could be included. She flipped the page over and saw the entire back was filled with even more data about the missions he'd been assigned. An entire career of murdering people for hire, boiled down to a page and a half.

Maybe this was what she needed, the gruesome details of his life, to make her see him for what he really was, to end her ridiculous fascination with him, to make her, somehow, stop caring.

The very first mission had her hands shaking so hard the paper rattled in her grip. She set the paper down on the table, clasping her hands together in her lap as she read. He was only twenty-one, just wrapping up his junior year in college. Now she knew what that date meant on the back of Arianna's picture. It was the date that Devlin had avenged her. Gage was his mentor on the mission, took him to Arianna's killer, but Devlin was the one who pressed a gun to the man's forehead and blew him away.

She pressed her hand to her throat and read the next entry, dated two years later. She was surprised by the amount of time that had passed. Perhaps he'd graduated college, settled his affairs, or even trained to become a full-fledged enforcer before taking on another mission. But when she read the cryptic summary, it wasn't at all what she'd expected, or the next entry, or the one after that.

Israel: High-profile society member with suspected ties to terrorism, no legal recourse; monitored suspect; intercepted while boarding bus with explosives, forty-seven school-age children on board. Terminated mark. No civilian casualties.

Michigan: Intelligence indicated baby-food factory worker disgruntled, potential threat, no legal recourse; intercepted mailing "complimentary" cases of tainted baby food to new parents. Terminated mark. Thirty-seven cases of potassium-cyanide-laced baby food destroyed. No civilian casualties.

Emily’s eyes grew moist. The next entry had tears flowing down her face.

Columbia: Drug cartel kidnapping American citizens, holding for ransom, executed seven civilians prior to EXIT order. Reconnaissance; captured; held two months before escaping with all five hostages. Terminated marks (3). No civilian casualties. Enforcer’s injuries: Bullet wounds—right thigh, left forearm. Knife wounds—both hands, lower back. Impact—three broken ribs. Electrical burns—numerous.

Emily sat frozen, shock warring with horror inside her. Electrical burns? Devlin was tortured for two months, horrifically injured. And he still managed to escape and save all five hostages.

All those tattoos on his body were to cover his battle scars, so friends and family wouldn’t see the marks from the injuries he’d sustained. Shame washed through her for judging him so harshly. He was right when he’d said he wasn’t strictly an assassin. From what she’d read, he was a hero. If she understood those entries—no legal recourse—that meant law enforcement’s hands were tied by rules and laws. Nothing could be done to prevent the upcoming tragedies. Until Devlin was sent in. He’d saved countless lives. How could she condemn him now, knowing what he’d sacrificed, how he’d dedicated his life to saving lives?

She couldn’t.

“I decided to make us some coffee.” Devlin’s voice carried down the hall as he approached the dining room. “I figured it was still early enough that we could call it breakfast. I could make us toast or—” He stopped in the archway. His gaze shot all around the room, as if looking for some kind of threat. “What happened? Are you hurt?”

He set the mugs on the table and rushed to her. He crouched down beside her chair and brushed her tears off her cheeks. “Em, what’s wrong?” His eyes searched hers.

She turned her mouth into his palm and kissed him.

His eyes widened in surprise. “Em?”

“I’m so, so sorry.” She feathered her fingers down his face. “I’m sorry that I judged you, that I doubted you. You’re a good man, Devlin Buchanan.”

His brows furrowed in confusion. He looked at the table, as if he’d find his answers there. “What are you talking about?”

“You really don’t know, do you? You have no idea how special you are.”

This time he looked at her as if he thought she was insane. “I think you might need to lie down. You’re hallucinating or . . . or something. Come on. We can afford to spend a few more hours here. From what I saw when I searched the house, it’s just the one man who lives here, and he’s married to his career. He’s not the type to pop in at home for lunch. He probably eats at his desk and never takes a break.”

He stood and took her hand in his. “I’ll tuck you in and hopefully by the time you wake up I’ll have figured out who’s after us.”

When he started toward the hall, she tugged her hand out of his grasp. He stopped and looked at her in question.

“Hold me,” she whispered. “Please.”

He hesitated, obviously surprised by the sudden change in her, but he put his arms around her anyway and pulled her against his chest. Emily reveled in the feel of him, the clean masculine scent of him, the strength of his arms holding her close. Her mind, and her heart, were still reeling from her discoveries about what he’d done, the sacrifices he’d made, to save people who would probably never even know he was the one who’d saved them. It wasn’t like he could hang around and receive their praise. The nature of his job required—demanded—secrecy. Yet even without accolades he continued to risk his life to help so many people.

She snuggled more tightly against him and smoothed her hands up his chest, wishing she could just as easily smooth away the hurt and pain he’d suffered in the past. It just seemed natural to continue sliding her hands up and around the back of his neck, fitting her curves to his hardness.

The sudden tension in his body and the feel of his heart slamming in his chest sent a surge of excitement pulsing straight to her belly. One of his hands moved down her spine to rest on the upper curve of her bottom. Her breasts tightened almost painfully and heat pooled between her legs with a suddenness that was startling.

When she'd asked him to hold her, it was because of her longing to comfort the tortured man she'd read about in his dossier. But now, she was thinking of an entirely different kind of comfort. Rather than feel guilt or doubts, like she had the last time they'd held each other like this, all she felt was a sense of how incredibly right it was to be held in his arms. And a growing hunger for something *more*.

She gently eased out of his arms and took his hand in hers again. "I believe you were going to tuck me in?"

His gaze dropped to her lips and he cleared his throat. "Of course."

He pulled her along with him down the hall. He didn't take her to the master bedroom, for which she was grateful. She didn't want to lie down on someone else's dirty sheets. Instead, he took her to a guest room. But when he pulled back the covers and encouraged her to lie down, she shook her head.

"No, Dev. I don't want you to hurt your shoulder. You're the one who needs to lie down. I'll do all the work."

Uncertainty filled his eyes. "Emily, I don't think—"

She pressed her hand against his lips. "No thinking. There's time enough for that later. Sit." She gently shoved him toward the bed. As if in a daze, he sat on the mattress facing her.

"This isn't a good—"

"Nuh-uh. Don't go anywhere. I'll be right back." She hurried to the master bedroom next door and made a beeline toward the closest nightstand. Sure enough, she found exactly what she'd expected—and hoped—to find. She opened the box and took out one of the foil packets. She was halfway to the door when she changed her mind and ran back to the nightstand. She pulled out one more packet, then shoved the box into the drawer and went back to the guest room.

Devlin was just starting to push himself up from the mattress when she stepped into the room.

"Don't you dare. Sit down." She gently pushed him back again. She produced the foil packets, setting them on the table next to the bed.

His breathing kicked up a notch as he stared at the packets.

Emily had been thinking about this moment for so long that she looked forward to the actual event both with excitement and relief. She knew there was no future for them. Even understanding better now why he'd done the

things he'd done and what he'd done, their worlds were still too far apart. She would need time to sort through all the ramifications of what he did for a living, to decide if she could accept it. But she feared she might never truly be able to, and that would lead to fights, to unhappiness.

Knowing they didn't have long made her almost frenzied as she slid out of her jeans, then whipped her T-shirt up over her head. It wasn't until she reached behind her and unclasped her bra that she looked up and realized he still hadn't moved. He was wearing all of his clothes, while she was wearing nothing but a pair of black lace panties.

Her boldness died a quick death and the flush of embarrassment warmed her skin. She covered her breasts with her hands. Had she misjudged him? Could that kiss at the diner have been an act? Had all the little touches, looks, been to get her to go along with his plans?

She grabbed her T-shirt and jeans from the floor, intent on running into the bathroom and hiding until she could face him again. But when she tried to turn, the jeans and T-shirt were tugged out of her hands. She froze as Devlin's strong arms closed around her, pulling her back against his chest. Except that she couldn't really feel his chest because of the Kevlar vest beneath his shirt. She shivered in the air conditioning.

And then he started to move. His large, warm hands slid across her belly, rubbing slow, sensual circles that began to warm her from the inside out. He slid them down, down, and ran just the tips of his fingers beneath the elastic of her panties. But instead of continuing their downward slide, he changed direction and slid his hands up, up, up until he was cupping the undersides of her breasts. And then her breasts were filling his hands.

He shuddered against her and lowered his head, kissing the side of her neck. "Don't move," he whispered. He stepped back, but she knew he was still there. She heard the whisper of cloth, a pained grunt. She started to turn, to help him.

"No," he whispered, his voice huskier, deeper than usual. "Don't turn around."

Not knowing what he would do next, where he would touch her, kicked up her excitement but made her frustrated at the same time. But then he was back, his warm skin branding her body from her shoulders to her calves. Every inch of him pressed against her, including several very impressive inches prodding against her bottom.

She started to take off her underwear, but again, he stopped her with a hoarsely whispered, “Let me.” His hands covered hers, but instead of sliding her underwear down her thighs by himself, they did it together, his hand guiding hers, forcing her to caress her own body as they bent together as one. His body followed hers, moving as she moved, his thighs pushing the backs of her thighs, lifting her back on top of him until by the time they pushed her panties all the way to her ankles she was sitting in his lap, completely cocooned within the circle of his legs, his arms, his mouth as he kissed her neck again.

Sitting there, her bottom on the tops of his thighs, crouched on the floor, she should have felt awkward. Instead, she felt surrounded, cherished, protected. He scooted back a little, his hands dropping from around her, the cool air conditioning whispering across her heated skin. She was about to ask him why he’d moved away when she heard the sound of a foil packet being ripped open and felt his hands brushing against her. He was putting the condom on. Was he going to take her like this? On the floor? From behind?

The answer was the slide of his hands beneath her bottom, lifting her, a slight shift of his hips. The feel of him, thick and hard, pressing against her sent a flash of heat straight to the center of her. She wanted him so much, wanted to feel him inside her, filling her. But he didn’t enter her. Instead, he leaned down and worshipped her neck with his lips, tasting her, kissing her.

His lips moved to her ear, his warm breath lifting tendrils of hair. “Are you sure about this, Em? You’re a cop. You’ll always be a cop. And I’m a __”

“Wonderful man,” she finished for him. “Don’t make me beg.”

He shuddered and fitted himself to her opening, wrapping his arm around her waist. And then, finally, he began to push inside her with exquisite slowness, stretching, filling her. She whimpered at the pleasure-pain of it. He was a large man in every way, and the angle of penetration allowed him to go so deep she wasn’t sure she could handle it. He pulled back and then pushed in more deeply. She tensed.

He immediately stopped. “Did I hurt you?”

“No, I’m . . . incredible. You’re just . . . larger than I expected.”

He laughed against her neck. “Not too large, I hope.”

“I don’t . . . think so.”

He held her clasped to him, not moving, just filling her, warming her, stretching her. And then he slid one of his hands down her belly to the apex of her thighs. Gently, with exquisite tenderness, his fingers slid lower, to her most sensitive spot.

"Ooh," she gasped as his fingers began to move with maddening slowness, stroking, pushing against her with just the right pressure.

"Dev . . . ah." She jerked her head back against his chest, lost in the pleasure he was giving her. He expertly played her like a fine instrument, strumming her nerve endings, making the most beautiful music, building her up, up, close, so close.

And then he began to move inside her, sliding in deeper, deeper than she would have thought possible. It felt so good. So. Damn. Good.

"More," she begged. "More."

His fingers pressed down on her, hard, as he surged upward and pulled her down on him at the same time.

She cried out as her entire body seemed to explode around him. He drove into her over and over until she was weeping with the pleasure of it, the beauty of it.

He drove up into her one last time, pushing her down on him, grinding against her. She half-turned and pulled him down for a kiss, thrusting her tongue inside his mouth. He groaned and pumped into her again and again. Suddenly, he tightened inside her, and then his entire body shuddered.

She drank in his shout of ecstasy and they both collapsed back against the side of the bed behind them.

A few minutes later, just as her heart had begun to settle down into a normal rhythm, she felt him hardening again inside her.

He stroked her hair back from the side of her neck and pressed a kiss on her too-warm flesh. "You're a drug, Emily. I can't get enough of you."

She felt a moment of disappointment when he pulled out of her. But when he tugged her toward the bed and pressed her back on the mattress, she knew there was nothing to be disappointed about. He looked like he wanted to devour her. And she very much wanted to be devoured.

He turned away to grab another foil packet.

For that brief moment of separation, the doubts began to niggle at Emily. This was so unlike her, to make love to a man when she knew there couldn't possibly be a future for the two of them together. But as he turned

back toward her, the doubts dissipated. Now; she would think of only now, of this moment of sharing their bodies and souls with each other. And if this was the only time they could ever truly be together, she wanted it to be perfect for him. A memory he could carry with him when his world was bleak and scary and dark.

She reached down between them and wrapped her hand around the velvety-hard length of him. He gasped and closed his eyes, his teeth clenching as she gave him one long, slow stroke. Then another. And another. His eyes opened and he grabbed her hand.

“I need to be inside you, Emily,” he groaned, his voice ragged and raw. “Now.”

He captured her lips in his, fitted himself to her entrance, and surged inside of her.

Her cry of ecstasy was captured in their wet, open-mouthed kiss. She rode him in a frenzied rhythm, moaning deep in her throat with every delicious, deep stroke. And then he reached down between them and caressed the very core of her, dragging cries of pleasure from her. She’d never felt so alive, so . . . loved.

Her climax washed over her with a suddenness and an intensity that was almost frightening. Devlin seemed to know exactly what she needed and kissed her and held her through every last convulsion, every last shiver. And then he began to move again, faster and harder, as he approached his own climax. As impossible as it seemed, she felt herself tightening and approaching that same glorious peak all over again. Her body instinctively seemed to tune itself with his, matching his rhythm, the pressure quickly building inside her as he pulled out, then sank into her again, and again, until the climax exploded over both of them and they fell over the edge into oblivion together.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

EMILY STRETCHED HER arms above her head on the pillow, reveling in the decadent feel of the silk sheets against her naked skin. When she started to stretch her legs, her sore muscles protested, making her wince and smile at the same time. She didn't mind the aches and pains because of the way she'd gotten them. Devlin.

She turned her head on the pillow, expecting to see him lying beside her, but the bed was empty. Had she fallen asleep? She didn't remember him getting up. Tossing the covers back, she grabbed her discarded clothes off the floor and saw that Devlin's clothes were gone—including his Kevlar vest.

A sense of unease sent her pulse pounding. He wouldn't make such incredible, sweet love to her and then just . . . leave. Would he? She threw her clothes on and hurried down the hall to the dining room. Her stomach dropped. Empty. The chairs were neatly pushed against the table. The papers that had littered the top were gone. Even the coffee cups had been taken away, the table wiped clean and shiny, as if no one had been there.

She ran into the adjoining family room. "Devlin? Devlin?" Panic pitched her voice higher than normal.

"In here."

She almost collapsed with relief. Following the sound of his voice, she went through a pair of French doors at the front of the house into what must have been the home office. A computer sat on a long glass table against one

wall, with a phone beside it and familiar-looking papers sitting on top—the EXIT dossiers.

Devlin was writing on the enormous whiteboard that took up almost the entire opposite wall. When she stepped beside him, he gave her a quick smile, then focused on the columns he was filling out.

The warm afterglow that had settled inside her after their lovemaking died a quick death. Her entire world had been shattered by what they'd shared, and yet Devlin was acting like nothing had happened. He couldn't even spare her a hello kiss or a decent smile.

Embarrassment and regret washed through her, making her cheeks hot and her eyes burn. There had been only two other lovers in her life before this, and she'd known both of them a long time before becoming intimate. With Devlin, it had taken . . . what, a handful of days? That was probably why he was so nonchalant about what had happened. He thought she was easy, a quick conquest. She tried not to let it bother—

"Emily?"

She blinked and realized he was facing her, amusement lighting his silver-gray eyes, his mouth quirked up at the corner in a smile that would have stolen her breath a few hours ago. But right now, it just made her resentful.

"What?" she bit out.

His grin widened. "Just . . . this."

He bent down and lifted her with one hand beneath her bottom, the other around her back, and covered her mouth with his. Turning with her in his arms, he pressed her against the wall, consuming her with a hot, openmouthed kiss that had her whimpering and clutching the front of his shirt. When he finally pulled back, she stared at him, dazed.

"Wh . . . what was that for?" she breathed.

He dropped a quick kiss on her forehead and stood her on her feet, supporting her elbows as she wobbled against him.

"That," he said, "was reassurance, to erase the frown on your face and whatever crazy thoughts were going through your head." He kissed her again, a tender, whisper-soft caress of his lips against hers. "You were amazing." He gave her a broad wink and followed it up with a sexy leer.

She cleared her throat and shoved her hair out of her face. "Yes, I know. You weren't too bad yourself."

They both laughed, and the dark cloud of doubt that had hung over Emily lifted. The man certainly knew how to dish out reassurance.

“What are you trying to do?” she asked, standing in front of the whiteboard, trying to make sense of his scribbles and scratched-out names and dates.

He crossed his arms and shook his head. “Trying to play detective, which I obviously am not. I don’t suppose you’d like to take a go at it?”

She grabbed the eraser. “May I?”

“Sure, erase it all and start over if you want. I’m certainly not getting anywhere.”

“Grab the dossiers.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He strode to the desk and began gathering the loose pages.

Once the board was a clean expanse of white again, Emily wrote headings on three columns: victims, suspects, clues.

She filled out the victim column by memory: Virginia Hawley, Shannon Fisher, Nancy Thomas, and Kelly Parker.

Devlin shook his head. “I can see Shannon being someone’s target, just as much as any enforcer. But Kelly is a high-risk victim.”

“High risk how?”

“She’s Cyprian’s right arm, his pet. Whoever abducted her had to be extremely careful that it couldn’t point back to them. That would be suicide.”

“Or the perfect way to ensure Cyprian turned against you if they made it look like you were the bad guy.”

He nodded. “You’re right. Risky but effective. What about the two other skeletons from the basement? And what about the three women Hawley said were with her? We’re assuming Nancy is one of them, I guess, and Kelly. But that leaves another woman unaccounted for.”

She rested her palm against the board and held the marker in her other hand. “I’m focusing only on the identified victims for this exercise. It probably makes sense to add one more, though.” She added a fifth name to the bottom of the list.

Devlin frowned. “Carolyn, my stepmother? She died in a car accident.”

“A single-car accident; no reason to suspect foul play. But with everything else that’s happened, I think we’d be fools not to at least

consider the possibility. Plus the jewelry on Shannon's body was probably supposed to make us think Carolyn was the real victim. I think we have to consider your stepmother and how she relates to our suspects once we list them out."

"All right. Makes sense."

After adding approximate dates of death beside each victim, she stepped to the clues column. "This isn't a court of law. We don't need absolute proof. Call out anything that seems like a clue and we'll look at it as a whole and see what we've got. We won't include the obvious, like that the killer knows you and must work at EXIT. Can we assume they're an enforcer?"

"Based on how the victims were killed, definitely."

"Okay. Let's fill up our clues column." She started writing. "The killer is Caucasian, approximately six feet tall. That's based on Hawley's description, but she couldn't give more physical details because her abductor wore a hat and covered his face. Oh, and the room was always dark." She made a second bullet item below that. "There also wasn't any sexual assault, and even though the victims were beaten and bruised, the only broken bone was the hyoid, meaning they were strangled."

She looked back at Devlin, standing behind her. "Do you want to add anything?"

"Not yet. You're doing good so far. Keep going."

She moved down a line. "There were cross-shaped bruises from the ligatures on Hawley and potentially the others. The man who drove Hawley on behalf of the killer was an ex-con, as were the men who tried to kill us outside the bunker." She stepped back and tapped the marker against the board.

"May I?" Devlin held his hand out for the marker. She handed it to him, and he wrote a bullet about the camera that was found inside his house, and that his garrote design was used on at least two of the victims—Shannon and Nancy.

When Emily asked him how he knew Shannon had been strangled with a garrote, he told her about the pictures Gage had brought him.

"I wish I could see those pictures," she said.

"No. You don't. Trust me."

“I’m just saying that if I could have seen the body, I might have seen another clue. Was she tied up?”

“There were ligature marks on her wrists and ankles.”

“Any unusual bruising with the ligatures?”

“Not that I remember. Why, because of the bruising on Hawley?” He waved to her note on the board.

“Exactly.” She tapped her marker against her thigh. “I’d like to know what caused the cross-shaped pattern. It might be important.” She slowly turned around to look at him. “Tuck could send me autopsy photos of Nancy Thomas. We could see if she had the same marks.”

“No.”

“I don’t recall asking permission.”

His expression darkened. Emily had the feeling he wasn’t used to people not following his orders.

“It’s not a good idea, Em. All he’d have to do is see the phone number come up on the screen and do a reverse trace to get this address. And what makes you think he’d want to help us anyway? He probably thinks we’re both in on the murders after the fiasco with Ace and the ambulance.”

Ten minutes later, after arguing her point every way she could think of, Emily was sitting at the computer, pulling up the autopsy report and photos through her personal e-mail account. “Thank you for being reasonable, Dev.”

“I can’t believe you talked me into it,” he complained, leaning over her to see the report. “Or that Tuck agreed to help you.”

“We’ve been partners a long time. Even though he’s furious with me, and hurt because I won’t tell him what’s going on, he would never refuse me if I needed him.”

“Sounds like you care about him.”

“Is that jealousy I hear in your voice, Mr. Buchanan?”

“I don’t get jealous.”

She grinned because the way he was glaring at her told her he was definitely unhappy about her friendship with Tuck. She scrolled through the report, skimming it as quickly as she could. When the autopsy photos filled the screen, Devlin turned away and moved back to the whiteboard, as if to study the clues.

But Emily knew better. While they'd waited for the e-mail from Tuck, Devlin had told her about Nancy, and how she was like a baby sister to him. How his friend—or *former* friend—Gage could think Devlin had anything to do with Nancy's death made no sense to Emily. Anyone could look at him and see how much he cared for the young woman.

She leaned closer to the screen, zooming in on the ligature marks on Nancy's wrist. Then she brought up the photo of Hawley's wrist that Tuck had e-mailed her too, at Emily's request. Side by side, they looked almost identical—a dark cross-shaped bruise on both victims.

"Nancy has the same bruise as Hawley," she called out. "I think that has to be significant. The killer is using the same type of restraint on both victims. Mrs. Hawley said it was rope."

"What's next?" he asked, not commenting on Nancy's autopsy photos. "Do you want me to list all the enforcers in the suspect list?"

She shoved back from the computer and joined him at the whiteboard. "If the size of that stack of papers is anything to judge by, that would make a very long list. Let's see if we can't narrow it down first. How reliable is the mission information on these dossiers?"

He shrugged. "The dates should be accurate. The other details should be close. Cyprian runs a tight ship, makes sure the information that's input after each debriefing matches the interview."

"Then let's start by eliminating anyone who was out of the country during Nancy's murder or Hawley's abduction. Then we'll narrow it down based on the approximate date of death for the other known victims."

He shook his head and stared at her in wonder. "You're really good at this sort of thing. Maybe you should be a detective someday."

She laughed. "Daylight's wasting. We need to get this figured out before our homeowner gets here. Let's get our suspect list going."

They whittled the papers down to forty enforcers, which was still far too many. By considering who knew about Nancy and Devlin being close, or that Carolyn was his stepmother, or about his relationships with Shannon and Kelly, however brief, they got the list down to five names.

Gage and four others.

"Are you absolutely positive the mission dates on Ace's dossier are correct? I hate that we ruled him out. He's the first person I would have expected to put on our suspect list."

“The data came straight from EXIT’s databases. Since I had to hack my way past all kinds of firewalls and security algorithms to get this information, I would expect it’s all accurate. Why go to that kind of trouble to protect inaccurate or fake data?”

She turned around. “You hacked in? Enforcers aren’t given access to the databases?”

“We are, but only a limited view on a need-to-know basis, depending on our assignments. I had a close call once because Cyprian was a little too stingy about sharing data, so I hack in every few months to update my copies of the dossiers. Well, until about four months ago. Cyprian installed a new security system that closed the loophole I was using to get in. Since then, I haven’t figured out my way past the new measures.”

She turned back to the board again. “Okay, back to our five potential suspects. Are all of these men six feet tall or close to it?” Emily asked. “Hawley estimated that was the height of her abductor, even though she couldn’t give any kind of description since his face was covered and he wore a hat.”

“Actually, no.” He crossed one of the names off. “This guy is much shorter than six feet. Even if Hawley’s off by a few inches, he wouldn’t come close to that. You can take Gage off the list too. Gage would never harm Nancy. That leaves us with three possible suspects. And, honestly, none of these guys strike me as someone with a vendetta against me.”

“Gage and Nancy were close?”

His mouth tightened.

“Devlin?”

“They were close until this past year. They had a falling-out because she wouldn’t switch majors from criminal justice.”

“I guess that would give someone pause in his line of work.”

“My family’s connections to law enforcement have never been a problem for me. They could have moved past it.”

“Except that she was killed first.”

Again he didn’t answer, but the possibilities hung in the air between them. If Gage was fanatical about protecting his employer, maybe he saw his sister as a threat. Devlin couldn’t accept that, but Emily had seen her share of domestic violence situations and knew these things happened even in families that seemed close.

She leaned back against the wall. “What about surveillance equipment expertise, and access to your home to plant the security camera in your bedroom?” Emily asked. “Isn’t Gage the only one with that kind of opportunity? Have you ever invited the other three over?”

He crossed his arms.

“Devlin, you need to be realistic. The only person who makes sense here is Gage. He’s the killer.”

“No. He isn’t. If it weren’t for Nancy, I could see it. He checks off every box. But if he wanted me dead, he could have killed me many times over, every time he’s come over to my house. Or even the morning that Cyprian gave him an EXIT order for me.”

She put her hands on her hips. “I think you’ve hit on something there. If one of them wanted you dead, why not just ambush you and kill you when you aren’t expecting them? Why go to the trouble of this elaborate setup first?”

“That one’s easy. One of the few rules we’re held to is never kill another enforcer unless they’ve gone rogue.”

Her shoulders slumped. “Okay, then there’s something else. Some piece of the puzzle we’re missing. Unless you’re willing to assume Gage is the killer since he seems the most likely. Can’t we go looking for him?”

He shook his head. “It’s not that simple. He’s got just as many properties as me, plus a few I don’t know of, I’m sure. We’d have to have some kind of clue just to figure out where to look. Assuming he’s not in a hotel or someplace like that. Assuming one of the three is our guy, not Gage, we still have to figure out the most logical search area or it will take too long. Meanwhile, Kelly is being held and probably tortured.”

She pulled the computer chair close to the board while Devlin brought one of the dining-room chairs in to sit beside her. They reviewed everything on the board over and over but still couldn’t narrow the list down to who and where.

“What about the ex-cons, including Brad Robinson?” Devlin asked. “Tuck seemed to think Robinson was the key when he talked about him back at the ambulance.”

She straightened in her chair. “You’re right. I need to e-mail Tuck again.”

“That’s not what I—”

“—meant, I know. I can ask him to check visitor logs for those ex-cons from when they were in prison, see if the same name comes up on any of them. Makes sense that if someone coordinated them all together, they would have visited at least a couple of them and made them some kind of deal for when they were paroled. Or maybe a guard or warden was bribed as part of the deal. I’m not ignoring any possibility.”

“Fine. E-mail him. Do what you have to do.” He stood and crossed to the doorway.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m hungry. I’ll see if I can scare us up some sandwiches.”

“Sounds good. Thanks.”

She opened her e-mail again and typed her request for Tuck to get everything he could from the prison records for Robinson and the other ex-cons, focusing on visitor logs. Since IDs could be faked, especially by someone who worked for EXIT and probably did that kind of thing routinely, she added a request for pictures of the visitors if possible. Years ago, that might have been a difficult request, but she knew prison records were digitized now. Pulling a picture of the visitors who’d signed in to see each of her target ex-cons shouldn’t be that difficult. She was about to click SEND but hesitated. Ex-cons. There were a lot of them involved in this case—the one Devlin had killed after they saved Hawley, Robinson, his three partners in crime. What about the men who’d broken into the bunker? Devlin hadn’t recognized any of them. Could they be ex-cons too?

Why would an enforcer—a trained assassin—use so many far less trained and less competent people to help him? Devlin had said they’d been sent to “soften them up,” which she supposed would make sense if the enforcer pulling their strings was busy or not close enough to go after the target. Or maybe the appeal was that the convicts couldn’t easily be traced back to the person who’d given them orders. Someone at EXIT was obviously very comfortable using criminals as their personal thugs.

As if they’d been doing it for a long time.

Her fingers hovered over the keys. Devlin wouldn’t want her to do this. He wouldn’t want her to reopen old wounds. But, as often happened while she worked a case, little things began to dig at her and dig at her until they were flashing inside her mind like big neon signs. Which usually meant she was on to something.

She glanced over her shoulder toward the doorway. It was clear. Devlin must still be in the kitchen. She turned back to the computer and added one more name to her e-mail. *Click.* For better or worse, the e-mail had been sent.

"Emily."

She jumped in her chair, blinking in surprise to see Devlin right behind her.

He grinned and set a plate of sandwiches on the computer desk. "Didn't mean to startle you." He set two bottles of water on the desk and crossed the room to grab the dining-room chair he'd brought in earlier.

By the time he was back, Emily had composed herself again. But guilt still ate at her. Had she done the right thing? Was she prying into something that would hurt Devlin if he ever found out? Or was she actually on to something big, something that could change everything?

"You okay?" Devlin took a bite of one of the ham-and-cheese sandwiches.

"Um, yeah. Just a bit frazzled, I guess." She gave him a weak smile and grabbed a sandwich for herself, taking a big bite to discourage any further questions.

Devlin looked past her at the computer screen, his brow furrowing.

Emily turned to see what he was looking at. The autopsy photos, zoomed in on the odd cross-shaped bruises on Nancy and Hawley.

"Sorry." She quickly minimized the picture of Nancy.

Devlin didn't say anything, but the rest of the time they ate he seemed preoccupied.

Once they were finished eating, Devlin crossed to the whiteboard again to study the lists they'd made.

Emily clicked her e-mail, unsurprised that Tuck had already responded. He was a good detective, really good, and retrieving information from the prison's records would be easy-peasy for him, especially if he called in a favor or two. She opened the e-mail and started to scroll down to see what he'd sent her, but the e-mail was long, with lots of pictures pasted below. She scrolled back up to read what he'd written.

"Dev?" She looked over her shoulder.

"Hmm?" He was standing on the other side of the room, hands on hips, looking at the whiteboard, as if the answers would come to him if he just

stared hard enough.

“Does the name Joe Harper mean anything to you?”

He stiffened and slowly turned around to face her. “Why?”

Just one word, short, clipped, uttered in a voice so quiet she’d barely heard him, with a lethal undertone that sent shivers skittering down her spine.

She swallowed nervously and reminded herself she wasn’t his mark or his enemy. *Thank God*. “It’s in Tuck’s e-mail. Joe Harper is the one name on the prison visitor logs that’s common to all of our convicts.”

“Son of a bitch,” he whispered. He began pacing the room, every muscle tight and wound like a spring ready to explode.

“Devlin? Is Joe Harper an alias? What does it mean?”

He stopped a few feet away from her, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. “Years ago, Gage bought some land north of town that Nancy nicknamed Jackson’s Island because it’s surrounded by woods and perched in the middle of a sea of grass, reminding her of an island.”

“Jackson’s Island. Like in *Huckleberry Finn*?”

“Exactly. Nancy was fascinated by that story and took to calling Gage by one of the character’s names—Joe Harper.”

Emily listened to the whole story, including the part about how Kelly and Ace had teased Gage mercilessly about his new nickname.

“By the time Nancy grew tired of calling him that,” Devlin said, “Gage had gotten used to it and even thought it was funny. The few times we were on missions together, he used it as his alias, as a joke.” He shook his head. “I never thought he would hurt Nancy.”

“What about the others on the list? Could they know about this Joe Harper thing?”

“No. They never knew that story.” He looked past her at the computer screen, then froze. “What the hell is *that?*”

Emily turned around to see what he was talking about. Beneath the body of Tuck’s e-mail was a picture of a black stretch limousine. The rear door was open. Inside, a man with a beard and mustache appeared to be making room for another man who was getting into the vehicle.

“I’m not sure. I asked Tuck to send me pictures—”

“Of the man who killed Arianna?” The bitterness in his voice whipped against her like icy needles.

She sucked in a breath and turned around. “I’m so sorry, I—”

“Why did you do it? To satisfy your morbid curiosity? To see if I was telling the truth about what happened to her?”

The accusation in his eyes did little to mask the pain underneath.

“Devlin, please. I wasn’t trying to hurt you, or check up on you, or anything like that. I had a hunch about the case. I know it sounds lame, but someone connected to you in this current case uses ex-cons as helpers, and then I got to thinking that an ex-con was connected to you in another way, through Arianna. It just seemed . . . I don’t know, like too many coincidences, so I asked Tuck—”

“To look into my past?”

“What? No, no. I just asked him to pull any information he could find on the man who . . . killed her. *Not* out of morbid curiosity. I had a . . .” She flushed hot beneath his scrutiny, words failing her.

“You might as well tell me all of it,” he said. “There’s no point in stopping now. You had a what?”

She cleared her throat. “A theory,” she whispered. “I’m sure there’s nothing to it. It’s stupid, really, I just . . .” She laughed awkwardly. “I thought it was odd that you’d refused to join EXIT so you could be with Arianna, and then an ex-con came along and killed her. More or less removing any obstacles. And then you . . . signed up.”

The silence stretched between them, like an invisible barrier driving them farther and farther apart.

“Scroll down,” he said. “Tell me where that picture was taken. And when.”

Relieved to have something to do that didn’t involve him glaring at her, she clicked the mouse and scrolled a little farther down to see what Tuck said about the picture.

“It’s a prison photo, showing him leaving the day he was paroled.” According to the date of the photograph, three days later the man getting into the limousine would rape and murder Devlin’s fiancée.

Suddenly, he leaned past her and grabbed the mouse. He clicked the zoom button and enlarged the photo until it took up almost the entire screen.

“Why are you . . .” She stared at the image of the man inside the car, the one smiling at Arianna’s future killer. “My God, isn’t that—”

“Gage,” he spat, his voice dripping venom. He whirled around and strode out of the room.

Emily collapsed back in her chair. Usually, she felt a sense of victory and pride when her hunches panned out. Today, she felt none of that. It nearly killed her not to go to him. But she sensed he needed a few moments alone to deal with the feelings of anger, grief, and betrayal he must be going through. His best friend had arranged for his fiancée’s murder, all so he could use the carrot of killing her murderer to convince Devlin to join EXIT. And now, for reasons known only to himself, Gage had constructed an elaborate plan to frame Devlin for his own crimes. Why?

There should have been a feeling of closure once she’d solved the case. But instead, she felt only . . . confusion. As if there was more to this that they hadn’t considered.

A loud squeak sounded from the garage. The garage door was opening. It was too early for their homeowner to return. Wasn’t it? Then what—

Devlin! She jumped up from her chair and ran from the room through the family room to the garage. She shoved the door open just in time to see the back of their stolen SUV barreling down the street. With Devlin at the wheel.

He’d left her.

The blood drained from her face. She didn’t have to ask what he was doing. She knew. He was going after Gage to save Kelly and avenge the woman he’d loved, the woman he obviously still loved. He’d left her behind because . . . why? He was angry with her? No, he was too noble when it came to people he considered “innocents.” He’d left her here to protect her, so she wouldn’t get caught in the crossfire between him and Gage. Well, who was supposed to protect *him*, to watch his back? She stomped her foot in frustration and headed back inside the house to the office.

She sat down in the computer chair, not sure what to do next. Stay here and wait for Devlin to return? What if the owner of the house came home before Devlin got back? If he *was* coming back.

The phone on the computer desk suddenly rang, making her jump. She pressed her hand against her chest, half-convinced her heart was about to burst through her ribs. It rang two more times before the answering machine

clicked on and an unfamiliar voice told the caller to leave a message at the beep.

“Emily, pick up.”

Devlin? How had he known what number to call? Had he written it down while he was in the office, before she’d woken up? For that matter, how had he even gotten a phone to make the call? No, she didn’t want to know the answer to that. He’d probably lifted it from some unsuspecting teen walking down the sidewalk.

“Emily?”

She grabbed the phone. “Devlin, what are you doing? Come back and take me with you.”

“Not a chance. I want you there, safe, while I . . . take care of what needs to be taken care of. Don’t leave and don’t call anyone.” The line clicked.

“Devlin? Devlin!” She pulled the phone away and looked at the display on the machine. He’d hung up. She tried the callback feature on the phone, but he didn’t answer. He’d probably already destroyed the phone.

She shook her head while she erased the caller ID information before she even stopped to think about it. What was happening to her that the first thing she thought of was to destroy evidence and cover her tracks?

She sat at the computer again to finish reading Tuck’s e-mail. When she scrolled down to the bottom, she saw another picture Tuck had sent—the one used in the visitor badge by Joe Harper. Except that the first name was spelled differently than Tuck had typed it. The name on the badge read *Jo* Harper.

Emily’s eyes widened. She jumped up and ran to the stack of dossiers. She tore through them, looking for one in particular. In the back of her mind, she realized Arianna’s picture wasn’t with the dossiers anymore. Devlin must have pocketed it after making love to her and going into the office. She shook off her resentment and fanned the dossiers out more until she found the one she was looking for, the picture that matched the one on the prison ID badge.

And it wasn’t Gage Thomas.

She looked up at the whiteboard and read through the clues again. It was all coming together, all making sense now.

Victims beaten, bruised, no bones broken.

No sexual assault.

She held the dossier up and read the stats—six feet tall—the height Hawley had used to describe her attacker, an attacker who stayed in the shadows, covered their face, wore a hat.

And now she knew why.

It wasn't that hard to find the rest of the information she needed. A simple Internet search gave her the address where she was 99 percent convinced the killer would be waiting. It just made sense. If Devlin didn't come back soon, she'd be forced to call Tuck and tell him everything so he wouldn't turn her in or try to stop her. She hoped his partner loyalty would extend to helping her find and save Devlin.

She sat back and stared at the board again. The one last thing bugging her was motive. Why, after all these years, would Devlin suddenly be targeted in such an elaborate plot that had, based on the coroner's findings about the date of death of one of the skeletons in the basement, taken over a year to set up?

Wait. Was it really that long? Or a much shorter time frame? She shoved out of the chair and hurried over to the board. Using one of the markers, she drew a circle around Shannon Fisher's name in the victim column and around Carolyn Buchanan's jewelry in the clue column. Then she added two more entries onto the board—Montana and EXIT's newly enhanced security system. What did they all have in common?

Each event had happened four months ago.

She tossed the marker down and crossed her arms. It all made sense. The killer wasn't suddenly abducting and torturing people just to frame Devlin. Or at least Emily didn't think so. The pattern of behavior had probably been going on for years, meaning there were other victims out there no one had linked to the case yet. The killer was just using the same old established pattern as a tool to frame Devlin. And now Emily knew why.

Devlin thought his hacking into the EXIT databases had gone unnoticed, but Emily believed just the opposite. Someone inside the company had discovered that Devlin had broken into sensitive files, and they immediately closed the security loophole to prevent him from getting in again. At the same time, they sent him on a domestic mission—instead of out of the country—so he could still reasonably have had the opportunity to kill Shannon. As for Carolyn Buchanan's jewelry, that theft had also occurred

four months ago, probably to continue to paint the picture of an out-of-control enforcer. Or perhaps just to taunt Devlin and let him know someone was after him, even if he didn't know who or why.

She wished Devlin hadn't left so fast, or that she had a way to contact him and run her newest theories by him. With nothing left to do, she straightened the house, removing all signs that she and Devlin had been there, including cleaning out the coffeemaker. After discarding the trash bag of evidence in a big, green garbage can in the garage, she went back to wait in the office. She erased the search history on the computer and powered it down.

A few minutes later, someone knocked on the front door. It couldn't be Devlin. Not this fast. Could it?

Moving as quietly as she could, she hurried to the door and looked out the peephole. She blinked in surprise and pulled the door open. "Mr. Buchanan. Pierce. This is a surprise."

"Detective O'Malley. Imagine *my* surprise when Devil called me during a task force meeting—with your boss, I might add—and said he needed me to pick you up. But that I couldn't tell anyone. Because the two of you had broken into someone's house."

He crossed his arms and stared down at her. "How in the world did my crazy brother talk a detective into committing a B and E?"

"Trust me, it wasn't as hard the second time," she grumbled.

His eyes widened. "Excuse me?"

"Uh, maybe we should discuss this somewhere else. I assume that's your GTO parked out front? Give me a second. I have to grab something."

She left him standing with his mouth open as she ran back into the office. After grabbing the stack of dossiers, she gave the room one last look to make sure she hadn't missed anything, then ran back to the door.

Once they were on their way down the street, she asked, "So what exactly did Devlin tell you when he called?"

"Not much, other than admitting he broke into that house. He wants me to take you somewhere safe until he can call me again to explain."

She shook her head. "Change of plans. You're taking me to Devlin, or at least where I think he is."

He shot her a sharp glance. "Why?"

“Because he’s in danger.” She shuffled through the dossiers and pulled out two of them. “He thinks he knows who killed Shannon Fisher, among others.”

Pierce shot her a stunned look. “He knows the killer’s identity? And didn’t tell me? I’m on the task force.”

“I know.” She held up one of the pages. “He’s going after this man, Gage Thomas.” She put the page down and held up the second one she’d picked out.

He frowned. “How did you get that picture? That matches the sketch of one of the missing women, one of the victims.”

She shook her head. “No. Kelly Parker isn’t a victim. She’s the killer.”

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Chapter Twenty-Four

EMILY CHECKED THE loading of the backup pistol Pierce had grudgingly given her after she gave him a brief explanation of what was going on. He steered the GTO around a slow-moving car on the highway and then punched the gas.

"So why would this Kelly person use the Jo Harper alias? She had to know someone could pull the badge picture and would know it was a woman who'd visited those convicts."

"The badges are cheap throwaways you turn in when you leave and are destroyed. She might not have realized the prison keeps digital records of the pictures. I'm betting she thought only about the log and wanted to ensure she used an alias that wouldn't point back to her. And since she was framing Devlin, why not use an alias that one of his friends regularly used, just to trip him up?"

"Maybe. What was her connection to the prisoners? Do you know why she visited those specific men?"

"Some kind of profiling maybe? She knew she needed some muscle to do her dirty work so she could remain in the background. She could have done a little research to determine who was getting out of prison soon and met her qualifications—a proven track record of being violent but someone she could easily manipulate. Since the prisoners she visited were all friends, I figure she targeted one in particular and maybe he recommended the others to her. There's something else too, about convicts or ex-cons.

Devlin's fiancée was killed by a felon on parole. The man Devlin went after today was in a picture at the prison, picking up that ex-con before Arianna was killed. Since Kelly is comfortable using ex-cons as her henchmen, it wouldn't surprise me if she helped arrange Arianna's murder."

"This is a nightmare. Do you really expect me to believe my brother is an assassin?"

She shrugged. "All that matters is that we get there in time and make sure Devlin knows Kelly isn't a victim so he doesn't walk into a trap."

His knuckles whitened on the steering wheel. "It does explain a lot, like why he was wearing a gun the night of the fire, and why he never went to the hospital afterward to check on Austin and the others. I imagine he won't be happy that you told me all of this."

"I'm sure he'll be furious. Serves him right for leaving me behind."

He grinned. "I'm beginning to understand why my brother likes you so much. You certainly aren't boring."

She shoved the gun into the waistband of her jeans. "What makes you think he likes me?"

"It wasn't obvious the first time you were at Alex's house, the night you told us about Carolyn. But the night of the fire, I saw how he looked at you. He wouldn't have been that concerned if he didn't truly care about you. Why? Do you doubt it?"

"How's your father doing? And your brothers?"

"Changing the subject, huh? Point taken. Braedon's fine. He's already been released. Alex is doing great. The doctors are baffled about why he had a heart attack. There's no sign of any heart problems to explain it. They'll be monitoring him for a couple more days before he can go to my house or Matt's, wherever home will be until the house can be rebuilt."

Emily had a feeling Ace had done something to cause Alex's supposed heart attack, but she and Devlin had never had time to discuss that. They'd been too busy running for their lives, and trying to rescue a woman who didn't need rescuing.

"What about Austin? Devlin hasn't mentioned him since that night. I think he's trying not to think about him so it won't distract him from finding the killer, but I know he loves his brother very much."

His smile faded. "Austin is fighting for his life. He's at the burn center, still touch and go."

“I’m so sorry.”

He gave her a crisp nod. “How sure are you that Kelly Parker will be at this Jackson’s Island place? Or that where we’re going is the place you think it is?”

“Devlin said Jackson’s Island was north of town. I searched the property appraiser’s database online and this is the only place Gage owns in that location. As for why I think Kelly will be there, it just makes sense.”

“Because of the Jo Harper alias?”

“No. Because Kelly has already framed Devlin for killing Shannon and Nancy. It makes sense she’d finish up by framing him for his best friend’s murder. She knows about Jackson’s Island. And the remoteness makes it a perfect place for her purposes. All she has to do is call Gage and tell him some sob story about being held there and needing him to come to her rescue. He’ll walk into a trap.”

“Wait. Gage wouldn’t believe that since he lives there. He’d know that no one was holding Kelly hostage at his own house.”

“If he were living there, I’d agree with you. But according to his official address in the phone book, the Jackson’s Island location isn’t where he chooses to call home. Trust me—I’ve looked at this from every angle. This is what makes the most sense,” she said.

“And you think Devlin will go there too, looking for his friend Gage, the one he thinks is the killer.”

“Yes. Maybe not at first. Gage has several properties. But Devlin will eventually wind up there.”

“Well, let’s hope you’re right. And that we get there before my brother, so we can stop him. I still don’t feel right going in without backup. But you seem convinced Devlin wouldn’t want that. I can’t believe he’s still trying to protect the company he works for after they issued a contract on his life.”

Emily wasn’t so sure that Devlin was all that worried about protecting EXIT anymore. She honestly didn’t know where he stood on that. But she knew her main goal was to protect Devlin in every way—which meant keeping him alive *and* out of prison. If they brought cops in on this and caught Devlin trying to kill Gage, Devlin’s fate would be sealed.

She couldn’t help the wry smile that curved her lips. When had she crossed over the line so completely that she was actually trying to protect a man on the wrong side of the law?

Pierce turned down another side road. They were pretty far outside of town now and surrounded mostly by trees.

“How did Devlin get sucked into this?” he said, obviously still struggling to come to terms with what she’d told him. “The brother I grew up with never would have agreed to become a hired assassin.”

She wanted to brag to him about Devlin’s accomplishments, about how many people he’d saved over the years. But it didn’t feel right to tell Pierce all of that. It needed to come from Devlin, in his own words.

“Your brother is an honorable, good man. Don’t judge him until you know the facts.”

“Good advice, Detective. I’ll wait to hear the explanations from my brother.”

“Since we’re about to put our lives on the line together, maybe you could call me Emily?”

He smiled. “Ditto.”

“You want me to call you Emily too?” she teased.

“Uh, no. Pierce will do just fine. You know, you sound pretty certain about his character for someone who’s known him for . . . what, only a few days?”

She shook her head in wonder. “It doesn’t feel like just a few days.”

He slowed for a sharp curve. Trees crowded in close on both sides of what was quickly becoming little more than a one-car path through the woods. “Any idea why this Kelly Parker went to so much trouble to set him up? Why is she trying to destroy him?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it? I have no idea.”

As for her theory that Devlin would wind up here, the proof was the SUV sitting on the side of the long gravel driveway Pierce had just turned down. The driver’s door was open and the back window had been shot out.

“He beat us here. And he’s already been in a gunfight. We might be too late,” Pierce said.

“Not necessarily. That window was shot out when I was with him earlier today.”

He winced and stopped the GTO beside the SUV, beneath the thick canopy of trees. Behind them, the woods stretched on seemingly forever. In front of them, nearly a full football field away, an enormous, two-story

white farmhouse squatted amid acres and acres of knee-high green grass blowing in the warm breeze.

Emily studied the trees on either side of the GTO as she pulled out her pistol. “There’s no way to get to the house without being seen. This is going to be tricky.”

“A frontal assault could be suicide. It looks like the woods are closer to the house on the back side. That will provide more cover and less ground to cross if we have to run for it. If we split up, we can both perform reconnaissance and compare notes once we meet around back. Sound good?”

“Better than any plan I’ve got. See you on the other side.”

DEVLIN’S PAINSTAKINGLY SLOW belly crawl through the grass had finally gotten him within twenty feet of the front porch. Since no one had shot at him yet, he figured he’d been successful in not being seen. Thanks to a stop outside of town to pick up one of his stashed go bags in the wall of an abandoned house, at least he had the tools he needed to get the job done—including a pistol and another knife to replace the one he’d lost earlier. He trained his binoculars on the window on the right corner of the second story, where all the action was taking place.

From a distance, Gage’s house had looked deserted, but Devlin had shimmied halfway up a tall tree to see what he was about to get in to. After watching each window for a few minutes at a time, he’d focused on that last window and had seen both what he’d expected and dreaded to see: Kelly, sitting on the floor, her hands tied to a bedpost, her face bruised, blood running from cuts all over her body.

And Gage, pacing in front of her, holding a gun.

What puzzled Devlin was that Gage was almost as bruised and battered-looking as Kelly. Had Gage been keeping her somewhere else after abducting her and only recently moved her to this location? If so, maybe Kelly had managed to get loose from her bonds long enough to get a weapon and the two of them had fought before Gage got her tied up again. It was the only thing that made sense, given the evidence in front of him.

Judging by the cold fury on Gage's face, Kelly wouldn't last much longer. Devlin had timed his movements through the grass with Gage's pacing, stopping every time Gage passed in front of the window. Now he was a short run from his goal. He checked his knife, sheathed on his belt, and his pistol, holstered at his waist, to make sure he hadn't lost them during the crawl through the grass. Then he pulled his lockpick out of his pocket and waited. Gage passed the window again. Devlin jumped up and ran for the porch.

EMILY'S FINGERNAILS CUT into the bark of a tree as she watched Devlin's mad dash from the tall grass to the front porch. He must have stopped to pick up his tools of the trade before coming here because he picked the lock on the door in a matter of seconds and disappeared into the house.

Above him, on the second floor, someone kept pacing in front of the window on the far right corner. But since Emily was in the woods on the left side of the house now, she was too far away to tell if it was a man or a woman. Was Gage inside? Kelly? Devlin would be on guard against Gage, but he didn't know to watch out for Kelly, that she wasn't the victim she'd pretended to be. Somehow Emily had to warn him.

She should keep circling around to the back as agreed and meet up with Pierce. But knowing Devlin was already inside had her feeling desperate. What was the point of being cautious if it meant not reaching him in time to help him?

If she took off running right now, how long would it take her to cross through the knee-high grass? The whole time she was running, she'd be vulnerable, exposed. Anyone looking out a window would see her. Belly crawling like Devlin had would take far too long.

"Pierce," she called out in a voice barely above a whisper. She wasn't sure how sound might carry out here and didn't want to alert whoever was inside the house. "Pierce?"

No answer. He must still be too far away to hear her. She wasn't willing to wait any longer. She'd have to make a run for it and take her chances.

She had just started to step past the line of trees when a loud crack sounded off to her left. Jerking back, she crouched down, sweeping her

pistol out in front of her.

DEVLIN CREPT DOWN the upstairs hallway with his pistol in his hand, stopping at each door to listen before moving to the next. He carefully edged around a decorative, granite-topped table and hugged the wall again. So far, he hadn't encountered anyone else in the house, but he was on the alert in case Gage had any of his ex-con friends lurking around. Or Ace. Anything was possible. But at least he didn't have to worry about Emily. He knew she was safe and out of harm's way, being protected by Pierce.

Muted voices sounded from behind the closed door at the end of the hall, but he couldn't make out any words. He crept closer until he was just outside the door. Leaning back against the wall, he held his gun pointed up at the ceiling while he reached for the doorknob beside him.

"No, Gage, don't!" Kelly screamed.

The dull thud of a fist smashing against flesh and bone reverberated through the room.

Kelly's scream turned into a gurgle and a moan.

Devlin grimaced but didn't go inside. Not yet. He wouldn't do her any good if he were dead. Running in blindly, without knowing where Gage was standing, would be a foolish move. Steeling himself against Kelly's whimpers of pain, he slowly, methodically, twisted the doorknob a fraction at a time, until it wouldn't turn any farther.

Footsteps echoed hollowly against the wood floor, approaching the door. Had Gage heard him, or seen the knob turning? Devlin froze, not moving, barely breathing, waiting, listening. The footsteps moved away from the door.

He slowly let out a pent-up breath. No, Gage hadn't heard him. He was pacing, probably going back and forth in front of the window again, which only proved how agitated, how unpredictable he was in his current state of mind. He was ignoring one of the most basic training tenets all enforcers lived by: stay away from the windows. If Devlin had carried a rifle with him, and if he'd been so inclined, he could have picked Gage off with one well-aimed bullet all the way back at the tree line. But he didn't have a rifle. And he wasn't so inclined.

He wanted to look Gage in the eye when he killed him.

After seeing the picture of Gage picking up Arianna's killer at the prison, Devlin had been consumed with raw fury. All he'd wanted to do was find his former friend and avenge his murdered fiancée. But that had lasted only as long as it had taken to pull out of the garage. As soon as he started driving down the street, all he could think about was Emily. He'd left her alone once before, in the bunker, and it had nearly cost her her life.

He'd immediately called her to make sure she didn't leave. And then, even though he'd made it a personal crusade never to involve his family in anything related to EXIT, he'd once again called Pierce. There was no one else he trusted enough to keep Emily safe. Then he'd spent the next ten minutes feeling guilty that he was thinking about Emily when it was Arianna's memory he should have been honoring, now that he knew the horrible truth about her death.

Stop it. Don't get distracted. Focus on the task at hand.

It was quiet inside again, except for the sound of Gage pacing. Devlin timed each footfall, counted the steps. Ten steps, turn. Ten steps, turn. He began to push the door open, slowly, timed with Gage's pacing. Ten steps, *push*, turn. Ten steps, *push*, turn. Seconds ticked by like minutes until the door stood open a full inch.

Just as carefully as he'd turned the knob before, he gradually turned the knob back the other way, then gently pulled his hand back. So far, no noises to alert Gage. And no had noticed the slightly open door.

He leaned down and pressed his face close to the opening. Gage was mumbling to himself, holding his pistol down by his side. Kelly was sitting on the floor, her wrists tied with a white nylon rope to the bed's footboard. Her jeans were ripped and torn, with dark stains that were probably blood. Her shirt—what was left of it—hung in shreds around her waist, leaving her in only a bra. The red welts on her stomach and arms told Devlin exactly why her shirt was shredded even before he saw the whip lying on the floor a few feet away.

What he saw sickened him and settled like a cold, hard knot in his gut. He'd never known Gage to be particularly cruel before. But then again, had he ever really known him? This man—who'd pretended to be his friend for well over a decade—had begun that friendship with a betrayal so heinous,

so evil, that it defied understanding, and brought up questions Devlin had never thought would cross his mind.

Like whether Gage had acted alone when he'd had Arianna killed.

Like whether Carolyn had been murdered instead of dying in a car crash, all so Gage could hurt his family, dig the knife a little deeper.

Worst of all, Devlin still didn't know why Gage would hate him enough to even want to hurt his family.

Gage stopped his nervous pacing just past the window, turned to face Kelly, and slowly raised his gun.

Devlin shoved the door open and ran inside. "Drop it!"

Gage whirled toward him.

Kelly let out a startled yelp.

Devlin pulled the trigger. The shot was nearly deafening in the confined space, echoing against the walls and wood floor. The blast sent Gage's gun flying across the room, skittering across the floor and stopping beneath the window. He screamed in agony, falling to his knees and clutching what was left of the bloody stump that had once been his hand.

His screams turned to whimpers as Devlin crossed the room and stopped in front of him. Gage's pain-glazed eyes begged for the mercy he'd never given Arianna. He blubbered and sobbed, clumsily clutching his ruined hand against his chest.

"Devlin," he choked out, "please—"

Devlin backhanded him with the butt of his gun. Bones crunched. Gage whirled around in a circle before crashing to the floor. His guttural screams filled the air. Devlin slowly crouched in front of him.

Mucus ran down from Gage's broken nose, mixing with the blood on his torn lips. One of his front teeth had been knocked at a crazy angle and protruded through one of the cuts on his upper lip.

"Pweeze," he choked, barely able to form a word. "Pweeze."

Devlin pressed the bore of his pistol between his former friend's eyes. "Just tell me one thing, Gage. Did Cyprian tell you to hire that bastard to kill Arianna or did you decide that on your own?"

His eyes widened. If he'd been afraid before, now he looked terrified. He squeezed his eyes shut, as if he knew what was about to happen, and broke down into wailing sobs, cradling his shattered hand as if it were a baby.

Devlin pulled the pistol back and shoved it into Gage's mouth so hard it rammed against the back of his throat.

He made choking, gagging noises, his one good arm flailing against Devlin's chest, feebly trying to push him away.

"Did Cyprian give the orders?"

Bloody saliva dribbled down his chin. "*Uwes, uwes,*" he gurgled.

Devlin pulled his gun out of Gage's mouth and wiped the barrel clean on Gage's pants. "Was that a yes? Cyprian gave the orders?"

He nodded vigorously, spittle dripping down in a long string to his shirt.

Kelly made a choking sound.

Devlin glanced at her. He'd been so furious and focused on making Gage confess his role in Arianna's death that he'd forgotten about Kelly. Her eyes were wide with fright, her face so pale it was translucent. Her body shook as she stared at Gage, who'd sunk to the floor, blubbering and moaning.

The stink of blood and sweat and urine filled the room. Kelly's terrified gaze locked on Devlin now. She seemed more afraid of him than of the man who'd whipped her and tied her to the bed. While she stared in fright at Devlin, Gage lay in a puddle of his own piss, brokenly sobbing the name of his dead sister.

Devlin slowly lowered himself to the floor and dropped his face in his hands. The haze of anger drained away, leaving nothing but a hollow, empty space inside him, and one thought running through his head over and over and over.

What would Emily think of him if she saw him now?

Would she trace her fingers over his tattoos and tell him how she admired him, that he was a good man? No. She would say he was no better than the men he'd killed, that he was kidding himself thinking he did what he did to save others, that inside, he was no better than any of them.

And she'd be right.

"Devlin?" Kelly's soft voice called to him hesitantly, as if she was afraid he'd hurt her if she spoke above a whisper.

God, how he despised himself right now.

He holstered his pistol and squatted down in front of her. Her eyes were wide, wary.

He tried to smile, to reassure her, but he didn't have any smiles left. "I'm not going to hurt you. You've been through a lot, haven't you? I'm sorry I didn't find you sooner. But everything's going to be okay now."

He unsheathed the knife at his waist and sliced through the ropes binding her wrists to the bed. Reaching up, he tugged a blanket down to wrap around her bare shoulders.

She smiled her thanks and gathered the blanket close.

"Can you stand?" he asked.

In answer, she pushed herself to her feet, surprising him with her strength after what she must have gone through.

"Where's the other woman?" Devlin asked. "Is she tied up in one of the other rooms?"

She gave him a look of alarm. "Other woman?"

"The woman who escaped, Virginia Hawley, said there were three other women being held captive. That would have been you, Nancy, and someone else. Am I wrong?"

"Oh, uh, no. There *was* another woman. Poor thing."

She waved a hand toward Gage, who had pulled himself to a sitting position and scooted away from the puddle, closer to the wall.

"He killed her, just this morning. It was . . . awful. So awful." She shuddered.

Devlin tensed. Something wasn't right. Something was . . . off.

"Yancy, Kelwee keel Yancy."

Kelly shot Gage an irritated look and grabbed the rope Devlin had just cut off her. "He's twisted and crazy," she spat. "I'll tie him up so he can't hurt anyone else."

"I hardly think that's necessary."

"Trust me. It is. He's still dangerous. I'll tie his good wrist to the bed." She looped one end of the rope around the footboard in the same spot where she'd been tied and quickly made a knot. She took the other end and started toward Gage.

Devlin stared at the knot. The same fancy knot she'd tried to teach him years ago. What had she called it? A double overhand knot. The way the rope crossed over itself created an *X* shape.

Or, if you turned it sideways, a cross.

His eyes widened. He went for his gun a second too late. Kelly yanked it out of the holster and scrambled back, aiming his own gun at him.

“Sorry, Dev. I got a little sloppy with my extracurricular activities and needed a fall guy.”

He stared at her, stunned. He’d been so sure Gage was the one behind everything. Not once had he considered that Kelly might be faking her own abduction. Until he saw that damn knot. He fisted his hands beside him.

“Extracurricular activities? Shannon? Nancy? Is that how you get your kicks these days? Beating and torturing other women and then killing them? Why, because they’re weaker than you and can’t fight back? That’s what all of this was about?”

Her eyes narrowed. “My *kicks*? You always did think you were better than me. Judging what you could never understand.”

He waved toward Gage, who was scooting back toward the window as if to get as far away from Kelly as possible. “You came here to kill him and pin that on me too, didn’t you? But you couldn’t resist a little sick, twisted fun first. You kept him tied up, beat him, but he broke loose. That’s why you were tied up when I got here, isn’t it? That’s why you said he’s dangerous.”

“If you’re expecting a confession, you’re wasting your breath.” Her hands tightened around the gun.

“Hold it,” Devlin said, trying to buy some time as he inched a little closer. “Are you saying you framed me for your kills, for what? To keep from getting into trouble with our boss?”

“He was getting suspicious.” She shrugged. “I needed a fall guy.”

“You expect me to believe that you went to such elaborate lengths to make me look guilty just so you wouldn’t be declared rogue? I’m not so sure Cyprian would ever declare you a rogue, no matter what you’d done. He adores you too much for that.”

She snorted. “You give me far too much credit. Even I’m not immune from Cyprian’s reprisals.”

Something flickered in her eyes, telling him she was lying. Did Cyprian know about her fetish for beating and killing other women? Had he turned a blind eye? If so, then why draw attention to her kills by trying to make it look like Devlin was the one killing the women?

“If you wanted me dead, why not just kill me outright? It would have been a lot simpler.”

“Right. And have every enforcer in EXIT trying to figure out who killed you? I wouldn’t have lasted a week. I needed to make you look so bad no one would care when you died.”

Devlin raised a brow. “So you decided to frame me, make it look like I was the one guilty of your sick crimes.”

“My sick crimes?” she spat. “What about your crimes? Hacking into the EXIT databases? Did you really think you could get away with that?” Her eyes widened with dismay. She obviously hadn’t intended to tell him that.

The ramifications of what she’d just said stunned him. “Kelly, all I did was download dossiers so I could do my job better, with less risk. Are you saying there’s something else in the EXIT databases worth killing me over? What exactly is Cyprian hiding?”

“You’ll never know, will you?” She tilted the gun up toward his head.

He slammed his left fist up beneath her right arm so he could wrench her gun away. Just before he could make contact, she danced back and whirled around, slamming the side of her leg against his ribs. His Kevlar vest took the brunt of her kick, but the force of the blow still sent him staggering back several feet. He gritted his teeth and inched his hand, ever so slowly, toward his waist.

Kelly laughed. “Really, Devlin? Did you think I’d forgotten that little trick of yours? Knock my arm and grab my gun?” She bounced on the balls of her feet like a boxer, ready to go another round. “Don’t you have any new moves?”

“Why don’t you toss the gun away and find out?”

Just a little more. His hand was almost in position.

She waggled her pistol. “You’re afraid I’ll shoot? My, my. Big, bad Devlin afraid of a woman. Or is it something else? Maybe your precious rule you threw in my face years ago—never hurt a woman?”

He unsheathed his knife and threw it in one smooth motion.

She screamed and staggered against the bed, clutching at the hilt of his knife buried in her abdomen.

“It’s more of a guideline than a rule.” Devlin rushed toward her.

She swung the pistol toward him again.

Bam! The front of her chest exploded in a bloody mess that would have made a horror movie fan cringe. She flopped end over end like a rag doll to land in a lifeless, crumpled heap by the door.

Stunned, Devlin looked past her to the other side of the room. Gage was on his knees under the window, holding a pistol, the same one Devlin had shot out of his hand earlier. Damn. Devlin had allowed Kelly to distract him or he would have retrieved the gun instead of forgetting about it. He tensed, prepared to lunge at him, but Gage dropped the pistol to the floor and pushed himself to his feet.

"Kelwee keel Yancy," he said, repeating his earlier mantra.

Now Devlin understood.

"Kelly killed Nancy, right? That's what you're trying to say?"

He nodded, tears flowing down his swollen cheeks. "Sawwee kill Erweannah. Sawwee Ace fire."

Sorry kill Arianna. Sorry Ace fire.

Because of Gage, his fiancée had died a horrible death. And because Gage had thought that Devlin had killed Nancy, he'd sicced Ace on Devlin's family, nearly destroying them. Devlin should hate him, but at that moment all he felt was pity.

Emily had ruined him as an enforcer.

"Come on. Let's get you to a hospital."

Pitiful relief flashed across Gage's face and he tried to smile, like an abused puppy begging its master for a kind word or a pat on the head. But the bloody, gap-toothed attempt just made his battered face look gruesome.

Devlin had never hated himself more than he did at this moment.

He started forward.

The glass in the window behind Gage shattered with a loud *boom*.

His head exploded like a too-ripe watermelon and his lifeless body dropped to the floor.

Devlin dove down as another shot sliced through the air, burying itself in the wall above him. Crouching down, he swiped his gun back from Kelly and yanked his knife out of her body. He scrambled on all fours into the hallway, flipped the granite-topped table on its side, and ducked behind it.

Silence reigned inside the house once again. He should get out, run for the cover of the trees before whoever was shooting at him cornered him in here. But he couldn't move. Not yet. He just needed . . . one . . . damn . . .

minute. He drew his knees up and rested his head against the wall behind him.

Kelly had earned what had happened to her. Her death didn't bother him, except that he was still left with unanswered questions—like just what exactly Cyprian was hiding that was worth killing for. No, he wasn't sad Kelly was gone. She'd paid for her crimes. But Gage . . . He squeezed his eyes shut, but that didn't block out the image of Gage's last, horrific moments on this earth, and Devlin's role in those moments.

In spite of everything Gage had done, seeing him die that way after what Devlin had put him through had grief and shame welling up inside him. He allowed himself another minute before he ruthlessly bottled his emotions up and locked them tightly away. Later, he would grieve and swear and probably break something. But right now, he needed to focus on surviving. Because someone outside wanted him dead.

And he had a pretty good idea who. Ace.

He crept down the hall toward the stairs. Halfway down, a high-pitched, agonized scream cut through the silence outside. It was far away, so far that he'd barely heard it, but what he had heard made his blood run cold. No, it couldn't be her. She was back in town, safe, under guard. Wasn't she?

He practically flew down the stairs, taking them two at a time until he was flat against the wall by the open front door, waiting, listening.

The scream sounded again, driving like a knife straight to his heart.

Oh, God. Please, no. Not Emily too.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

THE ACHE IN Emily's shoulders from having her arms tied to the tree behind her was nothing compared to the throbbing pain of the burns on the side of her face. Where was her tormentor now? Was Ace hiding in the trees on the opposite side of the clearing? Waiting for Devlin to try to rescue her, so he could kill him?

She still couldn't believe he'd gotten the drop on her back by the house. She'd been so intent on getting to Devlin that she hadn't paid attention to the woods around her until it was too late. Ace had grabbed her gun, tied her to a tree, and made her watch as he aimed his rifle toward the same window where she'd seen movement earlier.

Moments later, he'd fired. The resulting smile on his face had terrified her that he'd shot Devlin. But then he'd suddenly lowered the rifle, his face contorted in fury as he swung it violently against a nearby tree, cracking the wooden body of the gun. He'd pitched the ruined weapon down and glared at her.

There was only one reason Emily could think of for him to be that mad. The *second* shot was meant for Devlin, but for some reason Devlin was no longer in range. She couldn't help the smile that had curved her lips.

And then he'd pulled out the lighter.

She hadn't wanted to scream, figuring he wanted to use her to draw Devlin out. But willpower alone wasn't enough to keep her silent when the white-hot agony exploded across her nerve endings. He'd dragged her back

through the trees, deeper into the woods to this clearing, and tied her up again. And then he'd disappeared.

Did he think Devlin would follow her trail to this clearing? Did he hope to shoot Devlin in the back while he bent down to untie her?

The Buchanan family had suffered so much these past few days. Were they doomed to suffer another more permanent loss? The loss of Devlin? Hot tears tracked down her cheeks. But they weren't tears of pain. They were tears of anguish and fear for a man who mattered far more to her than she'd ever have thought possible a few days ago.

The hairs on her arms suddenly stood on end, her skin prickling with alarm. Something was wrong. The birds, the insects, even the warm breeze had stopped, as if the forest knew a predator was close by. Devlin. He was here. She sensed it in her heart, her soul. Somewhere under the cover of trees and bushes he was watching her.

Don't come for me. If you try to help me, he'll kill you. Stay away.

Suddenly, Devlin burst into the clearing. He moved so fast he was a blur, dropping to the ground in a tumbling roll as a hail of bullets rained down from one of the branches above him. He whirled around on his knees, firing his pistol up into the trees.

A crashing, cracking noise followed by a solid whump told Emily that Ace had jumped or fallen from his perch.

Devlin raced toward her, pistol in one hand, knife in the other. He dropped to his knees and cleanly sliced through the ropes binding her to the tree and immediately turned around, shooting his pistol in a deadly arc across the other side of the clearing. He hauled Emily to her feet as he continued to fire.

"Run, Em!"

Needing no further encouragement, she took off for the trees behind them while Devlin ran backward, firing to protect her flight until they were almost at the tree line. He turned and grabbed her, shoving her behind a tree as another volley of gunshots boomed across the clearing.

He hissed and arched back as he fell to the ground.

Emily jumped out from the cover of trees, grabbed his gun, and fired back toward the clearing to cover him. *Bam! Bam! Bam!*

"Dev, can you get behind the trees?" She fired her pistol again.

“Damn it, Emily,” he growled. He grabbed her by the waist and yanked her behind the tree with him.

She blinked in surprise to find him standing with his back to the tree with her facing him, pressed against him. She smiled, almost giddy with relief.

“You’re okay. I thought he shot you.”

His eyes widened and he grabbed her arm.

She looked down, and her face flushed hot to see him turning her gun away from his stomach. She’d totally forgotten she was holding it. Again.

“I suck at this,” she grumbled as he took the gun from her.

“No, you don’t. I took a bullet to the vest, but if you hadn’t laid cover fire, he might have hit me somewhere more vital. You did good, Em.” He gently forced her chin up. She knew the exact moment he saw her burns because the look on his face sent a shiver of dread straight down her spine. She would never want to be his enemy.

“That bastard is going to pay for hurting you. You must be in terrible pain. Are you injured anywhere else?”

“Just my face. I’m okay. Did you see Pierce anywhere when you were looking for me? We were supposed to meet in the woods at the back of the house, but Ace found me first.”

His knuckles whitened around the grip of his pistol. “No. I’ll find him. And give him hell for bringing you here. But I’ll have to take out Ace first.” He grabbed a magazine clip from his pocket and put it into hers. Then he shoved the pistol into her hand.

“Wait, what are you doing? Do you have another gun?”

“I’ve got this.” He patted the lethal-looking knife sheathed at his waist, the one he’d used to slice her ropes. “And I’ve got you as my backup. What could go wrong?”

He winked and leaned down to kiss her. The throbbing pain of her burns faded as his lips worked their magic, so soft, so sweet, so achingly gentle because he was trying not to brush up against her burns. He ended the kiss and before she opened her eyes again, he was gone.

Her shock quickly turned to frustration. How could she back him up if he kept leaving her behind? The man had no clue how to be a partner, or how to accept help from anyone else. He’d been a loner for far too long. It was high time he learned how to let someone else help him.

She knew firsthand how ruthless and violent Ace could be. So she wasn't going to sit and cower while Devlin risked his life for her. Or while Pierce lay somewhere hurt. But she wasn't going to run into the middle of anything either. She couldn't let fear or adrenaline control her. She had to stay calm, focused, and think things through.

Clutching the gun down by her side, she carefully made her way through the woods, looking and listening for anything that could tell her Ace or Devlin's location.

A shout sounded from the two o'clock position. She twisted to the right, toward the noise, aiming her pistol in a steady, two-handed grip.

Suddenly, Ace and Devlin crashed through the bushes a few feet ahead of her, their arms wrapped around each other like two grizzlies fighting for control. They staggered into the clearing.

Emily hurried after them, both hands wrapped around her pistol, arms bent with the muzzle pointed straight up but ready to use if she got an opening. Her stomach dropped when she saw the gun holstered at Ace's side. Devlin's knife was sheathed. The men must have surprised each other in the woods, and neither of them had been able to go for their weapons.

With their similar heights and muscular builds, neither seemed to be able to get the advantage as they strained against each other, grappling for control. Their grunts and curses echoed through the clearing. Devlin's biceps bulged as he shoved a hand beneath Ace's chin and slowly pressed his head back at an awkward angle.

Ace suddenly twisted, breaking Devlin's hold. Ace shoved him back with one hand while he clawed for his gun with the other.

They were too close together. Emily couldn't risk a shot.

"Devlin, gun at your nine o'clock!"

Devlin dropped his legs out from under him, throwing Ace off-balance. He fell on top of Devlin, the gun skittering across the ground. They shoved apart and both came up in a crouch, facing each other.

"Damn you, Buchanan. I should have killed you a long time ago, when you tried to have me thrown out of EXIT." Ace threw a punch at Devlin's jaw, but he ducked out of the way.

Devlin slammed his fist into Ace's belly, doubling him over. He followed with an uppercut to the jaw that threw Ace backward. But when

Devlin dove toward him, Ace scrambled out of the way and backhanded Devlin with a two-fisted hold.

Emily clutched the gun, biting her bottom lip. She wanted to shout at Devlin, to tell him to move, to get away from Ace, to let her help him. But she said none of those things. She couldn't risk distracting him and giving Ace an advantage.

Devlin roared like a caged bull and charged at Ace, wrapping his arms around him and sending both of them crashing to the ground again. The two men pummeled each other with their fists, grunting and shouting. Every time one of them seemed to be winning, the other would twist away or force him back.

The gun was useless with them this close. If Emily was going to help Devlin, she needed a different weapon. She shoved the gun in her waistband and ran from the clearing, digging behind bushes, searching for something, anything she could use to help. There, a broken branch on the ground, long and thick like a baseball bat. The thought of actually hitting someone with it sickened her, but if it meant saving Devlin, that's what she would do. She quickly stripped off the smaller branches and ran with her makeshift club.

They were on their feet again, slower than before, chests heaving. Both of them sported swollen eyes and cheeks. Blood ran down the side of Ace's face from a cut on his forehead.

Ace suddenly dove for his pistol, lying on the ground. Devlin jumped on top of him, but not before Ace got his hands on the gun. They wrestled for control. Ace twisted the barrel higher, toward Devlin's head.

Emily raised her tree branch and hurried toward them. But before she could take a swing, Devlin suddenly pitched forward, slamming against Ace's shoulder. The gun disappeared between the two men.

Emily jumped out of the way.

Devlin worked his knees up between the two of them and gave a powerful shove, knocking Ace backward, putting daylight between them again. He immediately grabbed the wicked-looking hunting knife from its sheath and reared back, both hands wrapped around the knife's hilt.

At the same time, Emily dropped her branch and grabbed for her gun.

But Ace was already whirling around toward Devlin, his pistol in his hand again. Devlin plunged the knife into Ace's left thigh. The pistol fired harmlessly into the trees above but did nothing to block out the agonized

sound of Ace's scream. The gun dropped from Ace's hand as he arched off the ground.

Devlin twisted the knife, making Ace scream even louder, before jerking it out of Ace's thigh with a wet, sucking sound that had Emily's stomach clenching. Devlin held it over his head, both hands wrapped around the hilt, ready to deal a lethal blow.

"Wait!" Emily and Ace both yelled at the same time.

"Devlin," Emily begged, "please, don't do this. He's unarmed. Killing him now isn't self-defense. It's cold-blooded murder."

"It's justice," Devlin growled. He raised the knife higher.

"Wait," Ace cried out again. He gasped and clutched his thigh. "Wait. If you let me go, I give you my word of honor that I'll never go after anyone in your family again. Or the cop. I'll leave her alone too. I swear."

Devlin laughed without humor. "Your word of honor? You gave up all honor when you went after my family in the first place. Your word is no good to me."

"If you kill me, your brother dies," Ace yelled. "He's hurt. You'll never find him in time without my help."

Devlin hesitated. "You lie," he snarled.

"No, no. I'm telling the truth." He grimaced, his face blanching.

Emily didn't think Ace was lying. Apparently, neither did Devlin because he lowered the knife.

He dropped to his knees, straddled Ace's chest, and held the knife against his throat, pressing so hard that blood ran down his neck. Ace hissed and tilted his head back, trying to escape the pressure.

"Where is he?" Devlin demanded. "Tell me or you die."

"That's not how it works," he said through clenched teeth. "Help me. Bind my wound before I bleed out. Then I'll show you where he is."

Devlin pressed the knife harder.

Ace gasped and writhed against the ground. Lines of blood ran down from beneath Devlin's knife.

Emily couldn't stand by and watch Devlin torture Ace, no matter what the man had done. She ran up beside Devlin and pointed her pistol at Ace.

"You can let him go now. I've got him covered. He can't get away."

Devlin suddenly grabbed her pistol, wrenching it out of her grasp. To her horror, he jammed the gun into Ace's mouth. Ace let out a guttural moan,

his face contorting in pain.

“Where is he?” Devlin demanded.

“Please,” Emily begged. “Don’t do this. It’s not right.”

His cold, dark gaze bore into hers. “What’s not right is my baby brother lying in a hospital bed in agonizing pain, fighting for his life. What’s not right is my father nearly dying, and losing everything he worked for his entire life. What’s not right is this bastard hurting *you* to get to me. Don’t ask me to politely question him like you would, Emily. You’re asking too much.”

“Would Alex, or Pierce, or even Austin want you to do this on their behalf?” she whispered. “Because I sure don’t.”

He stiffened. The answer was there in his eyes. *No*. His father and brother had dedicated their lives to upholding the law. Neither of them would approve of treating a prisoner this way.

“Please, Dev. Don’t. For *me,* don’t.”

He stared at her for a long time, resentment and anger waging a war across his face. He finally blew out a deep breath, and Emily knew she’d won.

Or had she just lost everything?

He looked down at Ace.

His eyes were glazed with pain, but he must have sensed the subtle shift and known he’d been given a reprieve because he suddenly smiled around the bore of the gun. Blood painted his teeth red, giving him a horrifying appearance, as if the devil himself had emerged from the gates of hell to punish his adversaries.

“Where is he?” Devlin asked again.

In spite of the gun jammed between his teeth, Ace slowly moved his head left and right, letting Devlin know he wasn’t going to tell him unless Devlin met his demands.

Devlin yanked the gun out of Ace’s mouth with as much force as when he’d shoved it in. Ace let out a shout of pain and rage and grabbed his bleeding mouth with both hands.

“Emily,” Devlin said, his voice cold as he climbed to his feet, “hold the gun on him. If he moves, shoot him. In the head.” He handed her the gun, slippery with Ace’s blood.

Ace narrowed his eyes, his hatred like a living, breathing thing, palpable in the air between them. Emily stood out of reach of Ace's hands and feet and waited to see what Devlin would do next.

He yanked his shirt off, revealing the Kevlar vest beneath, scarred and torn from the bullets it had stopped, reminding Emily of how close he'd come to being killed by the very man she'd just asked him to save. He used his knife to cut strips of cloth from his shirt and shoved Ace's leg up so he could bind the wound.

Ace sucked in a breath and cursed in what sounded like a dozen different languages. Devlin pulled the strips tight without any apparent concern for the extra pain he was causing his adversary by being so rough. He shot a glance at Emily, as if daring her to say something.

She pursed her lips and remained silent.

He finished his task and sat back. "I thought I shot you back by the ambulance."

"Flesh wound," Ace whispered, his voice ragged. "I thought I shot *you*."

"Nope," Devlin lied. "Missed completely."

Ace laughed, blood spitting out of his mouth. "Liar."

"Where's my brother?" Devlin demanded.

"East. I'll show you. But you'll have to carry me." He waved toward his leg. "I can't walk like this."

Devlin hauled him to his feet. "Sure you can." He shoved Ace toward the trees.

Ace stumbled but managed to stay upright. He glared his hatred at Devlin before limping out of the clearing.

Without a word, Devlin took his gun from Emily and walked behind Ace.

"Hurry up." Devlin shoved his gun in Ace's back, pushing him forward.

"Bastard," Ace bit out, stumbling again and nearly falling.

The burns on Emily's face throbbed and ached, and yet she couldn't help the sympathy that welled inside her each time Ace sucked in a sharp breath or tried to lean against a tree for support, only to be prodded forward by Devlin's gun against his spine.

"The rope he used to tie me up is still back in the clearing," she said. "We could use my shirt to rig a stretcher for—"

"No." Devlin's clipped reply left no room for argument.

When they reached the gravel road where Devlin and Pierce had both parked their vehicles, Ace waved toward the SUV. “He’s in there, in the back.”

Devlin shoved him out of the way. “You could have told me that back in the clearing.”

Ace grabbed a small sapling, clinging to it for support as he glared at Devlin’s retreating back. As if sensing Emily watching him, he slowly turned his head and spat a bloody stream of saliva, barely missing her. He stared at her, as if daring her to do something.

She shivered with revulsion and joined Devlin at the back of the SUV. The cargo door was down and Pierce lay in the back, his eyes closed. Devlin had hopped inside and was pressing his fingers against his brother’s neck.

“Is he alive?”

“He’s got a lump on his head, but his pulse is strong.”

A snapping sound had both of them whirling around just in time to see Ace running at a surprisingly fast clip.

Devlin scrambled out of the back of the SUV and drew his gun, but Ace had already disappeared into the dark shadows between the trees. Devlin cursed and started after him.

“Devil?” a groggy voice called out.

Devlin stopped and looked back. Pierce was trying to push himself up, blinking his eyes as if to focus.

Emily climbed into the back of the SUV and helped him into a sitting position, bracing his shoulders to keep him from falling back down. Devlin jogged back to the vehicle, his gun clutched in his hand, his body tense and anxious as he clearly struggled between his concern for his brother and his desire to go after Ace.

“What happened?” Pierce asked, grabbing the back of his head.

Leaning back, Emily gently felt along his scalp and winced in sympathy. “That’s a pretty big bump. Ace must have hit you over the head and knocked you out.”

“Ace?”

“One of the people trying to kill us.”

Devlin silently watched them, his face a smooth mask revealing nothing about the thoughts going on behind his stormy gray eyes.

“Can you fill me in?” Pierce asked. “My brain is in a fog right now.”

“Are you going to explain everything to your brother, Devlin? Or do I have to?” she snapped. Seriously, he was taking his brooding a little too far.

He suddenly shoved his gun in his holster and scooped Emily out of the SUV. After setting her on her feet, he took her place, sitting beside Pierce.

“Can you give me a minute with my brother? Alone?”

Since his request sounded more like an order than a question, she didn’t bother to reply. She marched toward the trees.

“Don’t go far.”

Right. Like she had anywhere to go. She sat on the ground and crossed her arms to wait.

The two men spoke in low tones. At first, Pierce shook his head, wincing as he did so. But a few minutes later, Devlin must have worn him down because he stopped shaking his head and gave his brother a glare.

Emily understood the emotion behind *that* response.

When Devlin hopped down, he headed straight to her and hauled her to her feet. She was still sputtering in surprise when he clamped his mouth down on hers. His stubble brushed against her burns, making them throb all over again. But she didn’t care. Relief and passion played a tug of war inside her as she clung to him, pouring her feelings into her response.

I’m sorry.

Thank you for sacrificing for me, for showing mercy when you wanted revenge.

I love you.

That last thought was an epiphany, startling her as much as she imagined it would startle him if she said it out loud. But she knew, deep in her heart, that it was true. She didn’t know how they would make a relationship work with all the obstacles in their way. But she didn’t see how they could fail, not with the passion that flared so hot between them, or the love that was strong enough to grow in spite of the horrible things they’d had to endure.

Or maybe because of them.

In just a few days they’d endured more tragedy and crises than most couples would in a lifetime. Anything after this would be easy.

By the time he ended the kiss, her heart felt like it would gallop out of her chest.

“Wow,” she breathed.

His sexy grin, the one she hadn’t seen in far too long, tilted his mouth up at the corner. Then it was gone and the shadows returned to his eyes.

“You’re a good, decent woman, Emily O’Malley. I don’t deserve you.” He kissed her tenderly on her forehead, then jogged into the forest.

Right where Ace had disappeared moments ago.

She stared after him, one hand pressed against her lips, swollen from his kiss, the other covering her aching heart.

Pierce joined her and, in halting words, explained the agreement he’d made with his brother.

“. . . that even though you don’t technically qualify for the program, I can pull some strings, call in favors . . .”

“. . . you’ll be safe and can even exchange letters with your family through the Justice Department. WITSEC—Witness Security—has a system for that without endangering . . .”

“. . . unfortunate that you’ll have to quit your job, of course, and leave Savannah, but . . .”

He paused, his face etched with sympathy. But even before he dealt the final blow, Emily knew what he was going to say.

Devlin wasn’t coming back.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

Two weeks later

A LAMP FLIPPED on, flooding the room with light. Pierce dove out of bed and grabbed the pistol from the top of his nightstand. He came up in a crouch, leveling his gun at the intruder standing just inside the open window, a window that had been closed and locked when Pierce went to bed. But the man standing there wasn't an intruder. He slowly lowered his gun.

"Devil, how did you get in here? That's a two-story drop, straight-down." He climbed to his feet. "And what were you thinking, surprising me like that? I could have shot you."

Devlin plopped down on one of the two wing chairs by the window. "Not without bullets you couldn't."

Pierce hefted the gun and grinned. "Should have known by the weight. But I'm half asleep, or at least I was." He stowed the gun inside the top drawer of his nightstand and discreetly pressed the red button on the device hidden inside. "Madison and Nikki are in Florida, visiting her brother Logan. But you already knew that or you wouldn't have barged into my bedroom." He crossed to the other side of the bed and sat on the mattress across from Devlin. "I wasn't sure I'd ever see you again. Did you . . . find what you were looking for?"

"Don't you mean *who*? Ace has gone underground. He's hiding, like the coward he is. But that's not why I'm here."

He pulled a folded piece of computer printer paper out of his shirt pocket and flung it onto the bed. "I'll save you the trouble of reading it. That's an article from today's *Savannah Morning News*. Want to tell me

why Emily's picture is on the front page in a story about up-and-coming detectives with the Chatham County police? What happened to keeping a low profile, to getting her into the Witness Security Program? You promised you'd pull some strings, move mountains, do whatever it took to give her a new *life*, to keep her safe."

Pierce raised his hands in a conciliatory gesture. "Let me explain."

"My God, Pierce. If something happens to her, I don't . . . I couldn't . . ." He shot up out of the chair and paced back and forth like a caged animal. "If you couldn't get her into WITSEC right away, why couldn't you at least keep her hidden somewhere? Hell, I'm shocked her boss even let her have her old job back after the way I barreled into her life and ruined everything. Still, you shouldn't have let her do it. EXIT could still be gunning for her."

"You act like you care about her."

"*Care* about her? Of course I care about her. I care about her more than . . ." He shook his head. "Why would you think I didn't?"

Pierce shrugged. "Maybe because you left her?"

Devlin wrapped a hand around the top rail of the footboard. "I had to. She could never be happy living the kind of life I'm now forced to live. And I wouldn't want her to try. She's far too good for that. She deserves better." He waved his hand in the air, as if to wave away what he'd just said. "Doesn't matter. What matters is keeping her safe. Don't you realize the danger she's in because of that article, that picture? It's like waving a red flag in front of a bull. Cyprian is bound to send someone after her again. How could you let her do that?"

"It wasn't his choice. It was mine," a soft voice called out from the doorway.

Devlin's eyes widened in shock.

Emily gave him a tentative smile. "Hello, Dev. Miss me?"

EMILY WAITED UNTIL Pierce had shut the door behind him before moving farther into the room. Devlin stood a dozen feet away, frozen like a statue, by the window.

"You left me. You hurt me."

Pain lanced his features. "I know."

He walked toward her slowly, as if she were a mirage, as if she might disappear if he moved too fast. When he stopped, he was so close she could feel the heat of him, so close that her body tilted toward him, a flower turning its face up to the sun.

His greedy gaze devoured her, drinking her in, like a man who knew he was going blind and wanted to imprint the image of a glorious sunset in his mind to take out and treasure when everything went dark.

He feathered his fingers across her cheek. “I’m so, so sorry about *this*. About what Ace did to you.”

Embarrassed at her unsightly burns, she pulled his hand away. “I heard you when you told Pierce that Ace got away.”

“For now.” His brows drew down. “Why are you here, in my brother’s house? And how did you know I was here?”

“I’ve been staying in a guest room down the hall since . . . the day you left. Pierce sent his wife and daughter on an extended vacation, using a made-up excuse about one of his cases being dangerous. They don’t know that I’m the danger part. As for knowing you were here, there’s a transmitter in the side-table drawer, by the bed. It rings a buzzer in my room. Your brother was supposed to press it if you showed up.”

“The article. It was a plant to draw me out. Pierce’s idea?”

“Mine.”

He grinned.

She smiled back. “Drier would never consider hiring me back, even if I wanted to go back—which I don’t. Pierce took care of the details. I wasn’t sure you’d be monitoring the news here. But he was confident you would.”

“He would know. He was bit by the bug a long time ago. I’m not sure why I fought it this long. I was doomed the moment I stepped into that basement.”

“Bug? Doomed?”

“Never mind. Doesn’t matter. You said your boss would never want you back. What about your partner, Tuck? Did I destroy that for you too?”

Unable to resist the temptation any longer, she lifted a hand to his chest, reveling in how his muscles bunched beneath her fingertips. She longed to unbutton his shirt and slide her fingers beneath the fabric, to feel the wiry roughness of his hair, the warmth of his skin.

“I hardly think you can take credit for destroying my life as I knew it. EXIT Inc. gets full credit for that. My friendship with Tuck is an unfortunate casualty. When Pierce and I called in the scene at Jackson’s Island, we made up half-truths to keep your name out of everything. Drier was only too happy to accept that Kelly and her ex-cons were responsible for the abductions. He was happy to believe our story that another man, one of Kelly’s thugs, is the one who shot Gage and burned my face. We simply inserted Pierce in the equation instead of you and . . . well, case pretty much closed. Except for the last missing woman Hawley swears is still out there. Who knows if she’ll ever be found.”

“I wouldn’t count on it.”

She nodded sadly. “Tuck wasn’t satisfied with our story since we couldn’t explain Kelly’s motives. And since he couldn’t talk to you. He’s convinced you’re in this up to your neck.”

“Smart man.”

“He’s an excellent detective. I hated lying to him. He refused my calls when I tried to talk to him last week.” She shrugged. “It is what it is. Pierce said he hit bureaucratic walls when he inquired about EXIT at work. He was ordered to back off, without explanation. Cyprian has powerful friends trying to keep this fiasco quiet, and to keep anyone from digging into the true nature of what they do. So what happens now? With EXIT?”

His silence had her fingers curling against the front of his shirt. “You’re going after the whole damn company, aren’t you?”

He gently pulled her hands away. “My entire life was built on a lie, Em. I thought by joining EXIT I could avenge my fiancée’s murder and protect others from horrific crimes like she suffered. But all along, it was *because* of EXIT that she died. And after I spent over a decade being loyal to the company, Cyprian gives me a death sentence over a breach of security. I would have expected if he ever found out about me breaking into the system that he would have at least asked me about it so I could explain why I’d done it. Slap on the wrist. Don’t do it again. But to issue an EXIT order? There’s something else he’s hiding, something big, and I’m going to find out what it is.”

“We can work together as a team to bring them down. We can go to the Justice Department, *make* them listen, tell them what happened, tell them __”

“Emily.” His voice was whisper soft, his gaze intent. “Who do you think created EXIT Inc. in the first place?”

Her mouth dropped open. “What are you saying? That the government is involved? That they know what EXIT really is?”

“Yes and no. It’s complicated. Em, promise me you’ll do whatever Pierce thinks is necessary to keep you safe. Don’t take any chances with your life.”

“You’re leaving me again?”

He winced. “I don’t want to. I have to.”

“Like you did in the bunker and later, after stitching me up? And again at Jackson’s Island? You’re leaving me again?”

“I. Have. No. Choice.”

He grabbed her shoulders, his fingers tight to the point that it was almost painful. Almost. But he knew his strength, and he was careful. He was always careful with her, because he didn’t want to hurt her. Wasn’t that the point of all of this? The reason she’d had Pierce put the fake article in the paper? The reason she forgave him for abandoning her even though he hadn’t asked and didn’t even know she’d forgiven him? Everything he’d done since the moment they’d met had been driven by his desire to keep her safe. It might not have been anything more than an intense attraction in the beginning, an instinctive yearning and pull toward each other. But somewhere along the way, it had turned into something more.

Something wonderful.

Something beautiful.

Something too rare to throw away.

She shook off his hands and raised her arms to slide her fingers through the hair at the back of his neck.

He shuddered and grabbed her hands. “What are you doing?”

“Waiting.”

“Waiting for what?”

“For you to catch up. It’s been two weeks, Dev. Two long weeks since we last saw each other. I’ve thought about everything that happened between us, every single minute. I’ve mulled it over and over in my mind, and I realized something. You’re in love with me.”

His eyes widened with panic. “I can’t . . . I don’t . . .” He stepped back, forcing her to drop her arms.

She followed, stalking him across the room. “Can’t? Don’t? You’re scared. That’s all. This is new for you. Heck, it’s new for me too. But at least you’ve been in love once before. You know what it’s like. You have to know this is real, this thing between us.”

She stepped forward again, but this time she didn’t touch him. “Look at me and tell me you don’t love me, Dev. Tell me you don’t want me.”

He surprised her by ducking away, sliding between her and the wall. He put his hands on the windowsill, prepared to slip away.

“Coward,” she accused.

He dropped his head to his chest. “What do you want from me, Em?” His voice was so low, so anguished, she barely heard him.

“The truth. Is that really too much to ask? When you left me the way you did, I thought maybe I was wrong about you. The way you treated Ace . . .” She shivered and rubbed her hands up and down her arms. “It scared me. But now, now I understand.”

He turned. “What do you understand?”

“I understand that you’re a good person, deep inside, but that you don’t see it. You don’t think you deserve to be happy, and you don’t think you deserve *me*. But you’re wrong. I’m the one who doesn’t deserve you. But I’m not as noble as you are. Because I’m not going to give you up. Not if . . .” She swallowed hard, ready to bare her soul, to go all in. “Not if you love me the way I love you.”

A pained look flashed across his face. “Don’t say that.”

She cupped his face in her hands. “I love you.”

He shook his head. “No. You don’t. You love some stupid hero on a white horse who doesn’t exist. I’ve hurt people, *killed* people.”

“I love you.” She pressed a whisper-soft kiss against his lips and waited.

He pressed his forehead against hers. “God help me. I love you too.”

He kissed her like he’d never kissed her before. If she had any doubts about his feelings, that hot, wet but achingly sweet kiss dissolved those doubts. He poured all his love into that kiss, telling her with his body what he could never tell her with just words.

When he pulled back, he smiled, *really* smiled, a sexy, full-blown grin that finally reached his eyes for the first time since she’d met him. She drank it all in, the happiness she’d somehow miraculously been able to give

this amazing, strong, protective man who had more honor than anyone else she'd ever known.

"I think I've finally found what I'm good at," she said.

"Kissing?" he teased.

"No. I mean, of course, but that's not what I was going to say. I'll never be a doctor."

He shuddered dramatically and rubbed the shoulder she'd drunkenly operated on.

"I'll never be a good cop."

"Thank God for that."

"I'm your conscience, Devlin."

"My . . . my what?"

"Your conscience. I stopped you in the clearing. I made you realize what you were doing was wrong. You didn't kill Ace."

"That doesn't mean I won't when I catch him again."

She shrugged. "We'll see."

His shoulders slumped. "You've ruined me. I'm no longer a badass assassin."

She put her arms around his neck. "You're still my badass. And I haven't ruined you—I saved you."

He pulled her against him, his smile reaching his eyes once again. "Yes. You did. I love you, Emily, more than I ever thought possible. And I want you, always, forever in my life. But it won't be easy. The future will be dangerous. I'll do everything I can to protect you, to keep you safe. But it's a leap of faith. With no guarantees except that I'll always, always love you."

"I know exactly what I'm getting. And the answer is yes. I love you, and I'm ready to make that leap of faith with you."

When he finished kissing her this time, they were both panting.

"When I get you in a bed again, I'm going to keep you there for a week," he breathed.

"Promises, promises."

He pulled a pair of gloves out of his pocket and opened the window.

Emily looked out. A rope hung from a hook on the other side of the glass and snaked down the wall to the yard below. Devlin set the gloves on the windowsill.

“Are you sure you’re ready to take that leap of faith with me, Em?”

“I trust you. I’ll follow you anywhere.”

“Then let’s leap.”

She put her hands on the windowsill and raised her leg to climb out.

He grabbed her and pulled her back, laughing. “Whoa, whoa. I was teasing. We’re not going out that way.”

“But the gloves. The rope.”

“I’ll explain later.” He winked. “But first, I need a pen and paper.”

AN HOUR PASSED before Pierce lost his patience and went upstairs to check on Devlin and Emily. He didn’t want to intrude in the middle of a fight—or something more intimate—but he couldn’t sit downstairs any longer, wondering whether they’d worked out their problems or whether they’d killed each other.

He knocked on the bedroom door. No answer. After knocking again, he twisted the knob and pushed the door open a crack.

“Everything okay in here?” He stepped inside. The room was empty, with nothing to prove that either of them had been there except for a sheet of paper lying on the middle of the bed. A note, written in Devlin’s chicken-scratch handwriting.

Pierce, Emily decided she couldn’t live without me, so she’s coming with me.

Pierce, Devlin decided he *couldn’t live without* me.

Thank you for everything. We’ll try to check in from time to time. Just know that we both love you and the others very much. Dev and Em.

He grinned, relieved and happy that Devlin had been blessed to fall in love *twice* in one lifetime, and that he was finally getting another chance at happiness. Even with the tremendous obstacles facing the two of them in the future, at least they would spend that future together.

Since he’d been sitting in the main room on the first floor, with a full view of the staircase, he knew they hadn’t come down the stairs. Which left only one way out: the window. He couldn’t imagine Madison ever agreeing

to do that. Who was he kidding? She was the type who would probably suggest it.

He crossed to the window to lock it and saw a pair of gloves sitting on the outside ledge. He slid the window up and looked out. Sure enough, the rope Devlin and Emily had used hung from a hook all the way to the ground. Crazy, absolutely crazy. After hauling up the rope and dropping it inside, he grabbed the gloves, only to notice a note tucked inside.

Did you seriously think I would scale a wall and climb through a window when a perfectly good door was available? You might want to check with an architect about your home's original blueprint. These old houses are riddled with secret passageways. All my love, Devil.

Pierce smiled and shook his head. "Godspeed, little brother. Godspeed."

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Epilogue

A FEW WEEKS later, Devlin stood just inside the tree line, looking through his binoculars across the field. White trucks with the familiar red B&B lettering on the side clogged the road to the construction site. Banging hammers and whining electric saws shattered an otherwise quiet morning.

Emily slid her arms around his waist and rested her head against his chest. “How’s the house coming along?”

“I’ve never seen so many people working on one building at the same time. Braedon must have canceled every other project B&B had to get this much manpower. Alex should be able to move back in by the end of the summer.”

“It’s amazing what people can accomplish when they work together.”

The hidden meaning in her words wasn’t lost on him. He lowered the binoculars, dropping them to the ground so he could cup her face in his hands. “You’re not going to stop bugging me until I say yes, are you?”

“Nope. Never. You might as well give in now before I drive you crazy.”

“Okay.”

She blinked. “Okay? Just like that? You’re going to let me help you try to bring EXIT down?”

“Against my better judgment, yes. But only because I know that if I don’t take you with me, you’ll end up going after them on your own, and that would absolutely terrify me. But you have to agree to my terms. We’re David against Goliath. It will take careful planning and training. You’ll

have to be patient. I'm not about to rush into this and risk you getting hurt, or killed."

He shuddered at that horrible thought and pressed a quick kiss against her lips. But, as it always seemed to happen whenever he touched her, his brain shut down and want and need took over. The kiss deepened until his pulse was slamming in his ears and his hands were shaking at the thought of getting her naked in his bed.

Forcing himself to break the kiss, he drew back, shaking his head in wonder. "Sometimes I think this is a dream. Because there's no way I deserve someone like you. I'm too broken, too flawed."

She cupped his face with her hands. "It's not a dream. And you're wrong about not deserving me. Both of us have our faults. We're not perfect. We're just perfect for each other."

He drew her into his arms and held her tight, resting his chin on the top of her head. A long moment later, he drew back and gently kissed the healing bright pink scar on the side of her face. She was self-conscious about the mark, but to Devlin, she'd never been more beautiful.

That scar was a badge of honor, proof of the tremendous courage and sacrifice she'd made defying Ace, refusing to scream to draw Devlin out until it was physically impossible not to. Most women he knew would have given in long before that lighter had been held against their skin.

"Why don't you get the air conditioner going in the car? I just need another minute," he said.

She looked past him at what had once been his father's house and soon would be again. "To say good-bye. I understand. Take all the time you want." She smiled and headed into the trees toward the side road where they'd parked their car.

Devlin reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a wallet-sized picture. He crouched down beneath a tree and used a twig to rake away the dirt. When the hole was deep enough, he tossed the twig away and carefully placed the picture in the hole.

His past stared up at him, her blonde hair shining in the sun filtering through the trees, her smile tugging at his heart as it always did. But the pain that little tug caused wasn't as sharp as it once had been. He barely felt it at all anymore. He would always love Arianna, but their time was over, and he was finally ready to move on.

He sprinkled the dirt back into the hole until he could no longer see the picture, then rested his hand on top of the small mound.

“Good-bye, Arianna,” he whispered.

He grabbed the binoculars he’d pitched to the ground earlier and stood. After one long, last look over his shoulder, he wiped the dust of the past from his hands and headed toward his future.

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Author's Note

Savannah, Georgia, is one of my favorite places to visit and is the setting of this book. I love the historic flavor and small-town feel of this beautiful city on the Savannah River. I've ridden the paddleboats, gone on the trolley tours, and spent days just walking the squares, touring old houses, and taking pictures of potential places to include in the books that I set there.

One of the places featured in this book is the Savannah-Chatham Metropolitan Police Department. There are three main locations for SCMPD, including the headquarters on Habersham Street, a delightful old brick building that features antique police cars out front. While I adore this old building, it didn't quite work for my story, so I took the liberty of creating my own fictional version of the SCMPD headquarters. There are, sadly, no antique cars in front of my fictional police department. There is a bustling diner across the street from mine, which I think is cool—but is not true of the real police station. Also, the fictional headquarters houses the coroner's offices in the basement. The real Savannah, Georgia, Coroner's Office is located in a separate building on East 67th Street.

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There's more to EXIT Inc. than meets the eye . . .

Keep reading for a sneak peek from

EXIT STRATEGY

the first book in Lena Diaz's thrilling new series

coming Summer 2015 from Avon Impulse

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An Excerpt From

EXIT STRATEGY

SABRINA STAGGERED INTO the dark living room and grabbed a couch for support. But her hand, slippery with blood, slid across the leather and she crashed to her knees on the hardwood floor. She bit her lip to keep from crying out. Moonlight filtering in through the heavy drapes revealed the blood running down her arm, dripping to the floor.

You have to stop the bleeding. You're leaving him a trail like a neon sign saying HERE SHE IS. COME AND GET HER.

There had to be something in this room she could use to bind the wound, something to stanch the bleeding. But the room was just as she'd left it this morning before going to work—clutter-free, everything neatly in place without even a throw pillow or an afghan lying across the back of a chair. For the first time ever, she wished she wasn't "just the in-law," as her sister-in-law Denise would say. Sabrina wished she *were* Denise.

Denise would have several blankets tossed on both of the couches, or a pair of socks lying on the floor, maybe an entire basket's worth of discarded clothes waiting to be picked up throughout the house. She'd have her choice of things to use as a makeshift bandage and wouldn't be bleeding all over the place.

Who was Sabrina kidding? She didn't wish she were her sister-in-law. Denise wouldn't have lasted five minutes with an intruder inside the house. She would have curled up in a ball the moment the sound of breaking glass downstairs had awakened her.

Why hadn’t the alarm sounded? Or automatically notified the police of the break-in?

She clasped her left hand over the cut on her right bicep, hissing at the fiery pain that shot all the way to her shoulder. Lurching to her feet, she stumbled as a wave of dizziness nearly drove her to her knees again. How much blood had she lost? She drew a deep breath, then another, until the dizziness subsided.

Get moving. Before he finds you.

This was her house, had been for over a year. She knew every inch of it, where the furniture was, even in the dark. She had the advantage, as long as she didn’t squander it by allowing her momentary weakness to get the better of her.

She hurried to the curved wall of floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over the circular brick driveway. Good. There was no one right outside, waiting to grab her if she left the house. Not that she saw, anyway. But there weren’t any headlights out on the street either, which meant no cars, no one to help her. She squinted, hoping to see the silhouette of a neighbor out for a late-night jog. But without her glasses, she couldn’t see much past the rim of security lights at the edge of the lawn.

She should have grabbed her eyeglasses as soon as she’d heard glass breaking downstairs. But she’d been so startled that she’d flailed blindly in the dark for her cell phone and knocked everything off the bedside table—including her glasses, her phone, and the lamp that had crashed to the floor. One of the jagged pieces had flown up and cut her arm. But she couldn’t take the time to find anything in the dark, not without knowing what had made the sound that woke her up.

She’d run out of her bedroom to the banister just in time to see a shadowy figure in the family room below, heading toward the back staircase. She’d ducked away before he could see her and raced down the long hall in the opposite direction, to the stairs that led to the front of the house. But soon he was downstairs again too, playing a deadly game of cat and mouse. Her only advantage, the only reason he hadn’t caught her so far, was her knowledge of the layout of the house and which doors opened into other rooms rather than dead ends.

Too bad she didn’t own a gun. Even without glasses she could see perfectly fine at close range. She could certainly hit an intruder, even in the

dark. And then she wouldn't be forced to run and hide like a frightened rabbit. But *convicted felons* couldn't own guns. And thanks to her *loving* family's schemes, that's exactly what she was—a felon. It didn't matter that she was actually innocent.

She turned away from the living room windows and hurried to the doorway that led into the hall. The front door beckoned to her like a beacon, its dull red color almost black in the darkness. Twenty feet away. All she had to do was run. Then she'd be outside.

And then what?

The nearest neighbor's house was several hundred yards away. What if the man who was searching for her looked out a window and saw her running down the street? Would he catch her before she made it to safety?

She could head into the woods that bordered the sides and back of the property. But she had no shoes to protect her feet, and only her Carolina Panthers nightshirt to keep her warm. Her Asheville home was far too close to the Blue Ridge Mountains not to take plummeting nighttime temperatures seriously. It made more sense to run to her neighbors. She'd just have to go as fast as she could and hope she made it before the stranger realized she was no longer inside the house.

Holding her now throbbing arm, she tiptoed across the wooden floor of the foyer, careful to make as little noise as possible. The light on the security panel beside the door glowed green, proving what she'd already concluded—somehow the man who'd broken into her house had shut off the alarm first. How? It was supposed to be state-of-the art, tamper-proof. For the fortune she'd paid to have it installed, it should have come with an armed bodyguard.

Worry about the alarm later. You have to get out of here. Now.

Using her left hand this time, the one not slippery with blood, she flipped the deadbolt, then turned the doorknob and pulled. Her shoulder protested the effort when the door didn't even budge. Was it stuck? Had she not flipped the deadbolt all the way? She turned the lever again. And this time she braced her right hand against the wall, not caring about the bloody print she was leaving on the silk wallpaper, and pulled the doorknob as hard as she could. Nothing! It was as if the door was nailed shut.

Her pulse pounded in her ears as she dropped her hands to her sides. What was she supposed to do now? Try to run back upstairs and find her

cell phone so she could call 911? What if the intruder saw her or heard her on the stairs? She couldn't risk it. What about the landline? She didn't have a phone plugged into it since she only had the line for the security alarm. But there was another way she could make a call for help using that line.

Her computer.

Her study was across the hall from the living room she'd just left. If she could fire up her laptop and make an Internet call—

A dull thump sounded from the study she was just thinking about. When had he gotten so close? She whirled around. There was only one other exit —the French doors off the family room at the back of the house.

She ran down the foyer, slipping through the living room again. Then she ran out the door on the other side to the long hallway that ran the length of the house. When she reached the family room, she raced to the doors but stopped as soon as she saw the broken glass. One of the panes had been smashed out—probably the noise that had woken her up. And the shards of glass littered the floor all around the doors.

Her bare toes curled against the cold wood, as if in protest of what she was about to do. But this was the quickest way out. If she had to climb through a window, she'd have to waste precious minutes knocking out a screen, and that would probably make too much noise. There was no other choice.

There, a tiny clear spot on the floor to the right, close to the door. It might be just big enough to step on without getting cut. She raised her foot. Strong arms closed around her, lifting her into the air before she could take that step.

She bucked wildly in the man's arms. "Let me go!"

"Be still," his harsh whisper sounded near her ear. He tossed her over his shoulder and clamped his forearm like a band of steel over the backs of her thighs.

She beat her hands on his back, then sank her teeth into his shirt. Or tried to. He had some kind of thick protective vest beneath his shirt. She blinked and grew still. Was he wearing a *bulletproof* vest?

"Who are you?" she demanded.

He didn't answer. He crunched across the broken glass and reached up with his free hand. A wood shim was wedged between the door and the

frame. Had he done that? To keep her from escaping? Is that why she couldn't get out the front door?

He grabbed the end of the wood and moved it up and down to loosen it.

No, no, no. He was about to carry her out of the house. She couldn't let that happen.

"Put me down. I have money." She pounded on his back again. "I can double, triple whatever they're paying you. It's my family. Right? They sent you—to scare me, to force me to return? This is a little over-the-top, even for them, but I get it. Okay. I'll call them. But please. *Please*. Let me go."

She hated that she was begging, but the thought of returning to the hellish existence she'd fled a year ago was more than she could bear. She was shamelessly considering offering *anything* if he'd just put her down and agree not to take her back to Nevada, and then the door suddenly popped open.

Her breath left her with a whoosh as he jogged down the back steps with her bouncing on his shoulder. He circled the rectangular pool, then sprinted across the lawn toward the same woods where she'd briefly considered hiding.

She clutched his dark-colored shirt, holding on during his wild dash across the grass. Dark shapes were a frustrating blur without her glasses as he ran past them. The cool autumn air whipped against her bare legs, raising goose bumps and making her shiver.

When they entered the woods, he slowed, but only enough to make it through the thick brush. She expected the low-hanging branches and scratchy shrubs to scrape against her, but somehow nothing did.

A few minutes later, they stopped in a clearing, deeper into the woods than she'd ever been. She wasn't even sure if they were behind her house anymore, or if they'd crossed into the nature preserve that bordered her land and led up into the foothills.

She blinked in surprise when he pulled her off his shoulder and put her down. Everything seemed to spin around her. She staggered and her knees buckled, but before she could fall, he grabbed her around her waist, steadying her.

When she didn't feel like she was going to faint anymore, or lose her supper, she looked up. The man who'd just snatched her from her home was far taller than her, which wasn't really saying much since she was barely

over five feet. But still, she figured he was at least six feet, maybe six one. He was dressed all in black or maybe dark-blue, and his eyes glittered down at her like those of a hawk sighting its prey.

"Are you all right?" he demanded.

Was she *all right*? "You just abducted me. Why would you even ask that?"

"We have a bit farther to go. I need to be sure you're strong enough to make it." He touched his left wrist and an old-fashioned–looking watch lit up. His lips curled with displeasure. "We have to be miles away from this place before sunrise and we're already behind schedule. If they catch us, you're dead."

His ominous words sent a shiver of dread down her spine. If her past had caught up to her, they might bully her and threaten her, but want her dead? No way. Not because they cared but because that would complicate and delay their plans even more.

"I'm sure you're mistaken. Stefan and the others wouldn't kill me."

"I don't know any Stefan, but I promise you, someone is definitely after you."

The certainty in his tone made her insides go cold. He had to be wrong. She pressed her left hand against her cut, which was burning and aching from their bouncing run across the lawn.

"I don't understand," she said. "What are you talking about? Are you trying to say you're here to . . . help me? That someone—other than my family—is after me? That they want to hurt me?"

He shook his head as if she were daft and he had to dumb things down so she could understand. "They don't want to *hurt* you. They want you dead."

Her mouth dropped open. No. He *had* to be wrong. "What makes you so sure?"

"Because I'm the one who was hired to kill you."

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About the Author

Originally from Kentucky, romantic suspense author Lena Diaz also lived in California and Louisiana before settling in northeast Florida with her husband, two children, and a Shetland sheepdog named Sparky. A former Romance Writers of America Golden Heart® finalist, she won the prestigious Daphne du Maurier Award for excellence in mystery and suspense and has been a finalist in the National Excellence in Romance Fiction Awards and the Booksellers Best Award. She loves to watch action movies, garden, and hike in the beautiful Tennessee Smoky Mountains. You can contact Lena through her website, www.LenaDiaz.com.

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BOOK ONE: INDEPENDENCE FALLS

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PERSONAL TARGET

AN ELITE OPS NOVEL

By Kay Thomas

SINFUL REWARDS 1

A BILLIONAIRES AND BIKERS NOVELLA

By Cynthia Sax

An Excerpt from

FULL EXPOSURE

Book One: Independence Falls

by Sara Jane Stone

The first book in a hot new series from contemporary romance writer Sara Jane Stone. When Georgia begins work as a nanny for her brother's best friend, she knows she can't have him, but his pull is too strong, and she feels sparks igniting.

Georgia Trulane walked into the kitchen wearing a purple bikini, hoping and praying for a reaction from the man she'd known practically forever. Seated at the kitchen table, Eric Moore, her brother's best friend, now her boss since she'd taken over the care of his adopted nephew until he found another live-in nanny, studied his laptop as if it held the keys to the world's greatest mysteries. Unless the answers were listed between items b and c on a spreadsheet about Oregon timber harvesting, the screen was not of earth--shattering importance. It certainly did not merit his full attention when she was wearing an itsy-bitsy string bikini.

"Nate is asleep," she said.

Look up. Please, look up.

Eric nodded, his gaze fixed to the screen. Why couldn't he look at her with that unwavering intensity? He'd snuck glances. There had been moments when she'd turned from preparing his nephew's lunch and caught him looking at her, really looking, as if he wanted to memorize the curve of her neck or the way her jeans fit. But he quickly turned away.

"Did you pick up everything he needs for his first day of school tomorrow? I don't want to send him unprepared."

His deep voice warmed her from the inside out. It was so familiar and welcoming, yet at the same time utterly sexy.

"I got all the items on the list," she said. "He is packed and ready to go."

"He needs another one of those stuffed frogs. He can't go without his favorite stuffed animal."

If she hadn't been standing in his kitchen practically naked, waiting for him to notice her, she would have found his concern for the three-year-old's first day of preschool sweet, maybe even heartwarming. But her body wasn't looking for sentiments reminiscent of sunshine and puppies, or the whisper of sweet nothings against her skin. She craved physical contact—-his hands on her, exploring, each touch making her feel more alive.

And damn it, he still hadn't glanced up from his laptop.

“Nate will be home by nap time,” she said. “He’ll be there for only a few hours. You know that, right?”

“He’ll want to take his frog,” he said, his fingers moving across the keyboard. “He’ll probably lose it. And he sleeps with that thing every night. He needs that frog.”

She might be practically naked, but his emphasis on the word *need* thrust her headfirst into heartwarming territory. Eric worked day and night to provide Nate with the stability that had been missing from Eric’s childhood thanks to his divorced parents’ fickle dating habits. She admired his willingness to put a child who’d suffered a tragic loss first.

But tonight, for one night, she didn’t want to think about all of his honorable qualities. She wanted to see if maybe, just maybe those stolen glances when he thought she wasn’t looking meant that the man she’d laid awake thinking about while serving her country half a world away wanted her too.

“You’re now the proud owner of two stuffed frogs,” she said. “So if that’s everything for tonight, I’m going for a swim.”

Finally, *finally*, he looked up. She watched as his blue eyes widened and his jaw clenched. He was an imposing man, large and strong from years of climbing and felling trees. Not that he did the grunt work anymore. These days he wore tailored suits and spent more time in an office than with a chainsaw in hand. But even seated at his kitchen table poring over a computer, he looked like a wall of strong, solid muscle wound tight and ready for action. Having all of that energy focused on her? It sent a thrill down her body. Georgia clung to the feeling, savoring it.

An Excerpt from

PERSONAL TARGET

An Elite Ops Novel

by Kay Thomas

One minute Jennifer Grayson is housesitting and the next she's abducted to a foreign brothel. Jennifer is planning her escape when her first "customer" arrives. Nick, the man who broke her heart years ago, has come to her rescue. Now, as they race for their lives, passion for each other reignites and old secrets resurface. Can Nick keep the woman he loves safe against an enemy with a personal vendetta?

The woman at the vanity turned, and his breath caught in his throat. Nick had known it would be Jenny, and despite what he'd thought about downstairs when he'd seen her on the tablet screen, he hadn't prepared himself for seeing her like this. Seated at the table with candles all around, she was wearing a sheer robe over a grey thong and a bustier kind of thing —or that's what he thought the full-length bra was called.

He spotted the unicorn tat peeping out from the edge of whatever the lingerie piece was, and his brain quit processing details as all the blood in his head rushed south. He'd been primed to come in and tell Jenny exactly how they were getting out of the house and away from these people, and now . . . this. His mouth went dry at the sight of her. She looked like every fantasy he'd ever had about her rolled into one.

He continued to stare as recognition flared in her eyes.

"Oh my god," she murmured. "It's . . ."

She clapped her mouth closed, and her eyes widened. That struck him as odd. The relief on her face was obvious, but instead of looking at him, she took an audible breath and studied the walls of the room. When she finally did glance at him again, her eyes had changed.

"So you're who they've sent me for my first time?" Her voice sounded bored, not the tone he remembered. "What do you want me to do?"

What a question. He raised an eyebrow, but she shook her head. In warning?

Nothing here was as he'd anticipated. He continued staring at her, hoping the lust would quit fogging his brain long enough for him to figure out what was going on.

"I've been told to show you a good time." Her voice was cold, downright chilly. Without another word she stood and crossed the floor, slipping into his arms with her breasts pressing into his chest. "It's you." She murmured the words in the barest of whispers.

Nick’s mind froze, but his body didn’t. His hands automatically went to her waist as she kissed his neck, working her way up to his ear. This was not at all what he’d planned.

“I can’t believe you’re here.” She breathed the words into his ear.

Me either, he thought, but kept the words to himself as he pulled her closer. His senses flooded with all that smooth skin pressing against him. His body tightened, and his right hand moved to cup her ass. Her cheek’s bare skin was silky soft, just like he remembered. God, he’d missed her. She melted into him as his body switched into overdrive.

“What do you want?” She spoke louder. The arctic tone was back. He was confused and knew he was just too stupid with wanting her to figure out what the hell was going on. There was no way the woman could mistake the effect she was having.

She moved her lips closer to his ear and nipped his earlobe as she whispered, “Cameras are everywhere. I’m not sure about microphones.”

And like that, cold reality slapped him in the face. He should have been expecting it, but he’d been so focused on getting her out and making sure she was all right. She might be glad to see him because he was there to save her, but throwing her body at him was an act.

Jesus. He had to get them both out of here without tipping his hand to the cameras and those watching what he was doing. He was crazy not to have considered it once he saw those tablets downstairs, but it had never occurred to him that he would have to play this encounter through as if he were really a client.

He slipped her arms from around his neck and moved to the table to pour himself some wine, willing his hands not to shake. “I want you,” he said.

An Excerpt from

SINFUL REWARDS 1

A Billionaires and Bikers Novella

by Cynthia Sax

Belinda “Bee” Carter is a good girl; at least, that’s what she tells herself. And a good girl deserves a nice guy—just like the gorgeous and moody billionaire Nicolas Rainer. Or so she thinks, until she takes a look through her telescope and sees a naked, tattooed man on the balcony across the courtyard. He has been watching her, and that makes him all the more enticing. But when a mysterious and anonymous text message dares her to do something bad, she must decide if she is really the good girl she has always claimed to be, or if she’s willing to risk everything for her secret fantasy of being watched.

An Avon Red Novella

I'd told Cyndi I'd never use it, that it was an instrument purchased by perverts to spy on their neighbors. She'd laughed and called me a prude, not knowing that I was one of those perverts, that I secretly yearned to watch and be watched, to care and be cared for.

If I'm cautious, and I'm always cautious, she'll never realize I used her telescope this morning. I swing the tube toward the bench and adjust the knob, bringing the mysterious object into focus.

It's a phone. Nicolas's phone. I bounce on the balls of my feet. This is a sign, another declaration from fate that we belong together. I'll return Nicolas's much-needed device to him. As a thank you, he'll invite me to dinner. We'll talk. He'll realize how perfect I am for him, fall in love with me, marry me.

Cyndi will find a fiancé also—everyone loves her—and we'll have a double wedding, as sisters of the heart often do. It'll be the first wedding my family has had in generations.

Everyone will watch us as we walk down the aisle. I'll wear a strapless white Vera Wang mermaid gown with organza and lace details, crystal and pearl embroidery accents, the bodice fitted, and the skirt hemmed for my shorter height. My hair will be swept up. My shoes—

Voices murmur outside the condo's door, the sound piercing my delightful daydream. I swing the telescope upward, not wanting to be caught using it. The snippets of conversation drift away.

I don't relax. If the telescope isn't positioned in the same way as it was last night, Cyndi will realize I've been using it. She'll tease me about being a fellow pervert, sharing the story, embellished for dramatic effect, with her stern, serious dad—or, worse, with Angel, that snobby friend of hers.

I'll die. It'll be worse than being the butt of jokes in high school because that ridicule was about my clothes and this will center on the part of my soul I've always kept hidden. It'll also be the truth, and I won't be able to deny it. I am a pervert.

I have to return the telescope to its original position. This is the only acceptable solution. I tap the metal tube.

Last night, my man-crazy roommate was giggling over the new guy in three-eleven north. The previous occupant was a gray-haired, bowtie--wearing tax auditor, his luxurious accommodations supplied by Nicolas. The most exciting thing he ever did was drink his tea on the balcony.

According to Cyndi, the new occupant is a delicious piece of man candy —tattooed, buff, and head-to-toe lickable. He was completing armcurls outside, and she enthusiastically counted his reps, oohing and aahing over his bulging biceps, calling to me to take a look.

I resisted that temptation, focusing on making macaroni and cheese for the two of us, the recipe snagged from the diner my mom works in. After we scarfed down dinner, Cyndi licking her plate clean, she left for the club and hasn't returned.

Three-eleven north is the mirror condo to ours. I straighten the telescope. That position looks about right, but then, the imitation UGGs I bought in my second year of college looked about right also. The first time I wore the boots in the rain, the sheepskin fell apart, leaving me barefoot in Economics 201.

Unwilling to risk Cyndi's friendship on "about right," I gaze through the eyepiece. The view consists of rippling golden planes, almost like . . .

Tanned skin pulled over defined abs.

I blink. It can't be. I take another look. A perfect pearl of perspiration clings to a puckered scar. The drop elongates more and more, stretching, snapping. It trickles downward, navigating the swells and valleys of a man's honed torso.

No. I straighten. This is wrong. I shouldn't watch our sexy neighbor as he stands on his balcony. If anyone catches me . . .

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