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SHELTER

CYPRESS SECURITY  BOOK THREE

REGAN BLACK

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Eva's
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About the Author

Introduction

With a vengeful enemy closing in, she'll need the right partner to survive...

A former Special Forces analyst, Eva Battaglia now applies her computer and linguistic skills to support the Cypress Security team. And just when she's getting the hang of small-town civilian life, someone from her military past takes aim at her.

Eva isn't thrilled with personal protection, especially when her bodyguard is Carson Morris, a local deputy with a warm smile, kind eyes, and no experience outside the county. Carson doesn't mind Eva's doubts, or anything else about her fiery personality. He knows how to keep the gorgeous newcomer safe in his hometown.

But when a sniper targets Eva, the rules of engagement must change—and fast.

Carson shelters Eva off the grid, but they can't hide out—alone—forever. Together they create a trap for a killer,

knowing that if the plan fails, they'll lose any hope of exploring the undeniable attraction and affection simmering between them.

If you like romantic suspense loaded with intrigue and action, forced-proximity heat, and characters you'd love to call friends, you'll love Eva's Shelter!

**In Regan Black's books you'll meet strong, tough heroes
and the women they'll do anything to protect!**

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For all the incredible men and women in law enforcement and
the military who serve at home and abroad with courage,
dignity, and honor.

Prologue

“**W**e have solid intelligence Eva Battaglia is being targeted by the Morcos family,” Ross Carpenter said, as soon as the sheriff’s office door closed.

Deputy Carson Morris glanced from Carpenter to the sheriff, wondering why he’d been invited to this private meeting.

“Morcos?” Sheriff Cochran’s chair squeaked as he leaned back.

“They’re international developers with sidelines in black market weapons and money laundering.”

“What’s their concern with Eva?”

Ross rubbed his forehead. “Years ago she worked a hostage rescue mission involving the owner’s son and it didn’t go as planned. We’re tracking down those details. I’m hoping there’s some place here in the court house where I can set up a temporary office for Cypress Security. That’s safer than having her working alone in Columbia. It’s not permanent. Just until we get this settled.”

“There’s office space up on the third floor,” Sheriff Cochran said. “Let’s go take a look.”

Ross examined the area and paced the entire hallway, noting the elevator, main stairs, other offices, and fire stairs. “This can work.”

Deputy Morris listened while Ross and the sheriff discussed Eva’s schedule and responsibilities and managed to keep a straight face when Ross volunteered Eva’s IT expertise to seal the deal.

“One last thing,” Carpenter said. “I’d like someone assigned to Eva full time.”

The sheriff groaned. “You know I don’t have the manpower for that.”

“Preferably Deputy Morris.”

“Me?”

“She likes you,” Carpenter said. “That’s not easy to discern with Eva, I’ll grant you that.”

Carson held his peace, baffled by the statement. The woman was as prickly as a porcupine. From what he’d seen, getting shot last month had wounded her pride more than anything else.

“What do you expect out of him?”

Ross pinned Carson with a level stare. “I expect you to treat this like undercover work, but you have to be yourself. I need you to make sure she gets to and from work safely by either

direct or indirect observation. If Rick or I hover, she'll bust us for it. And I expect you to inform me of any threats or suspicious contact."

He understood what might qualify as a threat, but suspicious contact? "Like what?"

"Morris, you were born and raised here in Haleswood," Carpenter said. "You'll recognize any strangers snooping around here, or at her room at the motel."

"True," the sheriff admitted. "But undercover is a tough thing to pull off in this town."

Ross grinned and clapped Carson on the shoulder. "You'll come up with something. It's not long term, I promise."

Carson glanced from one man to the other. He'd gone to high school with Ross. The sheriff had lived in the area all his life. All three of them knew there were no secrets in Haleswood. Undercover would be a unique challenge.

"It's not a typical assignment, that's for sure, deputy," Sheriff Cochran said. "But seeing as you're single, you're probably the person best suited to keep an eye on her without causing more problems."

"Stay close, be friendly," Carpenter said. "I'll let you know the minute we have the threat contained."

Chapter 1

B^{ANG} Eva Battaglia jerked in her chair, her computer search forgotten as she reached for her sidearm and braced for an attack. Her heart lurched out of rhythm when her fingers felt soft denim instead of the pebbled grip of a pistol in the smooth leather of a holster.

Another moment, another ragged breath and she recognized her error. Not gunfire, just the stupid stairwell door at the end of the hallway. Why maintenance could oil the hinges and not fix the timing on the self-closing mechanism was beyond her.

She made a mental note to get back to the firing range as soon as possible. The scared rabbit reactions had to stop.

Gently rubbing away the persistent ache in her shoulder, she flexed her fingers over her keyboard and resumed her background check on a potential client.

She needed a case she could sink her teeth into. Her boss, Ross Carpenter, was borderline paranoid since getting duped

by a client and nearly getting a few people killed last month. She fully supported his vigilance, considering the dup-er had gotten the drop on her, used her as bait, and eventually put a hole in her shoulder while trying to make his escape.

She did not, however, support her boss's decision to tuck her away in this little corner of nowhere running background searches and looking pretty.

Looking pretty damn annoyed.

Haleswood, South Carolina was a fine town. If you liked a friendly place that didn't push the needle much beyond sedate on the excitement scale. She even understood the basic logic of having a Cypress Security satellite office here, since Ross was finally living in the gorgeous home he'd built just outside of town a few years back.

The only consolation was being tucked away in an office inside the court house. It was small, and she knew her perspective was warped, but staying close to even the minimal activity of the sheriff's office took some of the sting out of being stuck here on the sidelines.

She wanted a real case. Her own case. Something more involved than the typical adultery and divorce nonsense. She knew she was ready, but her boss—in another fit of paranoia and overprotectiveness—disagreed.

Her arm had healed just fine. Mostly. True, she still couldn't quite hold her weapon steady enough to fire accurately. She glanced at the calendar. A month already. Hadn't she carried her own plate at the Haleswood Thanksgiving feast? Yet, that

stunning physical performance wasn't enough to convince Ross. She'd given him a note from the doctor in Columbia, but he'd only spouted nonsense about how the team needed her superior IT and tech support skills.

As if she didn't know her capabilities.

They both knew she could run the Cypress Security office from her laptop in any location sporting a decent internet connection. But the guys had been having all the fun lately. In more ways than one.

Both Ross and Rick, men she'd served with in the Army, had not only solved recent CS cases, they'd found their soulmates in the process. The thought made her antsy. She was genuinely happy for them both and already considered the women they'd chosen as friends, but it seemed so...

Out of reach, she decided on a heavy sigh.

Love was everywhere in Haleswood these past weeks. So much so, she would think there was something in the water, except Rick had been in Virginia when he'd fallen for Nicole.

Something in the jet stream? She clicked away to another window before she could do a search on weather patterns. High pressure systems didn't carry love viruses and the last thing she needed was one more man in her life.

Aggravated and restless, she pushed back from the desk and turned up the volume on the ever-quiet emergency scanner. Staring out the wide window onto Main Street, she watched

people going about their day. Even from here, she could recognize a few of them.

“Any minute now we’ll have ourselves a full blown jay-walking epidemic.”

“That would be chaos.”

She whirled around; irritated all over again that someone could sneak up on her. Maybe Ross was right about her not being ready for something more intense. “Deputy Morris.”

He dipped his chin. “Eva.” *Was he laughing at her?*

Of all the people in the building, why did Sheriff Cochran always send this man to beg favors? “What do you need?” she managed to close her mouth before adding ‘now’.

“Mrs. Jackson’s computer is locked up.”

“Can’t have that.” She rolled her eyes as she crossed back to her desk to secure her computer. This kind of thing happened often enough she suspected Ross had negotiated her tech skills for a discount on the rent for the office space.

“It would delay our response to a jay-walking emergency.”

Eva laughed. She couldn’t help it. Which only emphasized why she didn’t care for Deputy Morris. His friendliness was sneakier than most in this town. At first glance, he was a quiet, normal guy full of manners she was learning were an expected sort of local chivalry. The thoughtful details like holding a door she considered outdated, but Haleswood residents classified that kind of thing as required. And every so often he’d toss out a zinger or self-deprecating comment that made

her smile or laugh. She reminded herself it was nice. *He* was nice.

“Do you do that with everyone?”

He shrugged a shoulder, but as a trained observer, she already knew the answer was no—at least as far as everyone at work. She hadn’t found a good reason to investigate his home life yet.

Yet?

That kind of thinking only proved her overwhelming boredom. Unhappy with herself and her thoughts, she motioned him out of the office and locked up behind them.

“You take security pretty seriously.”

“Habit. It’s been my job for a long time.” And just because she was learning to be friendly within the context of Haleswood and the personnel around the court house didn’t mean she was going stupid. CS clients expected—and received—the utmost discretion.

This could be a diversion, a ruse to allow someone else to break into the office and snoop around. The scenario was extremely unlikely. But unlikely didn’t equal impossible.

Shaking off her random conspiracy theories, she stepped through the stairwell door he’d opened for her. “Any reason for strangers to be in town?”

“Besides you?”

He smiled when he said it and she felt her lips curve in reply. “Yeah, besides me.” Whether he meant she was the only stranger in Haleswood or she was something to draw strangers in was a question she didn’t want answered.

BANG

She was ready for the loud door this time and minimized her reaction to a small twitch.

Deputy Morris didn’t seem to notice the slamming door or her reaction to it. “We’ll have more visitors come through town to visit family for Christmas.” They rounded the landing. “But we rarely have any trouble out of them.”

“Family.” She’d intended to see her own family for the holidays. Then she’d been shot and traveling to New York just so her mother could fuss over her in person didn’t sound like fun for anyone. “Wouldn’t that mean they aren’t really strangers?”

“Suppose you’re right,” Deputy Morris said with a half-smile that caused a strange flutter in her belly.

It had to be the charming southern accent getting to her. She should be immune by now, surrounded by it day in and day out.

She’d met plenty of dialects and voice patterns during her life. At home in New York, in the Army, and now here. What was it about Morris’s voice that drew her in and made her want to melt? “Did you ever want to get away?”

“From Haleswood?”

She nodded. Was it Haleswood protocol to send his mother a note that he was batting a thousand in proper manners?

“I left for school for a while,” he said, opening the sheriff’s office door for her.

“Right.” Eva knew that already. And more. Too much free time meant she’d done rudimentary research on everyone who worked in the building, down to the two women who cleaned the place two nights a week.

Deputy Morris had spent two years in college on a basketball scholarship before coming home to help when his father was diagnosed with cancer. Of course, she could have spent a few hours at the Midnight Rooster coffee house and probably heard more details from the locals, but people usually put their own spin on information when they shared it. Eva had been trained to develop independent opinions about facts rather than simply absorb someone else’s perspective.

And, as Deputy Morris pointed out, she was still considered a stranger around here, which meant most of the locals either shared too much or too little when they talked with her.

“Hi, Mrs. Jackson,” she said with a smile. “What’s the trouble?”

“Hello, dear. It must be a virus. The screen keeps going black.”

Eva leaned closer, so she wouldn’t be overheard. “Bet that’s hell on your solitaire games.”

Mrs. Jackson arched her penciled brows over her festive red and green cheater eyeglasses. “You have no idea. But this morning I’m actually doing some undercover research.”

“Really?” Eva leaned back. “Do you need help?”

“I’m supposed to *be* helping.” The older woman glanced around. “Helping Santa Claus that is. What I need is for this monitor to stay alive long enough for me to compare prices and memory options on PlayStation consoles. Unless you have a recommendation.”

“I can make some suggestions, but first let me figure this out. Any other issues with the system?”

“No. It makes all the right sounds when I turn it on and off and it works just fine when I can see what I’m doing.” She waved a hand at the dark screen. “The control-alt-delete does nothing.”

“All right. I’ll take a look.”

“Be my guest.” Mrs. Jackson pushed back from the desk. “I’ll just get another coffee.”

Eva wasn’t sure caffeine was the best idea, but she wasn’t about to say so. Taking a seat, she started troubleshooting. By the time Mrs. Jackson returned, mug of steaming coffee in one hand and a slice of Danish in the other, Eva had figured out it was simply a matter of a loose cable.

She tightened the connections and explained what happened to Mrs. Jackson. As the older woman showered her with

praise, Eva wrote a note about what to look for and where to shop for the best deals on gaming consoles.

After a brief chat with the older woman, she prepared to leave, only to find Deputy Morris ready and waiting to escort her back upstairs.

When they were in the stairwell, she stopped on the first step and turned to face him. With the help of the riser, she was almost at eye level with the former basketball star of Haleswood High. “Am I under some sort of court house watch?”

He frowned. “Of course not.”

“Good.” She gave him a little finger wave. “Then you can go on about your business. I’m perfectly capable of handling a couple of doors all by myself.”

She turned and headed up the stairs before he could reply, but caught the sound of his boots behind her and paused again. “What part of ‘I’m capable’ wasn’t clear, Deputy?”

“The part where you leave before I can ask you out.”

Slowly, more than a little surprised, she twisted to face him once more, leaning against the handrail. “I beg your pardon?”

A wry grin tipped up the corner of his mouth. “You heard me. And call me Carson.”

“I thought everyone called you J.C. or Deputy.”

“You’re not everyone.”

Well, they agreed on that. She couldn't recall her last date. There must have been one on her last visit home before she'd joined Ross's investigation team. Her aunts were always trying to set her up with a 'nice young man'. The problem was she found nice young men boring.

She didn't have a bad boy complex. Having met plenty of those types, they didn't hold much appeal either. She wanted a man who shared a few of her interests and wasn't intimidated by her career or associates—past or present. She wanted—

“Do you plan to give me an answer?”

“Not before I know what you have in mind,” she shot back.

“How about I tell you on the way to your office?”

“Fine.” She figured he'd invite her to a movie at the one screen theater a couple of blocks away followed by pizza and a beer at O'Malley's. Not bad, just predictable.

His long legs made quick work of the two steps between them. “There's a police range down on Highway 521. Have you ever shot a .44 magnum?”

“Please,” she said dismissively. But it had been a long time since she'd held that kind of firepower in her hands. Unfortunately, she knew her shoulder wasn't ready for it.

“But you're interested.”

How did he know that? “You're awfully sure of yourself.”

“Why don't you tell me what you'd like to fire out there and I'll see what I can do to make it happen?”

Life in a small town sure hadn't limited his ability to read women. He'd pegged her in one when most men underestimated her on a variety of levels.

"Fine. A few rounds with an AT-4 rocket launcher would be fun."

He huffed a short sigh as they reached the landing and he opened the door. "That's a pretty unique way to say no."

She looked up at him as she passed. "Who's saying no?" And when had she decided to start flirting with Deputy Morris? *Carson*. "I'd enjoy some target practice with whatever you want to shoot."

His eyebrows arched. "Saturday then? I'll pick you up at ten."

"A.M.?"

"If that works."

BANG! The door slammed behind them, but this time the shock that followed was in front of her.

A massive man barreled out of her office, his hand gun trained on them.

Deputy Morris stepped in front of her and drew his service revolver in a smooth motion she might have admired at a different time.

"Stand down," she ordered, darting out to stand between the two men. "It was only the door." As both weapons slowly

lowered toward the floor, she raced forward, leaping into the open arms of the newcomer.

“Bart!” She punched his shoulder as he set her back on her feet. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“He was in your office, ma’am,” Deputy Morris said, stepping forward and nodding at the open door.

“Do not *ma’am* me.” It was one southern tradition she did not find the least bit charming. “Karl Bartholomew, Deputy Morris. We’re all friends here boys. Holster those weapons.”

When they complied, she stood beside Bart to reassure the deputy. “We worked together for years. I’m fine, Deputy—Carson,” she corrected when he glared at her.

“Concealed weapons aren’t allowed in the building.”

“What’s concealed?” Bart growled, patting the holster on his hip.

She stepped between them again, immediately concerned by Bart’s uncharacteristic edginess. Nudging her friend toward the office required more force than she expected. “Get in there,” she snapped.

He muttered under his breath, but he moved at last.

“I’ve got this,” she assured Morris.

After another long look over her shoulder, he turned away.

“Could you take the elevator? Please?”

Doing a fine imitation of Bart’s muttering, Carson reversed direction.

As Eva closed the office door, she felt an unexpected amount of regret that her Saturday invitation had probably been revoked.

Chapter 2

When the elevator opened on his floor, he turned away from the sheriff's office and headed out to the parking lot. He needed to cool off and the brisk December day worked in his favor.

Friend of Eva's or not, that man and the tense situation had scared him. Admitting it, even to himself, wasn't a comfortable feeling. It was one thing to be told about on-the-job fear in training, another to feel the adrenaline pumping through your veins and a life or death choice in your hands.

Generally, situations requiring weapons were rare in Haleswood. Usually he was grateful for that, but today it made him question his ability to fulfill his additional assignment as Eva's bodyguard.

Pitching in when Ross had asked a bunch of Haleswood citizens to keep an eye on Eva during her recovery from the gunshot wound was one thing. Pretty much the whole town rallied to support her. But this additional detail putting him in

Eva's path every day was proving challenging on a different level.

No surprise to find a woman of her exotic beauty stunning. Her Italian heritage was evident in her flawless olive complexion, thick dark hair, and the fire in her brown eyes. But he'd been very surprised that the more he was around her the more he liked her feisty nature and sharp wit.

At his car, Carson popped open the trunk. He pulled his emergency pack of cigarettes from the hiding place under the lining. Lighting up and taking a long, slow drag of smoke and nicotine into his lungs, his thoughts turned back to last week's private meeting.

"Stay close, be friendly," he muttered, remembering Carpenter's words. "Yeah, let me get right on that."

Carson dragged in another lungful of nicotine and toxins. As he blew the smoke toward the clear December sky he wondered how he was going to accomplish that now. Maybe the guy upstairs was his replacement.

The thought made him feel decidedly unprofessional about the whole mess.

It would have helped if Ross had offered a clear definition of suspicious contact. Gun-toting bear fit the bill for him, but obviously not for Eva. Apparently they trusted him enough to protect her, but not enough to reveal the details of the progress they were making. They were all damn lucky he hadn't fired on her friend Bart.

That kind of thinking was reckless, he knew. With a shaky hand, he raised the cigarette to his lips for a last inhale. As the smoke left his lungs, he rolled the filter between his fingers until the ash fell out. Pocketing the filter, he pulled out his phone. He sent a brief text to Carpenter about the bear with the gun and then headed back to the office to catch up on his real job.

At the door, his phone chimed the arrival of a new text message.

On my way. Keep her in the building.

Eva didn't bother to ask how Bart got into the locked office. For all she knew, Ross had sent him a key. She was more concerned by the bizarre tension radiating off of her friend.

With the office door closed and locked again, she perched on the edge of her desk. "What is wrong with you?"

Bart shook his big head. "Sorry. I heard the shot—"

"The door."

"Sounded the same to me."

It sounded the same to her too lately, but she knew why she couldn't tell the difference. She'd been away from the Army and regularly scheduled qualifications for too long. While she kept current on her service weapon—until she'd been shot—her support role kept her at the computer and her few

surveillance assignments hadn't been of a violent nature. She wanted to know his reasons for freaking out over the slamming door. "Why?"

"Huh?"

"You can usually tell the difference between two nine-millimeter pistols on a busy qualification range."

Bart wouldn't meet her eyes. His avoidance was more frightening than having him aim a gun at her. Her instincts prickled with apprehension, but she believed in dealing with fear—and everything else—head on. "You didn't come all this way to go mute." She gave him a soft kick in the shin. "Talk to me."

"You remember that night mission."

He couldn't be talking about the night mission that immediately popped into her mind. They'd vowed never to bring it up again. "There are a few of those in our history."

He looked at her and the despair in his eyes sent a chill down her spine. He couldn't be here about *that*, couldn't be bringing her worst nightmares up from the dark pit of Yemen to the quiet peace of Haleswood.

The emergency scanner crackled with a report about a 911 call at the middle school. The fire department sirens blared through town first, followed by one of the deputy cars from downstairs. Would Morris take the call or someone else?

How quickly life could change. An hour ago, it would have been the most important question of her day, now... "You're

sure about this?”

Bart reached into his pocket, pulled out his cell phone, and swiped the screen a few times. “Look,” he said, handing it to her.

She stared at the news article on the screen and told herself it was a hoax. Anyone could post anything on the internet and make it look real. But the brief, official obituary under what appeared to be the header of a major-market newspaper made her lightheaded.

“Why haven’t I seen this?” She held the phone out to Bart, but he wouldn’t take it back. She had alerts set up for news like this. At least once a week she scanned the headlines worldwide for this name and his related associates. Nothing had ever popped up. “This is nothing more than a hoax.”

“Eva.”

“Don’t ‘Eva’ me.” He wouldn’t take his damn phone so she left it on the desk and went to her own computer to search. “There is no way I missed this.”

“Did you read the whole message?”

She couldn’t listen to this and not just because of the stress-induced pounding of her pulse in her ears. Confirmation would prove she was overreacting. Her fingers flew over the keys while she muttered Italian curses that would make her father blush.

“It has to be fake, Bart. I would’ve known if he’d died. It has to be fake,” she repeated.

“Read the rest of the email, Eva.”

She’d read it in a minute. “How did anyone in that family get your email address?”

“Public record?” He shrugged. “The truck stop is a busy place and I’m not trying to hide my ownership.”

“You’re a thoroughfare, I know.”

“It’s true.”

She glanced up and saw her dear friend, a proud man, a strong soldier, standing there oozing doubt and defeat. Just as he’d looked after that fateful mission.

It all came rushing back from the murky corner of her mind where she kept that god-forsaken night locked away. They were supposed to save a young man who’d been groomed to take over the Morcos family businesses. But the queen of languages had misinterpreted the intent behind the intel and sent a delicate rescue mission spiraling into a deadly recovery op.

Not the brightest moment of her career.

Rather than let her take all the blame—the right thing to do—Bart had insisted on shouldering the failure with her. Their CO knew the truth was somewhere in the middle. Everyone on Special Forces lived with the cold awareness that things didn’t always work out as planned.

That night they’d brought back a body, two wounded soldiers, and managed to undermine the leadership foundation

of an organization they'd been sent to stabilize. No, not her finest hour at all.

“You can't keep blaming yourself.”

That was why she kept it locked away. “I don't.” They both knew she was lying. “Not every day,” she clarified. “It's not like it consumes me.” Eva clamped her mouth shut, damming up the justifications and excuses that wanted to keep tumbling out.

Bart's big hand landed on her shoulder and she barely resisted the urge to lean in and take comfort. She didn't deserve his comfort, she'd put him in danger—more than necessary—and it would seem he believed someone was determined to retaliate against her now.

“Pull up my email, Eva. Read the whole thing.”

Neither of them pretended she didn't know how to access his account. Her skills were one reason she'd made the intel side of their Special Forces team.

She shook her head as she logged in with his user name and password. Why Bart—or any of her pals from the past—put up with her was a mystery. A mystery she didn't dare question or solve for fear of losing a dear friend.

“This should've gone to your spam folder,” she said, studying his inbox.

“Lucky for you it didn't.”

For her? Hesitating, bracing for the worst, she finally clicked on the email. This time she got past her outrage over the article

outlining the death of the businessman they'd been trying to support.

Bart was right, the message itself was worse.

"Tell the queen her reign is over."

How could the sender know her old Special Forces team had called her that? It was an inside joke because the guys had claimed she looked like a princess even in her ACUs and they said she sounded like a royal whenever she switched languages.

"It's not real. An empty threat." Her words, whispered from a throat gone dry, lacked any believable bravado. She reached for her water bottle, sipped, and tried again. "Why send it to you? What's the payoff?"

Bart snorted. "Because you might as well be a ghost online and you know it." He walked over to the window, but rather than look out over the street as she'd done earlier, he dropped the blinds. "Or maybe it's because I'm the one who hauled his nephew's body out of that filthy slice of jungle they called a compound."

"You think this is from Bakr Morcos?"

"Who else? He's in a position to hire it done, don't you think? His brother sure as hell didn't send the email from beyond the grave."

"I told you that obituary has to be a hoax," she insisted.

"Prove it."

She would, given enough time. Abraham Morcos couldn't be dead. Not yet. Her mistake couldn't be turning into a real time disaster already.

“Does Ross know?” According to the information on her screen, Bart hadn't yet forwarded or replied to the bizarre email message.

“I showed him.”

She frowned. “Showed?” Now, with his spine stiff and his jaw set, Bart looked more like himself. She waved off the question. “Got it. You were with him in Columbia.” Eva double checked the time of the email, realizing Bart must have driven straight from the capital city to Haleswood moments after he'd seen the message on his phone.

“Doesn't take a genius or a ghost to figure out you were working on something else.” He'd probably been sharing intel on a drug bust or making an identification on some other issue. His truck stop really was a thoroughfare and the authorities frequently called on the unique expertise and observation skills he'd gained in Special Forces.

At least the time stamp proved this wasn't why Ross insisted on her staying here. Freaky message or not, if Ross planned to act on this supposed threat he wouldn't leave her out of the loop. “Well you've delivered the message. Want to grab a coffee before you hit the road?”

“I'm, ah, not supposed to leave.” Bart shuffled his big feet.

She rolled her eyes, expecting as much. “I don’t need a bodyguard.” Bum shoulder or not, she could take care of herself. “Especially here. After all of Ross’s precautions during Allie’s case, as part of the CS team who saved her, I’m accepted around here now. No one can hassle me without a community of witnesses to intervene.”

“Or a slew of innocent bystanders to abuse on your behalf.”

“That’s a low blow.” True, but low. She shot out of her chair and went to the blinds, yanking on the cord. Sunlight flooded the office as she leaned against the sill. “It’s a small town.”

The emergency scanner went off again announcing a collision with personal injury and naming one of the drivers. “Did you hear that? The 911 dispatcher knows who’s involved in that accident. Strangers stand out here, Bart. I spend most of my time here in the office.” Even though she hated it. “I’m in the *court house*. No one can get to me.”

“I got in with a gun,” Bart countered.

“Please.” She snorted. “You’ve got clearance to walk into the NSA with that gun.” It was only a small exaggeration. Maybe. “Listen to me,” she said, reaching up to pat his cheek. “Bakr can send you all the threatening emails he wants from wherever he’s hiding. I bet the fake obituary is a distraction to hide one more of his takeover attempts. He wouldn’t dare come here.”

Her friend just shook his head like she was too naïve for words.

“Hey. Relax. Even if he has some sort of brain freeze and shows up, I can take care of myself.” It would be easier when she could shoot, but she wasn’t helpless. As soon as Bart left, she’d start tracking this persistent bastard down. This was exactly the sort of project she wanted—needed, really. Something to test her skills and consume her time. He wouldn’t be hiding for long. “Go home to your son.”

Bart crossed his arms over his barrel chest, making it clear he had no intention of respecting her point of view on this. “Ross told me to stick around.”

Of course he did. It’s what paranoid bosses did when they didn’t want to lose personnel. “Go home,” she repeated. “Ross knows I don’t need a babysitter—”

Bart lunged, shoving her to the floor. It was the last thing her shoulder needed, but shattering glass interrupted her baffled protest.

Bart slumped to the floor, one hand clutching his chest, the other fumbling for his gun.

Eva groaned against the strain of pulling him closer to the wall, away from the line of sight. Pulling his gun from the holster, she flipped off the safety.

“Sniper,” he said in a gurgling voice.

Obviously. She needed to call an ambulance for Bart. She wanted to return fire. While she’d never been in the field taking fire, she knew the mission protocols as well as any of the soldiers she had supported with her real time intel.

Sirens erupted on the street, boots and voices bubbled up from the floors below.

Time slowed, each beat of her heart separate from the one before and after. She knew the layout of each building on this street. With a crystalline clarity she made her choice. Pivoting on her knees, she raised the gun and her eyes swept the roofs across the street for a target.

Spotting movement at the corner of the post office building, she took aim and squeezed off a three round burst.

And missed. Her volley didn't even slow the sniper down. Telling herself it had been a long shot—literally—she ducked back down to help Bart. “Haven't you learned not to jump in front of the bullets yet?”

“Get him?”

“No.”

“Sorry.”

“Shut up.” She covered his hand with hers, pressing hard into the wound. Blood seeped through her fingers and she alternately prayed and shouted for help while searching out anything to use as first aid.

He gasped. “Led him. To you.”

“Shut up,” she repeated. “One more word and I'll put you out of my misery.”

His mouth jerked in what might have been an attempt to smile. “Yeah. Love you too.”

At the sound of breaking glass, Carson met Mrs. Jackson's startled gaze. They were the only two people in the office. "Go check on her," she said. "That sounded close."

Carson started up the stairs, taking them two at a time when he heard three gunshots.

"Shots fired, floor three," he reported through his radio as he eased the stairwell door closed. Hurrying down the hall, he heard muffled voices in Eva's office and he caught the sound of movement on the main stairs. More security. Court wasn't in session today, so it would be a skeleton crew, but they were competent. Assured by the backup, he burst through the door, weapon drawn, to find half the window gone and Eva kneeling at her friend's side, their hands clasped on his chest, blood soaking into his shirt.

"Love you too," he said.

Okay, more than friends.

When no one shot at him, he lowered his gun and stepped closer.

"He needs an ambulance," Eva called. "He's been shot."

Carson nodded. He was already calling it in. "On the way," he said, completing the request. "What happened?"

"Sniper on the post office roof. I opened the blinds and Bart went down."

Carson made a mental note. He'd been up here enough to know Eva kept the blinds open all the time. So Bart had closed them. Had the man known there was a threat?

"I fired back. No luck."

"We'll find him." Someone had to see something. Carson had dozens of questions, but he kept them to himself as paramedics arrived.

"I'll ride with him," Eva announced as they rolled the stretcher bearing Bart out of the office.

"No." He signaled the ambulance crew away. "You'll ride with me." He'd had no word from Carpenter and he wanted to get some answers out of Eva without an audience. Based on the crisis, he didn't think staying in the building was the best move, but he wasn't going to let her out of his sight. "They have him stabilized."

"Right."

Her pale face and shaking hands made him want to hold her. A gesture he was sure she'd reject. "Security will guard the scene until the crime lab techs get here."

"Right." She closed her laptop and gathered the components.

"Leave it here."

"Absolutely not." Ignoring him, she tucked the various tech gear into a well-worn Army issue messenger-style bag. "I understand chain of evidence and I promise to cooperate."

“Eva—” Words failed him at the sudden, cold fury sparking in her deep brown eyes.

“This office was attacked.” She drilled her finger into the desktop. “Until I know why, my work goes where I go. Cypress Security protocol.”

He studied her. “You’re making that up. Sheriff Cochran can release your things to your boss later.”

“No.” She shook her head. “A new protocol is still a valid protocol. Ross would kill me himself if I let our work sit out for anyone to stumble over or steal.”

Carson had a mother and sisters. He recognized an immovable force when he saw one. “Come on then.”

She stayed quiet until they reached his car, the only official car left in the lot. “Why didn’t you answer the school emergency?”

“Wasn’t my turn.”

“What about the car accident?”

“I’m not a paramedic.” He could hardly tell her the sheriff had worked it out so he was almost always in her vicinity. “And the person injured is a friend of Sheriff Cochran.”

“He must be worried.”

“We’ll probably see him at the hospital.”

“Of course.”

He opened the passenger side door for her and she slid in without any remarks on his manners or her capabilities. He

took it as a fair indicator of her high stress level. When he was in the driver's seat, he paused to think about what information he needed first. "Why was Bart in your office?"

He'd seen her lock it, why didn't it bother her that he'd broken in?

"He was worried about an odd email he'd received. I was trying to convince him it was nothing."

"You believe he was shot over this email?"

"It's possible," she admitted. "But it's only one explanation. Bart earned a few enemies along the way."

"And you?"

"What about me?"

"Who are your enemies?" He estimated another two minutes to the hospital and held out hope she'd give him something more substantial than this. He wondered if it would help or hurt his cause if he mentioned the Morcos family.

"That list grows after every assignment," she said with a weary attempt at a smile. "I've been accused of being pushy and abrasive."

"Come on, Eva." He couldn't hide his disappointment. Avoidance wouldn't help either of them. "If that sniper was aiming for you, who do you think sent him?"

"Why don't you believe he was after Bart?"

"My job at this point is to explore all the options and I'm talking to you right now. Who might be after you?"

She sighed. “No idea.” She patted her laptop bag. “But I intend to find out.”

He was forced to drop the subject as they pulled up to the emergency room entrance, where the sheriff was chatting with a nurse waiting with another patient in a wheelchair. The sheriff opened Eva’s door, then leaned in for a second. “I’ll take her inside, get her cleaned up, and settled. You need to get an update on Bart and if he’s able, I want some answers.”

“Sure thing.”

With the ER staff bustling around him, Carson made a few notes for the report he knew Ross would demand at the first opportunity. When he was allowed a few minutes in the ER bay with the patient known officially as Karl Bartholomew, the man proved as evasive as Eva had been and Carson knew it wasn’t just the pain meds blurring his memory.

“Why did you close the blinds?”

Bart scowled at him, though his face was almost as pale as the pillow under his head. “It was too bright. I had a headache.”

Carson hooked a foot around a rolling stool and sat down, putting himself nearly nose to nose with Bart. “I have a job to do here. You strike me as a man who understands that concept. If you led a sniper into this town, I need to know about it.”

“So that’s how it is, huh?” Bart laughed, wincing from the pain it caused. “Men fall for her wherever she goes. You’re not her type.”

Carson had a sudden urge to add 'broken nose' to the man's medical chart. Keeping his fists on his knees, he played a hunch. "Why did you take a bullet meant for her?"

"You wouldn't?"

Carson battled back his immediate affirmative reply and stared Bart down.

"Better me than her," Bart continued. "If anyone can find the bastard who ordered that sniper to take the shot, it's Eva."

The curtain slid back and Mrs. O'Kelly, a nurse who worked with his mom, smiled at him. "The sheriff's asking for you, J.C."

"Thanks."

Chapter 3

Carson returned to the waiting area to find Sheriff Cochran pacing back and forth in front of the receptionist's tall desk. "They're waiting for us in the office. What's the prognosis on the big guy?"

He wondered who 'they' meant, but figured he'd find out soon enough. "Good prognosis, I guess. Mrs. O'Kelly says he's stable and no one seems too worried about him." Except Eva.

"I called in some help from Florence PD for a protective detail."

Carson nodded, following the sheriff away from the noise of the ER and into the quiet of one of the admin offices. Ross, Eva's boss, glanced up as they walked in, but Eva's gaze remained locked on her computer screen.

"How's Bart?"

"Stable enough to answer a few questions," Carson replied, pleased when his answer caught Eva's attention.

“What did he tell you?” She caught her lower lip with her teeth while she waited for his answer.

Carson was tired of the information flowing only one way—away from him. “Did he complain of a headache when he arrived?”

Ross and Eva exchanged a surprised look. “Bart never has headaches.”

“So why did he really close the blinds?”

“Dammit.” Ross straightened, crossing his arms over his chest and frowning at Eva. “They followed him straight to you.”

“Never on purpose. He couldn’t have known anyone was that close,” Eva countered.

“Whoever is out there, he’s good,” Sheriff Cochran added. “Spread us thin with those staged emergencies, then took his shot.”

“Staged emergencies? No one else has been hurt today?”

“Not so far,” said the sheriff.

Theories bounced around between the other three and Carson felt like the odd man out again. Granted, he was, but if they trusted him to keep an eye on her—

“Hold on. Let’s back this up,” Ross interrupted. “Deputy Morris needs to know what he’s up against.”

While he appreciated that on one level, he didn’t care for the way Eva suddenly studied him like he was some sort of

contagious germ under a microscope.

She turned an accusing look on her boss. “You’ve had him tailing me?” She ranted in Italian with what sounded like some German mixed in for emphasis. “Unbelievable.” Turning on Carson, she added, “I should have known.”

“Sounds like you need to get two of us up to speed,” Carson said. No way was he taking the brunt of her attitude or possible retaliation for this. It wasn’t his idea to keep her boss informed of her coming and going around town or to report any and all visitors. Which to date had only included him and Bart.

As assignments went, keeping an eye on a woman as vibrant and beautiful as Eva was no hardship. The more time he spent with her, the more he wanted to amend his earlier ‘prickly’ assessment and replace it with ‘complex’. Still, if she wanted to be angry with someone over his hovering, he’d prefer it if she aimed those emotions at Ross.

“Leave him alone,” Ross snapped. “He was helping me.”

There was an unholy gleam in Eva’s eyes. “Was that to smooth over any hard feelings that you once suspected him of murder?”

“What the hell?” Carson looked to the sheriff, who just shrugged.

“Be quiet, Eva. You’re just upset. Picking a fight won’t help.” Ross caught Carson’s gaze. “She can tell you about it

later. You'll have plenty of time because I want you two joined at the hip until this threat is resolved."

A task all the more challenging now that any sincere personal progress he'd made with her was wiped out. Trying to be professional, he said, "You were about to explain the threat."

Ross opened his mouth, but Eva interrupted with a raised hand.

"I botched the intel on a rescue mission when we were in the Army. The son of a powerful man had been taken hostage and we—well, the guys with guns—went in to get him out. If the son died, the uncle, a real nasty piece of work by the way, would inherit the business." She paused, running a hand down her long ponytail. "No one wants that to happen, even if most people don't know they don't want it to happen. Are you tracking?"

He nodded.

"My job was to interpret the intel and guide the rescue team. I screwed up."

"Maybe."

She flicked a hand, dismissing Ross's defense. "Do you speak Russian?"

"No," Ross replied. "But—"

"Well, apparently I'm not as fluent as I thought." She raised her eyes to Carson and her steely resolve made him ache for the heavy blame she carried. "The error was on me. I blew it

and our team walked into more firepower than should have been there that night. The son died en route to the father even though Bart did all he could to save him.”

“The kidnapers had no intention of letting him live,” Ross said.

“Doesn’t matter. A bad analysis—*my* analysis—of good intel was the problem.”

The body language between Ross and Eva gave him a more complete picture. “You think she was set up,” he said to Ross.

“I do. The mission was full of good intentions but it went straight to hell in a hurry.” He dropped a hand on her shoulder when she tried to interrupt him again. “Our current intel says the nut job we were trying to keep out of power has already taken over and is nipping loose ends to secure his position.”

“I don’t believe that,” Eva protested. “Abe Morcos is *not* dead.”

“And yet a sniper put a bullet in Bart,” Ross said through a clenched jaw. “In the middle of Haleswood.”

There was obviously much more going on and Carson’s mind darted back to the report he’d have to file as the first responder to the incident in her office. “So today’s shooter *was* after Bartholomew?”

“Doubtful,” Ross said. “If Bart was the real target, they could’ve taken him out in any number of places on the drive from Columbia to Haleswood.”

“Unless he wanted me to watch Bart die,” Eva murmured.

“No one knew you were here,” Ross disagreed. “Until now.”

Carson thought about it, trying to make the pieces he did have fit into some logical order but there were too many blanks. “How does today’s attempt support your previous intel that Eva was a target?”

“Yeah,” Eva turned on Ross. “Where is *that* information?”

“You’ll get it. One of my contacts picked up chatter about a bounty for any information on the whereabouts of the American queen.”

“That’s all? Come on, even for Mr. Overprotective, that’s thin. ‘American queen’ could refer to anyone.” She threw her hands into the air. “We both know how teams use odd nicknames for their analysts.”

Carson didn’t believe her team had called her queen out of a warped sense of humor. Didn’t she realize her tendency to rule any room or situation with either a friendly or intimidating approach?

“Not so thin when we verified the bounty is offered by Bakr Morcos.”

Carson watched the color drain from Eva’s face. She froze, like someone had hit pause on a movie. If the mere mention of the man’s name did this, he knew there was more she wasn’t sharing. She just wasn’t that fragile.

Again, he felt the urge to shelter her, to hold her. If nothing else, a touch might jolt her out of the shock gripping her.

He couldn't watch her suffer. He cleared his throat. "What do you need from me?"

Eva and Ross exchanged a long look full of meaning. Whatever discussion happened in the silence, she lost and her gaze fell to her clasped hands.

"Bart received an email a few hours ago. Eva will show it to you once you're in a secure place. When you add that email to the previous chatter and today's sniper attack I think it's safe to say Morcos is out for Eva."

"If I'm the target he must be new to wet work. I was in that window long enough for an experienced shooter to take my head off."

Carson's stomach rolled sickly at the thought.

"Regardless, the authorities want to contain Bakr and they know Eva is both the best possible bait and the person most likely to find him."

They could start throwing out good news anytime now. "You think he's here in town?"

"No, not personally."

"Not yet," Eva said it like a vow. "He likes to keep his hands clean," she added, still studying her own. "They think he'll make an exception for me."

"Morris, you'll be her personal security detail. I want her to sit tight, right here in Haleswood. Her singular task is to find Morcos before he takes her out. Do whatever you have to do to help her and keep her out of harm's way."

“It’s better if I leave town.” She smiled up at him with such an artificial sweetness, his teeth ached. “You can help me move someplace cool... like Florence.”

“No.” Sheriff Cochran shook his head. “Ross is right. You’ll stay in town.” He looked to Ross. “Deputy Morris is more than capable of protective detail, as you well know, but he’s entitled to support and back up from people he trusts.”

“But the sniper could—”

“Take out innocent citizens anywhere,” the sheriff finished for her. “Just because you wouldn’t know them personally in Florence or anywhere else, doesn’t mean their families wouldn’t suffer the loss.”

The admonishment set Eva’s cheeks aflame. “Of course, I didn’t mean to imply...”

“I know darlin’,” Sheriff Cochran said with his kind, fatherly voice.

Carson knew from experience it didn’t mean the man was done with his lecture or easing up on his position.

“The people in this town will expect me to put their minds at ease about this attack. That means working the case the right way and Deputy Morris, first on the scene, can’t just up and disappear.

“Ross, I’ve given you a lot of leeway these past weeks. I’d like you to respect my take on this. With our combined efforts I believe Ruth’s house would be the safest place in town. She has all the amenities and it’s defensible.” He cleared his throat.

“She can move into my place until Eva gets this resolved. Between us, we can find trustworthy personnel to maintain a twenty-four hour perimeter surveillance.”

“I still want someone with her.”

“I don’t need a babysitter,” Eva groused.

The sheriff ignored her. “My deputy here can hardly move in with her without causing a scandal that would end his prospects with Shannon O’Kelly.”

“And here I thought we were living in the twenty-first century,” Eva said.

Carson felt her gaze on him, but he was too busy trying to keep his mouth from falling open to give her any kind of acknowledgement. Shannon had dumped him last year—rather publicly. Hard to believe the sheriff had forgotten that.

“What’s the big deal? The sniper brought this situation out of undercover status.”

Wondering the same thing, Carson appreciated Ross asking first.

“Hang on!” Eva surged to her feet. “What is wrong with me staying at the motel?”

“Too public,” the sheriff and Ross said in unison.

“Bad enough if you’re under the same roof,” the sheriff added. “The same room is out of the question. Even in the twenty-first century. You’d drive each other crazy in minutes.

Besides, Deputy Morris can't get in and out of there without being noticed."

"Everything gets noticed in Haleswood anyway," she said. "I'm already settled at the motel and the public location works against whatever Morcos has in mind."

"You're not the tactical expert," Ross said. "It's easier to protect you at Ruth's."

Carson appreciated her effort, admired her argument, but he knew the sheriff. And Ross's implacable expression didn't bode well either. She'd lose this battle. They both would.

"You're more secluded at the house," the sheriff said. "There's more space, separate bedrooms, and a full kitchen. That means less need for coming and going which gives the sniper fewer chances to take out my deputy.

"Plus, she's got that new security system and the neighbors are still on alert to any oddities after the trouble last month. All of that works to your advantage, young lady."

"Secluded or not, everyone will know I'm there in less than five minutes." Crossing her arms drew his attention to her chest. Carson looked away, hoping the sheriff would relent. "What's the gain?"

"We can defend you more effectively," Ross repeated.

She rolled her eyes. "If it's so safe up there, I don't need a babysitter or a bodyguard."

"You need someone who can fire back," Ross stated plainly.

Eva gasped, it was clearly one betrayal too many. “Fine.” Once more, she slid her laptop into the bag. “Work out your secret entrances, handshakes, and code words. I’ll be with Bart.”

She stormed out, leaving the men to stare at one another.

“She’ll come around,” Ross said, sounding less than convinced.

“I’ll call Ruth.” The sheriff raised his cell phone. He nodded to Carson. “Go on and stay with her until you get word we have a perimeter in place. I imagine that will take us a few hours.”

Carson winced.

“She won’t admit it, but she needs support while Bart’s in surgery. As much as they bicker, they’re very close,” Ross finished.

Carson nodded. That sort of thing worked for some couples.

Chapter 4

“**W**hy did he close the blinds?”

Eva popped one of her ear buds free and glanced up from her computer into the clear blue eyes of Deputy Morris. “Pardon?” She’d been ignoring his presence; it was safer for him that way. The hospital wifi in the surgery waiting room was dreadfully slow and the lack of immediate progress exacerbated her edgy mood.

“The blinds. If your friend didn’t have a headache, why close them?”

“Why are you so hung up on the stupid blinds? Wouldn’t you rather be up on the post office roof trying to find a lead on the sniper?”

“Yes, but I’m assigned to you.”

She saw his resignation and understood it completely. “Outranked and outflanked.” She slumped in the chair and stared up at the ceiling. “We’re a sorry pair.”

“I could probably help you more if you’d talk about it.”

“Nothing to talk about until I know what’s what.” She closed her laptop. Defeat and getting stonewalled seemed to be the themes for her day.

“Why did he close the blinds?”

She groaned. “You are a broken record.” Putting one of her ear buds back in, she said, “I’m pretending you’re not here.”

“Fair enough, since I’d rather be anywhere else.”

That stung, even if she felt the same way. “Are the blinds that important to your report?”

“It was practically your first comment at the scene. You could veg with whatever’s on your playlist, but why not do something for the case? The wifi here sucks.”

“Gee, do you come here often?” She leaned away from the annoyed look he aimed at her.

“It’s common knowledge.”

Guilt slammed into her. He must have spent hours here at the hospital when his dad was sick and dying. Whether he meant the connectivity issues or his father’s death didn’t matter. What was wrong with her? Curt or abrasive she would own up to, but she’d never been accused of being completely insensitive. “Deputy M—”

“Carson.”

“Carson.” She swallowed, trying to clear the lump out of her throat. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend.”

“I know how you could make it up to me,” he said with a teasing half grin that held too much appeal.

She arched a brow and smothered the urge to grin back at him. “Only if your request applies to the official business we’re supposed to be discussing.” When he rolled his eyes she gave herself a point in whatever contest they were having. “To be clear, Bart isn’t some kind of traitor or double agent. He wasn’t at the window sending a signal. The only reason that makes sense is that Bart dropped the blinds because he was afraid for me.”

“Rightly so, it turns out.”

She shrugged. “Maybe.”

“You really aren’t convinced you’re the target?”

“Nope.” Denial was a beautiful thing and she’d indulge it on this topic until the last possible second. She leaned into him, close enough so no one else could hear, and the subtle, crisp scent of his cologne teased her nose. He didn’t seem like the cologne type, but she liked it. “Because we don’t really *know* anything other than some idiot with a gun shot out a court house window.”

“Fair enough. So Bart’s trustworthy and the sniper is just a random idiot. Got any other theories that might lead to an arrest in this case?”

She was saved from telling him outright lies—or worse, the truth—when a young woman walked up sporting a hospital ID that read ‘S. O’Kelly’.

Hmm. With Haleswood's modest population, it surprised her that she hadn't met any of the O'Kellys yet. Unless mother O'Kelly had a thing for alliteration in naming her children, this was likely Carson's prospect Shannon, as the sheriff had put it.

Blonde, blue-eyed, cheerleader type. Eva took in the details with the thoroughness of a jealous lover, which only added to her irritation with the whole day. Shannon and Carson would be a perfect, charming picture together. *Ack. Hairball.* It was one thing to feel possessive about a man she was dating. To feel this way about a man who'd only asked her out as a way to appease her boss was a new low.

"Ms. Battaglia?"

As if there was any real question. She was likely the only person in the room Miss O'Kelly didn't know personally. She set her laptop aside and stood. "Is he out of surgery?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Eva managed not to cringe at the *ma'am*. "When can I see him?"

Those perfectly glossed lips curved in a warm smile. "Mr. Bartholomew's surgeon will be out shortly to fill you in."

"Okay. Thanks." Eva rubbed her palms together. She was almost free of this waiting room with its cheerful décor, glossy brochures on chronic illness and death, and terminally slow internet.

The more time she spent in Haleswood, the more she realized the rest of the world didn't move at the same fast pace

she preferred. As much as she enjoyed the people, there were moments when she felt like she'd been transported back in time.

Her mind raced forward. She'd spend the night here with Bart, feeding him ice chips or sneaking him ice cream, whichever he preferred. And tomorrow they'd convince Ross to let Carson off the hook for babysitting. Full of nerves, she looped her laptop bag across her body and wrestled her cell phone out of her pocket. "I'll notify his family." It would give Carson a chance to woo his perfectly adorable 'prospect'. *Gag.*

She sent a quick text message to Bart's ex-wife, promising someone would let her know more when details about his expected recovery time came in. Another text went to Ross. Still aggravated, she wasn't ready to communicate verbally with her boss just yet.

In the reflection of the window across the room, she watched Carson walk Shannon back to her desk. Because so many terrible things could happen in the thirty or so feet between here and there.

Eva pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes. She couldn't possibly be this petty all the time. A difficult day was no reason to snipe about the people who'd been helpful, even in her mind. She'd never resented nice people or common courtesy before.

Determined to reverse her negative attitude before the surgeon arrived, she took slow, deep breaths and focused on a happy memory. It was an exercise her mother had taught her

when her temper kept getting her in trouble in the seventh grade. That in itself was always the first happy memory.

“Doing the right thing is commendable, Evangeline,” her mother had said with pride. “But you must do it in the right way.”

Back then, Eva had been standing up for a friend who was getting bullied for the high crime among children of being different. In that instance, her friend had been deemed too short and Eva had taken action, punching the bully in the nose and labeling him ‘Too Bloody Tom’.

She figured the reminder was timely here. Trapping Bakr Morcos would require not only the right actions, but taking those actions with the right support and going through the right channels. Irritating or not, her temper would only create more problems in the current circumstances.

“Eva?”

“Yes?” She turned to find Carson looking at her with far too much concern. Beside him stood a man in scrubs. “Hello.” She extended her hand. “You must be the surgeon.”

The newcomer nodded. “Mr. Bartholomew is in recovery and doing well. The bullet missed everything vital, so we have no serious concerns. He’ll stay overnight for observation and I expect he’ll be discharged in the morning.”

“Can I see him?”

“Of course,” the surgeon said with a nod. “A nurse will come get you as soon as he’s in a room.”

“Thank you.” Relief swamped her and she sagged into the nearest chair the moment the doctor walked away. “More waiting,” she said to Carson.

“But you know he’s okay now.”

She nodded, unable to give voice to all the fear she’d felt when that bullet tore through Bart. Losing him – or any of her friends from her Army days – wasn’t an option.

Carson held up his phone. “Sheriff Cochran called. Ruth’s place should be ready for you in an hour or so.”

“Okay.”

“Once you’ve seen him we’ll get you moved.”

“Am I the only one who understands bringing more ‘strangers’ to the area raises more questions and makes us more vulnerable?” Carson silently stared at a point just over her shoulder. She knew the painting on the wall behind her wasn’t that interesting. “Aha! You agree with me.”

“Didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to. It’s all over your face.”

“The additional security team coming will be vetted. They’re not strangers if we know them.”

“Convenient reasoning.”

He grumbled an indecipherable response just as her cell phone hummed with an incoming text.

She pulled up the message, read it, and dropped the phone. Stupid move. This guy would pounce on any sign of

weakness. She looked around the waiting room wondering who it could be. *Think!* But the dread icing her spine made logic a challenge. Less than ten people had this cell phone number. Until now.

She'd been hoping only Bart's phone was compromised, but it looked like whoever was pulling the strings had more details than they should. As much as she'd argued this wasn't only about her, the new text proved Ross was probably right.

Carson knelt to pick up her phone. "What is it?"

"Just jittery," she said with a brittle smile. "Without being obvious, can you tell me if there are any strangers in here?"

His gaze narrowed when she showed him the text.

He impressed her with his lack of reaction to both her request and the threat glowing on her cell phone screen:

Greetings vostra altezza. It seems another pawn has sacrificed himself for you. Cooperate and the suffering will end.

"What's *vostra altezza*?"

"It means 'your highness' in Italian."

"I see." Carson returned her phone, his hand steady and his lips set in a grim line. "Forward that to your boss. I'll alert the sheriff."

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Is there anyone you don't know sitting around here?"

He sat down beside her, draping his arm across the back of her chair. With the ease of an actor secure in his role, he sent the sheriff a text and then balanced the phone on his knee while he waited for a reply. “Nope. Same faces I’ve seen all my life.”

That was a whole different kind of scary in Eva’s opinion. It should have been a comfort, being able to quickly discern who belonged and who didn’t. Instead, the concept baffled her.

“Has anyone left the room since that message arrived?”

“No one’s moved.” She scanned the room again. “No one’s too interested in us. Well, aside from that couple.”

He nodded and smiled in the general direction of the couple in question. “The Shepards. She’s my mother’s cousin. Quite the scandal when she married a *stranger*.” He dropped his voice to a whisper on that last word. “They probably think I’m cozied up to you to make Shannon jealous.”

Were they cozied up? “Is she the jealous type?”

“Not about me,” he muttered, distracted by the sudden flash of an incoming call on his cell phone.

They were close enough she could hear the sheriff’s voice barking at Carson through the phone. She shook her head when she heard the order to leave the hospital immediately.

“Not until I see Bart,” she whispered.

He signaled her to hush and patted her knee. She glared. The man had a death wish. She would leave the hospital once she saw Bart was safe and not a moment before.

Her cell phone hummed again. She read the text, not surprised Ross was on the sheriff's side, but at least his message offered a small consolation. Her boss understood her all too well.

He's fine. I'm standing guard at his door until Rick arrives. Go. Hide. Fight.

She wanted to argue, but couldn't. Ross hadn't been on that mission, Morcos wouldn't consider him a target. And she couldn't track him down without decent internet access.

Resigned, she tilted the phone for Carson. He nodded and, with the phone still to his ear, they left the hospital waiting room together. He made her wait while he pulled the car to the door. When she was safe in the passenger seat, he pocketed his phone and asked for hers.

“Why?”

“The sheriff says Ross will get you another one. They think the sniper or whoever hired him will use it to track your location.”

She wasn't buying that excuse. “Like that would be a challenge. He already knows I'm in *Haleswood*. Not a lot of places to hide here.” She sensed Carson didn't want to push her and belatedly recognized his primary concern. “Stop coddling me. I'm not going to have a nervous breakdown because some jerk is sending me threatening text messages.”

He stared at her; or rather she assumed he was staring at her. His eyes were shielded by his dark, county-issue sunglasses. It

was kind of sexy in a masculine mystery and power sort of way. She swallowed. “I’ll admit the message rattled me if you admit it’s been a difficult day.”

“You dropped your phone and mentally turned everyone in the waiting room into suspects.”

“Hey, you cleared the Shepards.”

“Do you ever just cooperate?”

“Not usually,” she replied with zero remorse. “Seriously, changing phones is a mistake. If he thinks he’s getting under my skin with creepy messages, he’ll stay focused on me. Perceived success fuels the power-hungry types.”

He put the car into gear and eased out of the parking space. “So you’ve given up the idiot with a grudge against buildings theory?”

“Sadly, yes. I liked that theory.” It let her keep her independence. “It seems unlikely anyone with a beef against the court house would be inclined to find my phone number and send that kind of text.”

“And refer to you as a royal.”

That bothered her too. More than she intended to admit to anyone. It meant Morcos had turned a Special Forces soldier into an informant. Then or now. She shivered. Or he’d managed to outwit the computer encryption of the op somehow. Again, either back then during the op or through some traitorous connection now. She wasn’t sure which scenario frightened her more.

“Can you at least take out the battery until we get you moved in to Ruth’s place?”

“Sure.” She removed the protective case and popped the battery out, showing him the separate pieces before tossing them into her computer bag. “Where are we going?” She’d expected him to turn back toward town, toward the motel.

“I was instructed to get my things together first.”

“Ah.” And wherever he lived, he didn’t want to risk unwanted attention. Couldn’t blame him. He probably had lots of family in the area he didn’t want to expose to her current trouble.

“You do know the sniper could simply be tracking the vehicle?” His jaw clenched. Of course he knew. What was wrong with her today? She usually managed things—and people—better than this. Contrite, she apologized. “I’m not always the voice of doom.”

Carson shrugged. “Stress happens.” He was handling all of this with remarkable calm while she couldn’t shake the image of Bart falling to the floor.

She studied the landscape, trying to distract herself. They passed a sign for hayrides, a Christmas tree stand, and a few minutes later he slowed the car for a four way stop with harvested fields on all four sides.

“Were these cotton or tobacco?” When she’d first arrived in the area, she’d found the farmland charming. It seemed like they grew everything from apples to zucchini out here. She

wasn't a stranger to the process, having helped with her grandmother's productive garden plot in a corner of their small back yard in the city, but real agriculture and the community attitude was vastly different.

"These were all cotton."

"*Hmm.*"

"There's a cotton museum over in Bishopville if you want a history lesson."

She'd been through Bishopville a couple of times on errands for Cypress Security, and remembered seeing a small sign for the cotton museum. No way it would compare to the museums she'd grown up with in New York. The entire town of Bishopville could probably fit in one wing of the Met with room to spare.

"I'd like that."

"You're serious?"

"I enjoy a good museum." If cotton was all the history she could get her hands on right now, she'd make the most of it. "Has to be a good distraction, right?" Not that she wanted a distraction as much as she wanted a real-time location of Morcos and his sniper pal.

"I guess. For about five minutes."

"It doesn't excite you because you grew up here, but I'm going with the 'when in Rome' philosophy."

He turned off the road onto a gravel track shaded by a canopy of trees. “You seem better suited to Rome than Haleswood.”

“Is that some sort of crack on my ancestry?”

A laugh rumbled out of him. Or maybe it was a sigh that got tumbled around by the bumpy road.

As they emerged from the trees, she forgot any cracks about ancestry and gasped at the sweet little house with gingerbread detailing perfectly flanked by green topiaries. Low hedges framed flower beds that were dormant under a fresh layer of red cypress mulch now, but she could imagine them bursting with color the rest of the year.

“You live here?” It looked like something out of a fairy tale.

“Curse of the oldest,” he said with a wry smile.

“What curse? It’s charming.”

“It’s time consuming. My grandfather built it for my grandmother when they married and worked on it all his life. The house has become an ongoing project for all of their kids and grandkids.”

“And the oldest?”

“Gets to learn the value of home ownership and all the maintenance effort that goes with it.”

“Family matters.”

“Yeah,” he said, getting out of the car.

She understood the importance and value of family. In fact, she was grateful for that common denominator connecting her big city past with her current small town situation. She thought it might be the one element that helped her fit in and kept her from going stir crazy around here.

Following him to the porch, she thought the Morris family did excellent work. The steps didn't creak, the paint wasn't chipped, and the windows gleamed. "You've put in a lot of time."

"Tell me about it. The oldest kid does get the benefit of free labor and is always the job supervisor." He grinned, clearly pleased with a provision he'd used without regret.

"Does the second in command do the gardening? Those topiaries are fun."

He glanced back over his shoulder as he pushed open the front door. "That's my grandma's influence. Again, we all have to learn. My grandparents are do-it-yourself types with a wide streak of whimsy."

"I like them."

"The grandparents or the plants?"

"Both," she said, with a grin. A sudden rush of happy barking from the back of the house had her hesitating on the doorstep. "Should I wait for introductions?"

"You're safe with me," Carson said, over the canine greeting. He'd dropped to one knee, letting a dark spaniel turn

in ecstatic circles, roll onto his back for a belly rub, and then jump up to repeat the process. “This is Sheldon.”

She took a step closer. “Nice to meet you, Sheldon.”

At the sound of her voice, the dog glanced up at her with an expression that could only be defined as a smile. He looked to Carson and at some signal she didn't see, the dog rushed forward. She leaned down and got a face full of wet dog nose.

“No licking.”

She didn't care and it seemed to make the dog happier. “He's fine.”

“Give him an inch, he'll take a mile,” Carson warned.

“That wouldn't be so bad, would it?” She talked a little nonsense while she stroked the sleek body and soft ears. “He's gorgeous. What breed?”

“He's a Boykin Spaniel.” He snapped his fingers and the dog rushed to his side, butt wriggling. “Let the lady breathe.”

“I wouldn't think your job allows for a dog.”

“Maybe in a busier office you'd be right. But he's my buddy. Softest mouth and fastest learner of his litter.”

“Those are good things?”

“Definitely.” Carson was grinning now, an expression she found too charming. “You wouldn't know it now, but he's silent and still in the boat when we're duck hunting.”

She'd have to take that on faith since Sheldon didn't seem inclined to exhibit calm anytime soon.

“Let me give him a chance to run while I pack.”

With another of those imperceptible signals, Sheldon bolted out the front door and Eva took a minute to look around.

From the outside appearance, she expected softer furnishings in a cottage style with floral chintz and an abundance of throw pillows. Instead, the sleek, dark leather sofa and oversized chair cozied up to the brick fireplace were a welcome surprise. She could easily picture Carson stretched out, beer in hand and a basketball game on the flat screen television.

An oak drop-leaf dinette set had the place of honor in front of the other front window and the pale cabinets in the galley kitchen looked as conscientiously maintained as the rest of the house.

“This is a really nice place.” Shannon must love it here. The thought made her twitchy.

“It works.” He quirked an eyebrow. “Make yourself at home. I won’t be long.”

The urge to follow him back and see how he’d decorated his bedroom came out of nowhere. She shoved the errant train of thought off the track. His most personal space was absolutely none of her business. As a diversion, she studied a collection of photos near the fireplace. The age and style of the pictures reminded her of her own family.

She’d planned to go home for Christmas, if only to get away from the love-struck Ross and Rick and their brides-to-be. But now she was stuck. No way she’d put anyone back home in

Bakr's sights—it was bad enough the citizens of Haleswood were exposed by her proximity.

She rubbed her arms as her skin prickled with a sudden chill. If he'd dug up her cell phone number it wasn't a big stretch to think he might have already tracked down where she came from.

She reached for her phone, momentarily forgetting it was in pieces in the car. There had to be a way to warn her family. *Stop*. Ross would have handled both the necessary notification as well as a security team as soon as he'd determined the threat was legit. Panic was exactly what Bakr wanted from her. From any of his victims. It was his standard operating procedure. He'd already used fear tactics to instigate action by following a worried Bart right to her office. She couldn't keep getting sucked in—wouldn't cave to the victim mentality.

“All set.”

She jumped at the sound of Carson's voice. “Great.” She tried to smile as her heart slammed against her ribcage.

“Sorry to startle you.” Carson studied her for a moment. Her eyes were wide and haunted and her face was pale. Her knuckles were white where she gripped the back of the chair. “Did you get another text message?”

“What?” She glanced down and cleared her throat. “No. The phone's still in pieces in the car. I'm just lost in thought.”

“You’ll make this harder on both of us if you lie to me.”

“I don’t lie,” she snapped, shooting him a scowl cold enough to freeze an ocean.

He stared back, grateful his sisters had given him a measure of immunity against lethal gazes.

“Withholding information for security purposes isn’t lying,” she said. “And I haven’t even done that. Besides, my phone’s out of commission, remember?” She spread her hands wide and turned a circle.

The move did nothing but tempt him. Between the body and attitude, she’d tempt a saint. This wasn’t the time, if only because they were too close to his bedroom and he could too easily picture her there, her dark hair fanned across his pillow.

“Something spooked you.” He motioned for her to lead the way to the door, a little concerned she didn’t grumble over his wording. Whistling for Sheldon, he recognized her dodging the question as she bent to love on the dog when he came racing around from the back of the house.

“He’s not coming with us?”

“No.” Was that disappointment he heard in her voice? “My brother will pick him up and take care of him for me until this is over.” He tried to sound confident it would be over—and quickly. It was obvious by the tension in her face that she wasn’t happy about disrupting lives.

“So tell me what spooked you,” he repeated, locking the door behind them.

“Points for tenacity,” she said, with a weak smile. “I had a moment. Thought I should warn my family.” She turned toward the car. “What if he did more than find my cell phone number?”

“Such as?”

“What if he found my family already? What if he’s cloned the phone?”

He’d never seen her rattled like this. She was always so steady, so untouchable with her immense self-confidence that bordered on cocky. One of them needed to be logical and under the circumstances, it looked like it fell to him. “Has anyone been hovering close enough to do that?”

“No. But everyone hovers in this town. Maybe he paid someone to do it.”

“Highly unlikely.” He tossed his bag into the back seat before sliding behind the wheel.

In the passenger seat, she practically vibrated with tension. “I know. But what if he’s managed to hack my personal information or the CS records?”

“Then he’s a step ahead and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“And I thought I was the voice of doom.” She bounced her palm against her thigh. “Point taken. I’m sure Ross is handling it, but I just want to warn them, you know? But if I try, I’m afraid that will give Morcos an opening if he *doesn’t* have the information.”

Carson could practically hear her teeth grinding. “I get the impression you don’t do afraid.”

“Almost never.”

His grandmother always insisted they tackle trouble head on, no matter how simple or complex the problem. Eva was on the complex end of the trouble scale when her days didn’t involve old enemies and new snipers. “When was the last time?”

“Can’t remember,” she mumbled.

He laughed. “You said you didn’t lie.”

“I don’t like you much right now.”

Did that mean she liked him at other times? It was the wrong detail to seize on and he felt like the awkward kid in school for doing so now. “A common complaint in my line of work. Answer the question.”

“The last time I was afraid was on an assignment.”

“Which you can’t talk about because it’s still classified.” He felt the long look she sent his way, but he kept his eyes on the road.

“I’m not going to apologize for my career.”

“No one’s asking you to. I was going to ask what helped you over the fear factor the last time you were afraid.”

“Bart.”

Carson gripped the steering wheel, telling himself it didn’t matter. He had no claim on her. Just a significant interest. A crush really. And wasn’t that a demeaning admission?

“And the rest of the team,” she added, “even the night I screwed up the analysis.”

He didn't know all the details, but he knew something about her after keeping an eye on her these past weeks. She didn't jump to conclusions. She was thorough, no matter the size of the task. He thought this whole thing sounded like a set up, but figured she wouldn't want his opinion. Being a deputy meant challenges and sacrifice, but he knew it couldn't compare to what she'd gone through to make a covert Army team.

“So how did Bart help you through?”

She toyed with her necklace, sliding the pendant over the chain. “He completed the mission without ending up dead.”

She was making this difficult on purpose and he should accept the cues and back off. His job was to stick with her and keep her safe. Emotional support wasn't on his to-do list and she clearly didn't want it.

He turned off Main Street into the motel parking lot and pulled to a stop in front of her room.

“You can wait here.”

“Thanks, but you're stuck with me.”

She laughed. “Ross has a bark much worse than his bite.”

“Doesn't matter.” And he didn't believe her. “You forget I grew up with him.”

Her eyes danced with mischief. “Maybe our time together will pay off. Will you tell me his deep, dark secrets?”

“Only the ones that don’t incriminate me,” he said following her into the motel room.

That sultry laugh rolled over him again. He closed the door and planted his feet before he did something rash like spin her around and kiss her. It didn’t take a vivid imagination to know that would backfire.

He studied the room, if only to keep from watching the way she moved as she gathered her belongings. The bed was perfectly made and he knew it wasn’t because of the maid. Various chargers and cords were lined up on the edge of the desk and the few clothes on hangers were organized left to right by type and color. “You could have rented a real place.”

She shrugged. “My stuff was already here. They cut me a weekly rate since I didn’t want maid service daily.”

He’d heard that through the grapevine but decided she’d rather not know that detail. She packed swiftly with an efficiency he appreciated. The longer they were out, the more he worried about the sniper. He checked his phone, but hadn’t missed any messages.

Where was he hiding and who was pulling his strings? “Do you think the sniper and the guy sending you text messages are the same person?”

“No. Morcos hired someone, likely a team, to tail Bart in an attempt to find me or torture me with his death.”

“How can you be so sure?”

She brushed by him on the way to the bathroom. “Because Bakr doesn’t have the patience or the skill to make the shot that took Bart down today. But he wouldn’t pass up an opportunity to play mind games. Hence they aren’t the same person.”

“You don’t think he can change?”

“Not a chance. He doesn’t do the wet work. His type considers it a menial task.”

“Today’s sniper was no slouch.” All the more worrisome that no one had spotted him anywhere in town yet.

She zipped up her suitcase. “Is there anyone in town—someone not a stranger—who could have taken that shot?”

He’d been wondering that himself. “No one in Haleswood has any reason to take a shot at you for any price.”

“That we know of. Sheriff Cochran should check recently filed missing persons reports.”

“Trust me, if someone isn’t where they’re supposed to be, we find out at the Rooster before anyone has time to file a report.”

“Putting a bullet through a window might have been a ransom payment.”

“Come on. You’re suggesting a pretty sophisticated and detailed network in a short amount of time.”

“That happens to be Bakr’s specialty.” Her shoulders slumped. “Call it charisma with a life-threatening edge, he

inspires a certain loyalty. As for time, that's irrelevant. For all we know he's been working on this since the day I screwed up that rescue.

“Following the idea that he hired someone local...” Her voice trailed off while her fingers worked the pendant back and forth again. “That implies he didn't need to follow Bart to find me.”

A thought which was obviously taking a toll on her. “Let's get to Ruth's place and then you can figure it out.”

“It's a plan.” She winced as she hefted a tote over her shoulder.

He held out a hand. “Let me carry it.”

“I've got it.”

“I know, but we're about to leave your motel room. We'll be visible on Main Street.”

“So what?”

“If my mother or grandmother hears that you were carrying your own luggage I'll never live it down.”

She rolled her eyes. “You're exaggerating.”

“Nope.” He motioned for the bag again.

“But if they see you carrying my luggage, they'll think my shoulder isn't healing.”

He hadn't expected that argument. “Nah.”

“*Umm*, yeah.”

“Well, that will get cleared up when we get back from the range on Saturday.”

“What?” The shoulder bag fell to the floor. “You still want to go?”

“Why wouldn’t we? Unless Ross vetoes it as a security risk. Or have you changed your mind?”

“What could be safer than a trip to the firing range? Live ammo, right?”

“Of course.”

She beamed and took a giant step back from her luggage, arms spread wide. “Haul away, kind sir.”

Her bright smile was worth every effort he’d made to bring it out. He scooped up her bags and let her lead the way out to the car.

Chapter 5

Minutes later he pulled up to Ruth's house and, following orders, drove around to the back, parking at the garage. He went to the keypad and entered the code to raise the door. When he turned to the car he caught Eva scowling. "What's wrong?"

"You know her security code?"

"Sure. I've done repair work for her." He recognized the exasperation on her face and the cause. "Relax. The sheriff parked us here for a reason. Defensible. Perimeter. These terms ring a bell with you?"

She shook her head.

"Defensible means—"

"Oh stop it." She dragged her luggage from the back seat. "I can probably reprogram it without much hassle."

He squelched the automatic offer to handle the bags, knowing she'd argue and insist on doing even more for

herself. Grabbing his things, he locked the car and lowered the garage door behind them.

They passed through the workout room Ruth had carved out of the breezeway between the garage and the kitchen. He glanced around, impressed that everything looked normal again. He hadn't been here since the night when Ross had stopped an assassination attempt on Ruth's niece, Allie, last month.

Now it was his job to prevent a similar attempt on Eva's life. The thought settled like a block of ice in his gut. He said a prayer he was up to the task and that the woman would cooperate. Just a little.

"I'm setting up back here."

He followed her voice to the den. A small room with a wide bay window overlooking the lake, he couldn't decide if it was safer than the rooms on the front side of the house. Perimeter or not, he would have suggested a windowless room but she'd never go for the idea of riding out the threat in the tiny downstairs powder room.

"Stop trying to judge the distance and target resolutions," she said as she slid her laptop out of the bag. "Shall I define perimeter for you?"

"No thanks."

"I'm sure one of Ross's old pals is already hunkered down in the best spot, thrilled to death to be in his ghillie suit again."

"Takes all kinds I guess."

“It does. Could be worse,” she said with a wink. “We could all be former Marines.”

Ignoring that, he reached for the bags she’d brought from the motel. “I’ll get these upstairs.”

“Oh, no. Don’t bother with that. I figured I’d just stay down here. Couch feels comfy enough.”

She was babbling and refusing to meet his gaze. “You can’t work this twenty-four-seven.”

“I can and I will. The sooner we find this bastard the better.”

“We’re already here. Ruth would want you to be comfortable.”

“Couch is comfy,” she repeated. “I’ll be fine right here.” Her eyes were on her computer, but he could tell it wasn’t close to done booting up.

He left the bags and eased into the chair across from the couch. “Talk to me.”

“I am talking to you.”

Bracing his elbows on his knees, he whispered, “Do you have some terrible fear of the upstairs?” It earned him an annoyed glance. “What’s really bugging you?”

“What? Bakr Morcos isn’t enough?” She leaned back from the laptop and rubbed her hands together. “I hate tossing Ruth out of her home, okay? It’s wrong.”

“It’s temporary. She and the sheriff are getting married soon. There’s more to it.”

“Again. Not liking you.”

“You’re worried about Bart. Let’s call the hospital and check in.”

“It’s more than Bart.” She leaned back and stared at the ceiling. “If the doc says he’s fine and Ross says he’s protected, I have to accept it as true and do my job.”

He tried not to read too much into the professional tone of her voice. Her fortitude in tough circumstances was one of the things that attracted him, but that ‘love you too’ Bart had uttered echoed persistently in his head. “Then what’s the real issue?”

She cracked her neck before meeting his gaze. “This whole hideout idea is stupid and inconvenient. Taking you away from your job, your family, and Shannon is an imposition. If they insist on you staying here with me, despite the protective detail out there, the least I can do is minimize it.”

“You’re my job right now.”

“But the sheriff said—”

“Forget what Cochran said.” He still didn’t understand why the sheriff had even made a reference to Shannon and he had bigger issues on his mind. Like keeping her alive. “We may be small town, but we’re still professionals, Eva. You should understand and respect that just like everyone else.”

“I do.”

She might have said more, but his cell phone sounded an incoming message. “Speak of the devil. It’s the sheriff.” He

read the text message. “Says he’ll be here within the hour.”

“Great.” She turned her attention back to the laptop, her fingers already flying over the keyboard. “Here’s hoping I’ll have some news by then.”

He left her to it, quietly hauling everything upstairs to the guest rooms. She didn’t need to stay downstairs and make her challenge any tougher. Her woman-on-a-mission attitude was understandable, but Ruth would be appalled if Eva didn’t make herself at home for however long it took to rein in Morcos. Not that there was much chance Ruth would find out if Eva slept on the couch, but it was the principle of it.

He placed her luggage on the bed in the room at the back of the house and tossed his duffle inside the door of the bedroom across the hall. Standing there, looking from one open door to the other, he shook his head. Ruth’s hospitality was the least of his worries. He’d never get any sleep knowing Eva was only a few paces away.

On the other hand, staying awake meant he’d do a better job of keeping watch. He headed back downstairs to the kitchen to verify there was plenty of coffee to clear the cobwebs in the morning. Passing the den, the soft glow of the laptop highlighted Eva’s face. The furrowed brow and narrowed gaze told him she was engrossed with whatever filled her screen. He’d seen the look plenty since she’d come to town.

It didn’t take much to imagine the way she’d laugh if she knew the direction of his thoughts. He was almost grateful this wasn’t the time or place to make a move. Reality check, he

thought. Even if he took that leap, Ross and Bart would string him up in a heartbeat. She was off limits and well out of his league.

He'd just finished a mental grocery list when the doorbell rang. Eva didn't seem to hear it, making him wonder if she was pulling real leads already.

The front door opened before he got there and the sheriff's voice stopped him from drawing his gun. "It's just me, J.C. I've brought the radios and a couple of guests."

"Come on ahead, then." The door swung wide and two more silhouettes followed Cochran into the dim foyer. "She's settled in back here."

"*She* is right here." Eva stood in the doorway between the den and kitchen.

"Ms. Battaglia," the sheriff said, removing his hat. "Think you'll be comfortable here?"

"What's that about? You always call me Eva. Oh," she said, drawing it out and frowning as she spotted the others. "Special Agent Nichols must have rubbed off on you."

Sheriff Cochran was flanked by a tall guy in a suit and a woman in a DEA windbreaker. Neither of them looked too happy.

Carson moved to Eva's side as the sheriff introduced Special Agent Dan Nichols of the FBI and Hannah Thalberg of the DEA.

“Hannah?” Eva’s brow furrowed. “Has something else happened to Bart?”

“He’s stable and his room is guarded,” the sheriff said quickly. “They’re here because today’s sniper incident might be connected to an open FBI case.”

“I’m really just extra baggage,” Agent Thalberg said.

“Regardless,” the sheriff continued, “with Ross’s various contacts this is quickly turning into an unofficial joint effort. Ross wants Nichols kept in the loop.”

Eva planted her hands on her hips. “On which details?”

“All of them, Ms. Battaglia,” Nichols replied. “You should know your reputation precedes you.”

“I’ll take that to mean we all know I earned my place on one of the most elite teams in the Army, Special Agent Nichols.” She turned a brilliant smile on the DEA agent and extended her hand. “It’s good to meet you at last, Hannah. Are you staying?” She glanced around. “We could make it a girl’s retreat and kick out these guys.”

Carson thought the FBI agent’s jaw might crack.

“Tempting,” Hannah replied with a stiff smile. “But I can’t stay. I only tagged along with Ross from the Columbia office when I heard about the, ah, incident.”

“You’ll see him before you go.”

It sounded like an order to Carson’s ears.

“I will,” Hannah agreed. “You do know you get better toys when you play nice?”

Eva slid her gaze to Nichols. “You brought me toys?”

“I have some resources in the car that might expedite your search,” Nichols said. “I’ll be taking your current computer and phone.”

“Absolutely not.”

“I have Ross’s approval.”

“Well, he didn’t get mine.” She took a step back as if ready to defend her computer and phone to the death.

“Our forensics team—”

“Won’t find a damn thing I can’t find.” Eva cut him off. She threw her hands up. “I’ll keep you informed of my progress. If someone found a weak link in the CS network security and exploited it, I can turn that to our advantage. It’s better to feed him what we want him to know than cut him off and force him to start over.”

“You don’t get a vote.”

“Then you don’t get my help.”

Nichols took a step closer, and Carson shifted to block him. Nichols tried to stare him down, but Carson didn’t flinch. His job was keeping Eva safe so she could stay on task.

“What are you trying to hide, Ms. Battaglia?”

“Not a thing. If Ross wants you informed, I’ll do that, but not by handing over my system.”

“Eva,” the sheriff said calmly, drawing Nichols back. “We’re all here to help you resolve this as soon as possible.” He motioned the other agents back. “Go on and get the system and give us a minute.”

Carson heard the FBI agent cursing Eva’s stubbornness as he walked out. He added the strange animosity to the growing list of questions he wanted answered.

“I can’t turn over my phone, Sheriff,” she began, but he cut her off with a raised hand.

“You have to. The plan is to have those two leave the house in Nichols’s car with your computer and cell phone.”

“Oh, lord.” Her hand went to her pendant. “They’re trying to draw out the sniper.”

“Yes.”

“If they fail...”

Carson could tell she was more worried about the agents succeeding in drawing the sniper’s attention. He agreed with her concerns. It felt like an unnecessary risk.

“It’s long odds.” The sheriff patted her shoulder. “We don’t have any hard evidence from the post office rooftop. Not a footprint or shell casing. No indication of where the sniper might be.”

“No leads from the false alarms?” Carson knew it was early, but surely someone had seen something.

“None,” Sheriff Cochran said. He turned back to Eva. “Ross needs you to hand over the phone and computer. Trust him.”

“Trust someone,” Nichols growled, returning with two oversized black molded plastic cases that looked like they were better suited to an underground military installation than a cozy den in Haleswood. Shouldering his way between Eva and the sheriff, Nichols headed into the den. “Come on and I’ll give you the rundown. You’ll thank me later.”

Her lip curled in a dramatic sneer and Carson had the distinct impression she was mentally cursing Nichols in more than a few languages as she followed him. A few seconds later he heard the sound of latches flipping open and a happy little exclamation of surprise from Eva. Apparently the new toys would be worth the tradeoff.

He went the other direction to confer with the sheriff about scheduled check-ins, shift rotations, and radio channels.

“Careful what you wish for,” Eva murmured, studying the lake from the safety of the dimly lit den. She didn’t feel comfortable turning on the lights and giving whoever might be watching a better view.

When she’d wished for a new case to challenge her, she didn’t think it would be her own life on the line. It was hard to believe guards were already posted around Ruth’s property. Men the sheriff and Ross trusted to keep Morcos away from her. The temperature was dropping and there was a chance of

snow in the forecast. She made a mental note to get the names of everyone on this detail so she could thank them when it was done.

“Fair warning,” she said, feeling Carson hovering in the doorway. “I’m going to go crazy hiding here, rattling around in this antebellum monstrosity.” The house was lovely, but all the space and quiet intimidated her. Even the windows mocked her, waiting to shatter under a bullet’s impact at any moment.

Her skin actually itched with the vulnerable feeling. Once more, she reached for the place where her side arm should be. Her shoulder couldn’t get strong fast enough. Going unarmed annoyed her more every day—and that was before she’d heard about Morcos’s bounty. She was about to ask Carson to hook her up with a weapon when he said something completely unexpected.

“This house isn’t antebellum.”

“Yeah, that was the relevant point.” She’d been inside Ruth’s home once before and the memory wasn’t her favorite. Not bad, just not her favorite. She’d been on surveillance detail when her target—Ross’s high school sweetheart, Allie—took off on an impromptu run through the countryside. They’d ended up here in her aunt’s kitchen, Allie looking none the worse for the effort and Eva gasping for breath and fighting a side stitch.

“Antebellum means pre-Civil War.”

“I know that.” Surely, she’d known that. “But come on. You have to admit the house is ‘Frankly Scarlet’ Southern.”

“True.” He laughed and she took a little too much pleasure in the deep, baritone sound. “Have you ever been to Georgia?”

“No.” Quiet, sedate south wasn’t her thing. Big, noisy cities with a lively urban nightlife were her preference. “You know, I thought Columbia was rural,” she admitted. “Then Ross showed me his house by the lake.”

“Now that *is* rural,” Carson agreed. “I wondered who bought the land a few years ago. Allie and Ross used to meet there in high school when it was nothing but a quiet cove.”

“Really? Do tell.” She urged him to join her at the other end of the couch. “Seriously,” she said when he hesitated. “What else is there to do right now?”

The facial recognition software was doing its thing and until she had the Morcos file from the FBI she couldn’t do much more than keep reliving the failed mission. Since it hadn’t done her any good so far, she’d prefer any distraction to get it out of her head.

He’d left his hat somewhere, the kitchen probably, and she noticed the slight curl of his blond hair. Inviting him closer might have been a mistake, but it was too late now.

“I shouldn’t talk about it,” he said, as he settled his lanky frame onto Ruth’s tapestry couch. He sent her a sheepish smile. “They hated gossip back then.”

“Because it was all about them?”

“Often,” he admitted. “They were inseparable from grade school on. Her daddy didn’t like Ross and was always

bragging about Allie's big prospects."

"You mean prospects like Shannon?"

"No." He shook his head and something like regret darkened his expression. "Prospects like going away to college and launching a big career."

"She landed a sweet gig with that company in Virginia."

"Yeah. Everyone here talked about that for weeks. Ruth and her parents were so proud. But she rarely came home to visit."

"What about Ross? When we caught that case, I got the impression he'd lost contact with her."

"He left town right out of high school and never came back. As far as anyone in town knew, he was still in the Army. Until he showed up with you."

"Me?"

"Yep." He cleared his throat. "I heard he only sent a picture of himself at some random base on the other side of the world for their tenth high school reunion."

But she latched on like a dog with a bone to what he hadn't said. "What do you mean he showed up with me?" She felt fifteen again; when the cute guy at her sister's wedding reception had asked her to dance. The happy flutter of attraction was dialed up high. The only thing missing was the wedding band doing covers of cheesy love ballads.

You're a grown up, Eva. Act like it.

“You, umm, mentioned his name when you did carry out breakfast at the Midnight Rooster. Strangers get noticed,” he added.

There was that word again. *Stranger*. The one that made it clear she didn’t fit in here. She couldn’t deny being ridiculously flattered he’d noticed her and somewhat ashamed of herself that she hadn’t really *seen* him until later in the investigation. Of course she knew about him, along with the rest of Sheriff Cochran’s staff, having run the background checks at Ross’s request. But she hadn’t *noticed* him until the day she’d been shot.

To be accurate, it had been the day after the shooting. He’d driven her from the hospital to her motel room to recuperate. She’d wanted to be alone, but the community wouldn’t put up with that. Someone had stopped by every day for the first week and every couple of days after that, until she finally preempted the visits by going to the Rooster on her own.

“How long has Ross had you tailing me?” *Was that a blush creeping into his face?*

“Not as long as you think. We were all happy to help while you were recuperating. You saved Allie.”

“Okay, okay,” she held up her hands. “I’ll back off that topic. It’s just weird. I don’t like the thought of people hovering and pampering. There’s a reason I’m not going home for the holidays.”

He laughed again, softly, but it was no less effective. “We’re lucky none of Ruth’s neighbors have been by with a ‘welcome

to the neighborhood' pie or casserole.”

“They would do that?” She rubbed at her shoulder. “It’s not like I’m really moving in.”

“In a heartbeat. If only to get a read on what we’re doing here together.” He pushed a hand through his hair.

She dragged her gaze away from the movement and hauled her thoughts away from how it would feel to touch him. *Think of Shannon*. She flirted, teased occasionally, but she never poached. As much as she hated it, this man was off limits.

It was a welcome relief when her email pinged a new message. She leaned forward, mentally crossing her fingers it was the file Nichols promised her.

“You seem pretty happy with the FBI set up.”

“It’s sweet,” she confessed without thinking. “Please don’t tell Nichols I said that. I knew they had cool stuff, I just didn’t know how cool.”

“Why do you hate him?”

“Hate is a strong word.” She sighed. “It boils down to having different philosophies.”

“Got it. He strikes me as a rules guy.”

“And I don’t strike you as a rules girl?”

His half grin did terrible things to her equilibrium. She turned her attention back to the monitor and clicked to download the file. “Rules are fine,” she said at last. “I wouldn’t have made it in the Army if I couldn’t follow rules.

Maybe it's more accurate to think of Nichols as a good agent who hates my methods."

"What are your methods?"

"Pretty straight forward. I do everything in my power to get the job done." She cut him a glance from under her lashes.

"And I know how to uncover the things people most want to hide."

Chapter 6

In a New York City penthouse, Bakr Morcos sipped warm brandy while waiting for word on the woman he hunted. As he'd expected since his opening move, her handlers had closed ranks to protect her. It would be a pleasure to dispense with them one by one. The first to fall were hardly worth the time, the price a mere necessity for setting the stage.

Outside, snow fell gently on Central Park, but his gaze was locked on the antique chess set on the low table in front of the fireplace. Hand-carved from camel bone, it had been in his family for generations and, though it was cumbersome, he rarely traveled without it.

The pieces gleamed in the leaping firelight. He plucked the black queen from the board and held her carefully in his palm. Like the dark queen he hunted, the fire was greedy and passionate, all too eager to act without regard for the result.

Theirs was a delicate game of strategy, made all the more intriguing because he didn't know what to expect from her. Reports could state her skills in the most clinical manner, but

gave no true insight. Tapes from the night his nephew died were his only indication of how she behaved in a crisis. He would have to react as she did, yet stay within the confines of his goal.

He swirled the brandy, picturing her lovely face pale and contorted with pain when she realized everything she loved was cinders—burned by her own choices.

So close. These final moves would play out and then he wouldn't have to imagine anymore. The queen would be at his feet, begging him to kill her.

Winner takes all.

Chapter 7

Eva woke to pale winter sunshine seeping through the bedroom window. She hadn't closed the shades when Carson dragged her off the couch and pushed her up the stairs. He'd let her work well into the night before insisting the computer could run the facial recognition program without her.

Rolling over, she checked the cell phone. Four hours of sleep wasn't bad. No new messages from the hospital or anywhere else. Probably a good thing under the circumstances. She stretched, appreciating the soft flannel sheets, content enough now to admit Carson was right about the bed being a vast improvement over the couch. Aside from the excellent accommodations, the intensity of the situation and the schedule made her feel like she was back with her team.

Only this wasn't her team. This time she was in civilian clothes under the direct protection of a sexy guy with a charming accent. This time she had no idea who would act on any intel she provided. Both factors should make this search

for the Morcos brothers easier for different reasons. Instead she felt worse.

Eager to get back to work on the sweet setup Nichols had brought, she gathered a change of clothes and padded quietly down the hall for a quick shower. The hot steamy shower did wonders for her tight shoulders. Dressed in jeans and her favorite red sweater, she crept past Carson's room and down the stairs.

She measured out coffee and set it to brew while she checked for any return on last night's queries. "Where are you, Abe?" she whispered to the screen. There'd been no confirmation of the obituary in the email Bart received. Until she had the news from a reliable and independent source, she would not accept his death.

Her stomach rumbled as she turned to the second computer. According to the facial recognition program, courtesy of the FBI, Bakr Morcos had yet to enter America. She wasn't sure she believed that either. With the nearly unlimited resources of his family business and the wide network of associates on both sides of the law, there were too many plausible options for entering the country undetected.

"One good lead and you're mine, you twisted jerk."

She went to the kitchen to fill a mug with coffee and start breakfast. Ruth had every gadget and top of the line appliance and Eva couldn't resist the lure any longer. Cooking kept her hands busy while her mind worked through a problem and Morcos was nothing if not a problem.

Last night's dinner had been smothered chicken from the Midnight Rooster. While Eva appreciated the gesture, she was determined not to put Ruth out any more than necessary. The sheriff had delivered the delicious meal personally, along with news that Hannah and Special Agent Nichols failed to draw out the sniper.

He considered it a failed ploy, but Eva put it in the 'win' column. To her, it meant the sniper and Bakr—the man most likely pulling his strings—knew she was right here. While it felt a bit constricting, it also meant as long as she stayed put, he had to come to her.

How to make that happen sooner rather than later?

She stewed on the question as she pulled eggs, cheese, and a package of thick-sliced bacon out of the refrigerator. When the skillet was hot, she added the bacon and started cracking eggs into a bowl. She paused at four, two for each of them, then added two more for Carson. He had a lean build, but there was a lot of it.

As if summoned by the thought, Carson came down the stairs in well-worn jeans and a white t-shirt, his gun in a dark leather holster at his hip. With his hair damp from the shower and his jaw shadowed with morning stubble, he stirred a different kind of hunger inside her. It took a supreme effort not to whisk the eggs right out of the bowl.

“Good morning.” He placed the radio on the back counter on his way to the coffee pot. “Need topped off?”

“Please.” Topped off by him would be ideal. She pushed that image out of her head in a hurry. “I hope you like eggs.”

He added a splash of cream before taking a long sip of his coffee. “Yup.” He glanced from the bacon sizzling in the skillet to the wall oven. “Want me to make biscuits?”

“You cook?” At his raised eyebrow, she laughed. “Ah, another area of Morris family training?”

He winked. “I’ve learned it pays off.”

That was a loaded reply if she’d ever heard one. It sent her imagination on another wild ride, but this one ended on a less than happy note. How often had he cooked morning-after biscuits for Shannon? “Then why do I always see you at the Rooster?”

“Your boss had me tailing you,” he reminded her, turning on the oven.

She set the eggs aside. “Before that.”

“Oh, come on, the Rooster’s got the best food in town.” He turned suddenly, his face going red. “If you tell my mom I said that, I’ll deny it.”

“Huh.” She slid a glance at him while she moved the bacon to a plate to drain. “I’m open to negotiations.”

“Cooking for one is more hassle than it’s worth.” He started mixing dry ingredients. “Really, the Midnight Rooster is a department tradition.”

“Sure.” She found the blush staining his ears was adorable.
“Supporting the local economy.”

“Exactly.” He surprised her, rolling out the dough and cutting biscuits to uniform size with the rim of a juice glass.
“How’s that FBI set up working for you?”

“Don’t change the subject.” When the biscuits were in the oven, she poured the eggs into the pan. “It’s no big effort for me to hack your email and send your mom a message.”

“I bet it’s not.” After putting things in the sink, he started setting the kitchen table for the meal. “What will it take to guarantee your silence?”

“What are you offering?” Something about him inspired her to laugh and flirt. Whatever unidentifiable character trait it was, she let him see a side of her she typically hid from the rest of the world. She had to keep reminding herself he wasn’t available.

“Tomorrow morning at the shooting range isn’t enough?”

She shook her head. “Those plans were made prior to your incriminating admission.”

“I see. No leniency for the exhausted?”

“Not a chance.”

“You’re tough.”

“I am.” She dished up the eggs and topped them with cheese while he slid the fluffy, golden biscuits into a basket and carried it to the table. As she sat across from him, she

wondered if normal mornings with a man like Carson were in her future.

It didn't seem likely. This kind of calm domesticity had never been on her radar and she didn't have the type of career that lent itself to an easy, steady routine. Cypress Security was a big improvement over the Special Forces commitment but the hours were often still long and the risks atypical, even for a person who spent most of her time in the office.

As evidenced by current circumstances.

"The biscuits are fabulous," she said, taking another one and slathering it with butter. "My compliments."

"Is the recipe the right price for your silence?" He wiggled his eyebrows.

"No." She tossed her napkin on her plate before she gave in to the temptation of a third biscuit. "Just answer one question." She waited until he met her gaze. "What were you going to tell Shannon about 'asking me out'?" She put the phrase in air quotes, trying to be casual when the reality of being Carson's assignment hurt her feelings far more than it should. "On the stairs, before the sniper attacked yesterday, you made it sound like a date."

"It was supposed to." He frowned into his coffee, turning the mug back and forth between his hands. "I'm thinking the better question is what were you going to tell Bartholomew?"

"Bart wouldn't care about us going to the range. Unless I couldn't hit anything." Eva pushed back from the table and

gathered the dishes.

“Right.”

What the hell did that mean? She wanted to know, but she couldn't form the question in a civil manner. His irritated tone got under her skin, igniting her temper. She'd been the fool who believed his attention was sincere. Clearly the love virus that struck Ross and Rick had infected her too. Her thoughts raced around, none of them settling long enough to make sense. Instead of taking the easy, satisfying route and throwing the dishes at his head, she methodically rinsed each piece and loaded the dishwasher.

“I wouldn't have asked you out if I'd known about him.”

“Bart is just a friend.”

“I know better, Eva.”

“You know *what* better?” She spun around, fisting her hands in the towel. Better than throttling him. Ross was right, she was stressed out and spoiling for a fight. Carson couldn't be faulted for helping Ross keep an eye on her. If she could be logical for two seconds, she'd realize he'd done a good job. It wasn't his fault she found him so damned attractive. She didn't even *want* to find him attractive.

With a deep breath, she tried to dial it down. Seeing the self-righteous look on his face, she failed. “What's that mean ‘if you'd known about him’? You and Shannon were looking for a third?” Sneering, she leaned back against the counter and indulged in a long, hungry look. “It's always the quiet ones.”

“Don’t do that.”

“What?” She batted her eyelashes. “Tempt you to stray?”

“Invite me to fight,” he said in that calm, slow way he had.

Something changed on his face, in his eyes. Anger had given way to a softer emotion that fell somewhere between understanding and sympathy. *Not* acceptable. She turned away, seeking a distraction as her bravado faded. Her eyes lit on the skillet and she snatched it off the stove top and started scrubbing.

No man—no one at all—had ever read her as well as Carson, and they didn’t really know each other. The knowledge should be a balm considering their forced proximity; instead, his perceptive nature gave her chills. Not the good kind, though he set off plenty of those too.

“Shannon dumped me last year,” he said. “I’m not sure who’s feeding the sheriff gossip, but I’m not seeing anyone. Particularly not her. Yes, I was supposed to keep tabs on you, but I would never have asked you out on a date if I’d known *you* were involved with someone.”

She paused her ruthless scouring of the skillet, tossing her hair out of her face. “Who’s feeding you that worthless gossip?” Bart had never been to Haleswood before yesterday. If Ross or Rick were pulling some kind of prank on Carson, she’d put an end to that with a quick phone call.

“Not gossip. I heard him tell you he loved you.” Carson poured more coffee. “Right after he took a bullet for you.”

Eva cursed men in general as she tested the weight of the skillet, wondering if it would be enough to knock some sense into him. “First of all, I think the sniper wanted him all along. It’s not my turn yet.” She held up a hand when Carson started to argue. “Secondly, if I remember correctly, Bart professed his devotion—sarcastically—after I threatened to finish him off. For a tough guy, he whines a lot when he’s hurt. It was annoying.”

For a long moment they just stared at each other. The heat in his eyes amped up her already charged senses until nothing existed beyond him, beyond this room. Her eyes drifted to his mouth, imagining how it would feel to kiss him. Helpless against the reaction, she licked her lips.

“Don’t do that.”

His ragged whisper was more eloquence than she could manage. A raw, aching desire pulsed through her veins, sizzling along every nerve. She was evaluating which part of him she wanted to taste first when the radio and phones launched a bizarre, discordant symphony.

They leaped apart like teenagers caught steaming up a car, both of them scrambling to answer their respective devices.

Recognizing Ross’s number, she worried Morcos had gotten past Bart’s security detail at the hospital. “Talk to me,” she answered as she rushed toward the computers in the den.

“Matheson’s gone missing.”

Eva sagged against the counter. Phillip Matheson had been on the team that stormed the hideout to rescue Abe's son.

"Didn't know he was here," she managed. While she appreciated the loyalty, it surprised her that Ross would invite others who'd been on that team to step right into Morcos's line of sight.

"He wouldn't stay away."

"What do you mean?" She struggled to hear Ross's voice through the memories of that awful night.

"Everyone involved with the mission got a head's up and a number to call in case of trouble. That wasn't good enough for Matheson. He insisted on being here."

"Retirement doesn't sit well with some people."

"Like I don't know that," he grumbled. "We disagreed about how he could pitch in, but he insisted on guarding the house, claimed he owed you one."

"What happened?"

"From the looks of things, he fell asleep at the wheel and drove his car into the ditch."

"Is he dead?"

"The only thing I've got is a deployed airbag, a smear of blood on the door, and a ransom note."

Two years ago Abraham Morcos's son had been snatched from his car in a similar accident on his way home from a work site.

“What’s it say?”

“It’s not written in English.”

“Take a picture or copy it in a text. Do something, Ross. Matheson might not have much time.” When they found him, she’d bloody his nose for making her worry. The man had a wife and little girl for crying out loud. What was he thinking to get involved in her troubles?

“I’ve sent a picture.”

The message was in Russian: *My price is an audience with the queen.*

Eva’s breakfast threatened to come back up the hard way. “Come get me.”

“No. You stay right there. What did the message say?”

She read it back to him. “Come get me,” she repeated, willing him to change his mind. “I want to see Matheson’s car.”

“No. If you’re out here, it means you’re not doing your cyber thing. Stick with your strengths,” Ross said. “He wants you to suffer and feel guilty.”

“Well, give him a gold star.”

“Not today. Focus, Eva. Find Morcos. Let us find Matheson.”

Fingers flying, she brought up her private and corporate email accounts, no longer concerned about the FBI tech genius

hunched behind a desk somewhere ghosting the set up to help her trace any incoming communication.

Finding nothing new at her personal email address was small consolation. Either her enemy didn't have the skill or just hadn't exercised it yet. The newest message in the primary Cypress Security email inbox gave her chills. Matheson's name was in the subject line and Bart's email address was listed as the sender. "Dammit." Fairly sure it wouldn't help, she did as instructed and started a trace on the IP address anyway.

The little paper clip indicated an attachment on the message which had arrived three minutes ago. Braced for anything, she opened the email. The only message was the same request, in Russian, that had been left at Matheson's car. The first attachment was a picture, the second indicated a video file.

She clicked on the picture and gasped. Matheson sat on a folding chair, his hands presumably cuffed behind his back, his ankle shackled with a heavy chain looped around a thick pipe. A black blindfold covered his eyes and the left corner of his lip was bloody and swollen.

It was a perfect re-enactment of the photo the kidnappers had sent to Abraham Morcos years ago.

"Carson," she called, clicking the mouse so the picture filled the monitor. She needed him to see this immediately.

“The sheriff brought me up to speed—” Carson slid to a stop and gave a low whistle when he saw the picture. “Is that the guy who disappeared?”

“Phillip Matheson, hostage. Presumed alive. Let’s hope the video confirms it.”

The panic he’d heard in her voice when the calls had come in was gone. He had the distinct impression he was watching the aloof expertise that earned her the ‘queen’ moniker.

Over her shoulder he watched the twenty or so seconds of video play out. The guy’s chest rose and fell in steady breaths but that was the only movement. The camera angle didn’t change and there was no sound.

“What do you need?”

“Location, location, location. I’m hoping you can tell me where this is. It has to be close.” She patted the space beside her on the couch. “I’m trying to unravel the message within the picture.”

“You think there’s a code embedded in the picture?”

“No, that would be too easy. Everything is staged just like the fiasco in Yemen, but the tight time frame means Matheson is close,” she insisted.

“Did you send this up the line?”

As if on cue, a little forward arrow appeared beside the message thread. “Mr. FBI just did it.”

“That’s creepy.”

“More than a little. It’s going to be a real pain in the ass erasing my cyber footprints when this is over.”

Assuming that comment didn’t require any reply from him, he focused on the picture instead.

“Sheriff Cochran said the ransom note was in a foreign language.”

“Russian,” she answered, scrolling to the top of the email. “Just like this one. Requesting an audience with the queen in exchange for Matheson’s release.”

“Can I zoom in?”

“Go to town.” She nudged a mouse his way.

“Tell me what you can about the Yemen rescue.”

“Recovery,” she corrected, pointing at the picture. “It was that, exactly that. Only the Morcos heir was the hostage rather than a U.S. citizen.”

“Was the ransom the same?” He was trying to read the manufacturer’s stamp on the pipe.

“Not even close.” He heard the soft rasp as she tugged her pendant across the chain. “That time the kidnappers asked for an obscene amount of money and a specific cache of surface to air missiles. Everyone, Abe included, assumed the kidnappers were trying to break into the black market trade. All of the intel pointed unerringly to a small group of bold and desperate young Russians trying to impress a boss.”

“Where did you find him?”

“He was in a warehouse near the docks, looking just like that. Geez, even the blow to the mouth is the same.” She leaned closer, her leg rubbing against his. “Where’s Sumter?”

“Everywhere.” He promised himself there would be time later to address the attraction arcing like a live wire between them. “They supply most of the industrial iron work across the state.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Less than helpful.” He reset the picture to normal, looking for the next area he wanted to study. “Charleston does serious container business if you think the kidnapper is trying to mimic the Yemen situation.”

“I’m sure this is supposed to look just like that. Charleston is how far?”

“About three hours.”

“Beware the obvious,” she cautioned. “Back then we were right about the location, but not the perpetrator. This time it has to be Morcos pulling the strings, but I don’t know where the hostage is.” She cracked her knuckles. “I want this guy on a platter. What happens if we tell them to go look for Matheson in Charleston?”

“They won’t let you tag along, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“No. Ross made that clear.” She shook her head. With a swipe and click, she brought up her email inbox again. “I’m just brainstorming here. If we tell them we think the hostage is

in Charleston, Ross will go. Someone from the FBI will go—uh oh.”

“What now?”

“The FBI dork just made the Charleston suggestion.” She pointed to the small instant messaging window in the corner of her screen. “Creepy and annoying.”

“Finish your thought.”

“First Bart, from the mission that night. Now Matheson.”

“He was on the mission too?”

She nodded.

“You think the perp is targeting everyone who failed to save the hostage?”

“My personal theory is the perp then is the same perp this time around. Bakr Morcos has no more concern for this hostage than he did for his nephew.” She waved her hand as if erasing a board. “One issue at a time, please. Think like a bad guy. If the ‘queen’, assuming that’s me, is your goal, then sending the people organizing her protection out of town gives you better access.”

“Divide and conquer.”

“It’s a proven strategy.”

“They have to get through me first.”

“Thanks,” she said absently. “Whoever did the kidnapping had to have the holding site staged and ready, just waiting for

the order to grab a hostage. I think Matheson is being held closer to Haleswood than Charleston.”

“But no matter who goes to Charleston, no one’s calling off the security team guarding you. You’re safe as long as you’re in the house.”

She gave a snort. “We’re not dealing with people who play fair and stand down just because there’s an obstacle. You’re talking to a woman who ran analysis and gave operational support to a covert strike team. There are several quick and effective ways to get me out of this house if necessary.”

He hoped they wouldn’t have to put any evasive tactics into action. “Well, I know the area if we do get flushed out.”

“Great. Do you know where this kind of place might be in your area?”

“The iron work bugs me.”

“Why?”

“Because it looks like a shut off valve. The flooring and the joinings remind me of an old railroad box car.” He used the mouse to zoom in again on the pipe. “It doesn’t make sense. Who mounts a length of iron pipe in a box car?”

He studied the picture while she grumbled a monologue as she typed responses—and likely directions—to whoever was on the other end of the instant messaging window.

There was no evidence of natural light. Matheson’s chair was positioned under a bare bulb. Box cars and containers were just that—boxes—not usually wired and outfitted unless

they'd been repurposed. He did a mental run through Haleswood and the immediate area, trying to think like a kidnapper.

There was the old textile mill on the other side of Bishopville. Less chance of being seen out there, unless the kidnapper wanted witnesses. He slid a glance at Eva. With this case it felt like anything was possible. As a department, they'd been called out to deal with some drug issues and derelict behavior at the edge of the rail yard a couple years back, but he didn't remember an upright pipe in any of those out of service box cars.

"Idiots," she said, leaning back and smacking her knees. "They're sure it's a shipping container."

"It's not." It finally dawned on him. The drive-in had repurposed some of the old rail cars when they lost a chunk of the building in a summer storm almost ten years ago. He reached for the phone and dialed the sheriff. "This is local."

"You're sure?"

"Pretty sure." He nodded. "It's the old drive-in theater." Her dark eyes went wide and bright with anticipation as he explained his reasoning to Sheriff Cochran.

"Let's go," she whispered.

He shook his head and ignored her frown as he listened to the rest of his orders. The sheriff confirmed that nothing had changed in regard to her protective detail outside and promised to let them know the moment they found Matheson.

While he went through the standard security checklist, Eva's phone rang again. He hoped it was Ross. Hoped her boss said something to help him keep her inside the safety—relative safety—of Ruth's house.

“One last thing, Sheriff.” The one contingency they hadn't discussed was what he'd do, where they'd go, if they had to leave Ruth's house. Watching Eva work last night and this morning, he had to assume that despite everyone's efforts, her enemy was listening in. “My brother's coming in for a turkey hunt this weekend. His license is in my desk. Can you see he gets it?”

“Yeah, J.C. that'll be my top priority.”

Carson winced at the scathing tone. He liked to think he wasn't typically such a dumbass, so the sheriff would put two and two together if Morcos forced them to run.

It wouldn't be the easiest hike. And he wouldn't want to take the chance without knowing how many men Morcos sent after her. He trusted the team on the perimeter, but all he had in the house was his nine-millimeter service weapon.

Considering the routes and risks between Ruth's place and the old plantation where he did most of his hunting, it took him a minute to hear Eva calling him back to the present situation.

“Hey. Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” He gave her a smile, but knew it was weak. “Did you find something new?”

“The video is too steady to be hand held. It might be broadcasting the live feed to Morcos. Or whoever’s behind this,” she added without the reminder. “I might be able to hack the signal.”

She had a map of Haleswood and the outlying area on her monitor now. “This is the area around the drive-in right?”

He came closer. “That’s it.”

“Good.” The screen changed. “There’s a convenience store with security cameras right here.”

A different area of the map popped up. “Think the kidnapper stopped for a twinkie?”

“We can only hope. Want to go ask?”

“No way. My orders are to keep you right here.”

She shrugged. “It was worth a try.”

“What next?”

Glancing up at him, she pulled a face. “To keep from pulling my hair out worrying over Matheson, I plan to hyper-analyze the picture and video while scanning the cyber universe for any trace of Abe or Bakr Morcos.”

“All right.” Most of that made sense to him. He shoved his hands into his pockets. “Not planning to make a break for the drive-in?”

“You have the car keys.”

“True. And you have a map.”

“Also true. I should probably tell you I know how to hotwire a vehicle should the need arise.”

“Duly noted,” he said with a shake of his head. The woman amused him. There wasn’t another word for it. “Please, don’t.”

“Since you asked nicely.” Her eyes were on the monitor once more.

“I’m going to do a walk-through.”

“Paranoid much?”

The way this was shaping up, he wasn’t afraid to admit it. “Definitely. Fits the circumstances. Holler if you need me.”

“Will do.”

Chapter 8

Eva studied the photo and video, working through the angles, comparing present to past as the rescue team assembled. She'd tried a few things, but hadn't broken into the live feed signal yet.

Uncomfortable didn't begin to cover how she was feeling. No one enjoyed rehashing their mistakes, but if she screwed up again, Matheson would pay the ultimate price. Thinking of his family, she sent messages and warnings to Ross, trusting him to be the voice of reason in the planning. It seemed unlikely that a full team of bad guys had managed to slip unnoticed into the area, so some things would be different.

What worried her were the things that would be the same.

If this was meant to be a re-enactment, and it certainly looked like it from her perspective, how would one or two people simulate the unexpected firepower of ten gunmen?

Someone—Bakr Morcos, in her mind—wanted something. From her. To drive her crazy? Too vague. To punish her? That

didn't make sense either. He should have been grateful for her mistake because it gave him what he needed—death to the heir who stood between him and control of a corporation with global influence.

“Why now, Bakr?”

Years ago, she'd been told her suspicions of Bakr's involvement in the kidnapping had been explained to Abraham and dismissed out of hand. She wondered if believing that story made her as gullible and vulnerable as Abe Morcos appeared to be when it came to his brother's motives.

According to the shrink she'd been required to see after that mission, she needed to let go, accepting what was out of her control. She'd done her job to the best of her ability... blah, blah, blah.

It sure as hell didn't feel that way.

“Why now?”

She'd pulled everything useful from the picture and video. Opening the email again, she hovered the mouse over the reply button. Would a straight-up reply fulfill the royal 'audience' he wanted?

Tempting as it was to buck the order to avoid direct contact, she stayed the urge. For now.

She went back to the obituary. Didn't matter how it was faked. Didn't matter that a recent search had turned up pictures of his wife and children mourning. Why it was faked was the real question.

The Morcos corporation dealt with contracts in the billions—both legitimately and through the supply and demand of weapons. Abraham’s moral compass might not point directly north, but he had a certain integrity Bakr lacked.

Eva leaned away from the FBI system as if it might read her thoughts and intervene before she could act. How to distract the minion ghosting her so she could find a way into the Morcos systems?

Public record. She’d searched every related keyword to find news on Abe and his supposed demise. Was there a way in through the front door, so to speak?

She set to work, finding much of the territory familiar as she’d provided the background when they were planning the mission to rescue Abe’s son.

Soon she had a spreadsheet of births, deaths, weddings, and milestone projects. She had lists of close friends and primary business associates. She didn’t burrow down any of the shadier internet tunnels. Yet.

Since his son died, Abe had given much of his free time and a significant portion of his personal salary to children’s charities.

She skimmed through images, making note of the same faces at nearly every event. His wife, his personal assistant, and his brother, Bakr.

Interesting.

She found a news report showing Abe's grieving widow, and was startled by the implication that Bakr was also mourning in their family home. The source on the article was a spokesman for the family, so she didn't quite count it as independent corroboration, but it certainly made it tougher to prove Abe wasn't dead. Changing tactics, she left that avenue and focused on the assistant.

The woman, Amelia Sala, was hot—no surprise there—and competent, or she'd never have kept up with the multiple schedules a man like Abe maintained.

Eva was into what she considered her second layer of the background onion when she discovered Amelia was related to Mrs. Morcos.

“Way to keep it in the family,” she murmured. “I bet you know everything.”

She did a cursory search of the companies and charities most recently associated with Morcos in the news. Going back to the pictures, she fanned out her searches, matching names and faces with the businesses they represented.

Ready to go deeper, she hesitated. She couldn't be sure how much hacking the FBI would tolerate. More to the point, she wasn't in a hurry to expose her full range of skills. Using her 'powers' for good within the Army was one thing. She was a civilian now, whether her brain worked like one or not.

While she knew Special Agent Nichols and Ross went way back, she also knew there were limits to how many infractions

Ross could force Nichols to overlook, even in these circumstances.

Turning over her options, she ditched the idea of ordering a new computer. Nichols would likely intercept the shipment. Ruth used a laptop and it was most often with her at the Midnight Rooster. She could snoop through Carson's gear, but she hadn't seen any evidence he'd brought any tech beyond his smart phone.

Besides, she wasn't supposed to be sneaking around. They expected her to cooperate and work in conjunction with the ghost in the FBI office.

Maybe it was time for the ghost to step up. Opening the chat window, she made her request, framed in pleasant, cooperative words. She even shared a valid, primary reason for her request.

When she was sure he was sufficiently distracted, she set off on a cyber journey to find the trail of breadcrumbs Abraham Morcos had left behind.

Chapter 9

B akr reviewed the photos once more. The holding area and the staging of the hostage earned his full approval. The men hired for this task had carried out his instructions to the letter.

He wondered if her handlers would let her answer his invitation—if they would barter one brief conversation for another man’s life.

Probably not.

If the roles were reversed, he wouldn’t sacrifice his queen so early in the game.

He’d been told the email went out on schedule, but she had not answered him. Did she understand his proposal or had he overestimated her ability and influence?

How disappointing if their queen turned out to be nothing but an empty-headed poster child for equality in the American Army.

He'd thought of that angle—thought of every angle of course—before he'd made the first move.

If she didn't have the information he needed, she was disposable immediately.

He drummed his fingers on the desk, growing impatient for his plans to bear fruit. He fought the urge to make the call and speed things up, to dispense with the game and simply take what was his sooner rather than later.

Closing his eyes, he envisioned the ideal outcome, knew it would not happen if he left any loose ends.

His brother, Abraham, was gone and the family in mourning. Already they looked to him for comfort as they dealt with the shock and despair of loss. Soon they would turn to him for guidance and grant him control of the company he coveted. He would steer them into a time of unprecedented prosperity.

But first, the queen... she was the last loose end.

Finally, the static images on his computer changed as a team stormed in to make their rescue. He watched, eager for a glimpse of the woman he knew only by voice and reputation.

There was no sign of her. He resigned himself to wait a bit longer. They identified one camera and disabled it quickly, but he watched the drama play out on the second camera.

Just as they'd done the night his nephew was killed, the team advanced. The first explosion knocked them back. The injuries would be minor, by design. The camera on the hostage showed

the man's agitation as he strained against his bonds and shouted warnings to his rescuers.

Perfect.

For a moment, rescue activity halted and Bakr filled in the predictable discussion. Surely they would ask the queen for her advice. He'd staged it so she would remember vividly the night his nephew had been sacrificed.

He sent the code for his next move, relishing the ripple of anticipation.

His ransom was an audience with the queen. If they would not bring her to him, he would take her. He watched the team change tactics and let them have the hostage. The exercise had served its purpose.

It was clear to him now how much her team cared for her and respected her opinion. And they would give him exactly what he needed to take her back.

Chapter 10

P icking up the radio handset from the kitchen counter, Carson requested a status from the perimeter team. He confirmed windows were locked tight upstairs as each of the six men outside checked in with all clear signals.

Downstairs, he did the same circuit, skipping the den because he didn't want to disturb Eva. She was so intent, he figured the last thing she'd bother with was opening a window.

He finished the breakfast cleanup, needing to do something while they waited for word on the Matheson rescue. The helpless, sitting duck feeling was already getting to him. Someone was making his town unsafe. Beyond taking a shot at Eva, the false alarms and staged accidents were unsettling for everyone in his community.

He poured the last of the coffee into his mug and stared out the window at the glassy lake.

While some people—like Eva—might find the tight knit small town atmosphere annoying because few things stayed

private, he understood the inherent value and comforting tradeoff. He viewed his neighbors as extended family and took his responsibility for their safety and peace of mind seriously.

Haleswood was home.

Six vigilant, armed men stationed around the house should have made him feel better. He wasn't the only thing standing between her and whoever put that bounty on her head. He didn't know them—didn't need to. Ross wouldn't have assigned anyone but the best to this detail. But Eva's warning about getting chased out of the house kept blaring like a siren in his head.

He rinsed his mug and put it in the dishwasher.

Ruth kept a gun cabinet in the garage. If this *bastardo*, as Eva frequently called him, continued picking off the security detail, Carson wanted more defense than the nine-millimeter at his side. The AT-4 rocket launcher Eva had mentioned sounded like a good option. Too bad he had no way to get one and wouldn't know how to fire it if he did.

He flipped on the garage light, pleased by the sight of Ruth's shotgun front and center in the cabinet. Testing the action, he smiled. The woman who fed nearly everyone in town at least once a day knew how to care for other things too. He made a mental note to get her a Christmas present instead of just a card this year. Finding the box of shells, he loaded the shotgun. He noticed plenty of twenty-two caliber ammunition, but no gun. Maybe she carried that one with her. If he was lucky, she kept it in her bedroom.

He looked around for anything else they might use as defense, but beyond the basics in Ruth's tool box, the guns were about it. While a hammer could do damage at close range, he wasn't about to take more ribbing about his paranoia. Once Matheson was rescued, he'd invite Eva out here to take a look. As a small town deputy, he hadn't been trained on improvised explosive devices or rocket launchers. While he understood she'd done her Special Forces analyst thing well back from the action in the field, he'd bet his salary she had a much deeper knowledge of that kind of thing than he did. A smart man would probably be intimidated by that, but Carson found it all the more intriguing.

Had he really almost kissed her? Oh, yeah. And he wanted to follow through. Part of his mind was still locked on that moment in the kitchen. They had bigger things to think about right now, but when this was over he'd get that kiss.

His phone rang and he snatched it up, hoping like hell it was positive news about Matheson. "Morris."

"I taught you the proper way to answer a phone."

"Hi, Mom. Sorry. I thought it was business."

"Your business associates appreciate manners too."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Is it business that has you living with that Italian girl?"

Carson rolled his eyes and leaned back against the hood of the car. This could take a while. "Yes, ma'am."

“Your grandmother wants to know if she should set a place for your new friend for dinner on Christmas Eve.”

“That’s a week away, Mom.”

“That’s not an answer, son.”

“Eva’s not exactly my friend.”

“But everyone’s talking about how much time you spend together. And that was before you moved in with her at Ruth’s place.”

“Come on,” Carson grumbled, reminding himself he liked his small town life, despite the gossip chain. “I’m here on assignment, same as her.”

“Does she have family coming to town? A place to celebrate the holidays?”

“No, but—”

“I’ll tell your grandma she’ll join us. Everyone should have a family to be with this time of year.”

He agreed, in theory, but he wasn’t about to risk anyone’s safety by taking Eva to his grandma’s house. How to explain that to his mom without causing more worry? “Tell Grandma I may need to get two dinners to go.”

He heard his mother’s quiet gasp, but he knew better than to promise something he couldn’t deliver. “Business, Mom. Trust me, if we can be there we will be, but there’s a lot of work to get done.”

“I can talk to Sheriff Cochran.”

“Mom,” he warned. “This has nothing to do with the shift schedule. You know some things don’t go by the calendar.”

“Fine.”

His radio crackled and he dialed down the volume so she wouldn’t overhear. “Look, I have to get going. Tell Grandma thanks for the invitation.”

“I love you.”

“Love you too,” he replied, quickly ending the call.

He turned up the radio, and asked for an update, but static was the only reply.

Taking one of the reusable shopping totes off the peg by the door, he dumped in the rest of the ammunition. With the radio back on his belt, he headed back inside to look for the missing twenty-two. He’d feel better if Eva was armed and the smaller gun shouldn’t give her shoulder any trouble.

Locking the door behind him, he reset the door chimes on the security system. Assuming Eva’s enemies wouldn’t have any problem disarming the system, he made a mental note to find a low tech, old school noisemaker to put by the doors too.

Did they still call it paranoia when the threat was real? Didn’t matter. Anywhere he could eke out an advantage he would.

The radio crackled again and a voice calmly announced, “Unknown contact lakeside. Investigating.”

Carson paused in the small exercise room, cursing himself for not putting a radio next to Eva in the den. Lakeside could mean just about anywhere out back. Ruth's house had an excellent view of the entire north end of the lake, something he'd admired until it worked against him.

Confident the team on the perimeter would do their job, he entered the kitchen as the glass in the back door shattered, sending broken bits of glass skittering across the tile floor like sharp-edged raindrops.

Not a gunshot he realized, peeking around the cover of the center island. An elbow. And the hand attached was working to unlock the door.

Carson stood tall, shotgun ready. His order to freeze was ignored and the security system wailed as the door parted from the sensor. He leveled the gun and fired.

The intruder stumbled with a pained yelp, but kept advancing into the kitchen.

"Where is the queen?" Glass crunched underfoot. "Give her to me and you will live."

Carson wondered how that would work since it appeared he was the only one armed. He pumped the action and held down the trigger, using a slamfire technique in an attempt to drive the intruder out.

The man lunged, heedless of the gunfire and Carson found himself in hand to hand combat. He held his ground, using the

butt of the rifle to ram the attacker's gut, only to feel an unyielding flak jacket.

It pissed him off.

He went for the weaker points of knees and the wound in the intruder's arm. Still, he found himself in a choke hold, pinned against the center island, his service weapon out of reach. There was no way he was letting this happen. No way would he allow this guy to lay so much as a finger on Eva.

He rolled back onto the island, drawing his knees up and slamming the heels of his hands into the man's ears. Not the final strike, but enough to give him room. He gulped in air as he landed on the other side of the island and drew his weapon.

The intruder rushed by him, racing toward the den. Toward Eva.

"Get back," he shouted at her as he fired three rounds into the back of the intruder's knee. The man dropped with a scream that rivaled the alarm. Furious, Carson stalked over, grabbed the guy's collar, and dragged him back across the broken glass toward the door.

Eva hovered in the doorway, staring at the men and the mess strewn across the kitchen. "Are you hurt?"

"Stay down!" he shouted over the incessant blaring of the alarm. "There may be more."

She sank to the floor. "Are you hurt?"

“No.”

But his voice was rough from the abusive choke hold. “Give me the radio.” She needed something to do and the dark look on his face told her he wasn’t about to part with a weapon. Relieved he didn’t hesitate, she scooped up the radio and called for an ambulance. Then she requested an immediate team check-in and ordered everyone to fall back to the house.

Only five of the six guards working the perimeter responded affirmatively. She wanted to redirect someone on the team to the last known position of the sixth, but it was too risky. Once they understood the current crisis, they could send someone out.

She watched Carson go through the pat down looking for weapons. Once he’d removed a knife and a syringe of some sort, he cuffed the intruder.

The syringe had probably been meant for her, but to break in with only a knife seemed like a serious planning mistake. And why hadn’t the guy pulled the knife during the fight?

She started to stand, but Carson signaled her to stay put. Fine by her. If he wasn’t ready to ease up, she could wait it out. After placing all of the weapons and the syringe safely out of reach on the center island, he crossed to the security system control panel and silenced the alarm.

“Are you hurt?”

She looked up into his serious face and a shaky, adrenaline-induced laugh was her first response. “I’m good.”

He jerked his chin toward the radio. “Is everyone checked in?”

“All but one.” She’d known there had to be this all-business side of him, he was a sheriff’s deputy after all. But it was such a change from his typical easy-going nature, she struggled to adjust.

“Probably the guy who spotted this one.” Carson pointed at the bleeding, trussed up intruder. “Recognize him?”

“No.”

“Want to talk to him?”

She was tempted, but knowing the Morcos operation, she didn’t think she’d get anything relevant out of him. “I’ll leave that to the real interrogators. But we have one question answered.” Outside, the sound of emergency sirens grew louder, closing in on Ruth’s house. “The sniper didn’t come to Haleswood alone.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Well, fine. I’m not a hundred percent sure. Yet. But it doesn’t make sense to leave a hostage like Matheson unattended.”

“Definitely not,” he agreed. “If you’re right about Morcos using him to bait you.”

“Exactly.” She stood up, pleased he agreed with her logic.

“Is he free?”

“They’re working on it. Want me to answer that?” She pointed behind him to the silhouette darkening the glass oval of the front door.

Carson stalked down the hall and confirmed the person on the porch was a friendly before opening the door.

Eva watched the brief exchange as Carson sent the man back out, presumably to look for the guard who had yet to check in. She reached for her pendant and said a quick prayer they wouldn’t find another casualty.

So much for the defensible position argument, she thought. Not that she expected the sheriff or Ross to change the set up now, but this put a new spin on the threat closing in on her. She felt terrible about the damage to Ruth’s beautiful home—and right before Christmas too. Hopefully she’d think up some way to make it up to her.

But right now she knew her best bet was to solve this riddle—and fast.

From the den, Eva’s phone rang and she hurried back to answer. “Hello?”

“Matheson’s safe,” Ross reported. “No real injuries, but we transported him anyway.”

“Local hospital?”

“No.”

She breathed a sigh of relief. The sooner they got anyone associated with the Morcos kidnapping away from Haleswood,

the better she'd feel. "You'll send him home after he's debriefed, right?"

"I'll try."

"Try hard." If Ross failed, she'd find a way to convince Matheson to lay low until this was over. "What about the kidnapper?"

"No sign of him."

"I beg your pardon? Someone should have been there."

"Nichols put the FBI crime scene techs on the job, so if there's a lead we'll have it soon."

"Knowing Matheson's skills, leaving him alone was risky." She went to the kitchen doorway and stared at the man on the floor, wishing for answers she knew he wouldn't provide. Had Bakr made a mistake? Or was this all an elaborate diversion? Felt like a diversion in her gut, but—

"Did you get anywhere with the video feeds?"

"Hmm? Oh, yeah. I put the ghost on that. I'm sure he'll have a report."

"Why?"

She recognized that cautious tone. He knew her well enough to realize she wouldn't hand off something important unless she was following something else. "In the interest of preserving the peace, ask me again later, okay?"

"Eva."

"What? We've been busy with our own share of trouble."

“What happened? Talk to me.”

“An intruder happened. Carson handled it.” Her heart still fluttered a bit—and not entirely from adrenaline. He’d had the perfect chance, and every right, to kill the man but he’d maintained his composure and given them a potential source of intel. “We’re taking a head count now.”

“Put him on.”

“He’s talking to the paramedics. I am perfectly capable of giving you the report.”

“Don’t let the paramedics go before I get there.”

“O-okay.” That struck her as a curious demand. “We’ve got pictures and I’m already running his face through the system.”

“No prints?”

“Superglue,” she explained. The application made immediate, accurate fingerprint identification impossible.

“Damn.”

“I can find some nail polish remover.”

“No. I don’t want you anywhere near him.”

“Fine. I’ll behave. He’s conscious, but not inclined to cooperate.”

“You’ve tried talking to him?”

She frowned at the phone before she replied. “No.”

“Good. Don’t.”

“I know my limits,” she snapped.

“About time. Now put Morris on the line.”

“I may not have shot the guy, but I managed to call for the ambulance.”

“You’re a real rock star, sugar.”

She growled into the phone, knowing he’d added the sweet talk to irritate her.

“I’m on my way. You have about ten minutes to finish or hide whatever it is you don’t want to tell me about.”

“No rest for the wicked.” She held up the phone to get Carson’s attention. “It’s for you.”

He parted from the paramedics. “Ross or the sheriff?”

“Ross.” She handed him the phone. “He wants your take on things.”

Letting the men bond over the technicalities of the intruder’s attempt, she went back to her computer. Any second now she’d have the lead on Abe. Her gut instinct insisted he was the key to unveiling the real cause of this whole mess.

Chapter 11

In the den, the computer chimed with a result. “We’ve got a lead!” At the last second she went around the couch rather than leaping over the back like a kid on a sugar high.

But it wasn’t Bakr’s face staring back at her as she’d hoped. It was the older, supposedly deceased brother, Abraham.

“I knew it.” Elated and relieved, she just stared at his picture for a moment. The anticipation came next and she let it shiver through her. It would be a pleasure to destroy whatever Bakr was trying to pull off.

“Where are you, my friend?” When she read the location of the camera that captured his face, she had no idea how to proceed.

Not only was he in Haleswood, he’d been caught on the camera at the emergency room door. Obviously it was a willful thing as he’d looked straight into the camera. She checked the time and gasped. Less than an hour ago.

Brilliant move to stay in a place with plenty of security and help. Bakr's team couldn't make a move without exposing themselves. And a strange face at the hospital would create wonderful, informative gossip around town.

“Way to go, Abe.”

She sent Ross a text message to share the news and her phone rang before the ‘message sent’ icon faded.

“I’ll swing by the hospital to pick up the passenger.”

“Cool. See you soon.” She ended the call and leaped into analyst mode.

Abe being alive diverted immediate disaster, but only if they could figure out why Bakr was making a move *now*.

The FBI information showed Morcos's companies bidding on government contracts in the states. As far as Eva had been able to unravel the details following Amelia's access within the company, Abe hadn't known about those deals before his reported death.

The Morcos family finances were solid and the corporate records showed a hefty profit margin. She didn't doubt the bottom line was padded with shadier deals. The Morcos were too powerful and knew too many people around the world.

During her Army career, she'd learned things that might strike her as unethical were simply the cost of doing business in a global market. Different countries operated with different rulebooks. If you wanted to make progress, you learned how to cater to the people who approved the contracts. Black and

white philosophies, a pristine line between good and bad, just weren't possible.

So why would Bakr hide his bids for contracts in the US? And why eliminate his brother? Greed was a universal motivator, but a thirst for power didn't strike Eva as enough reason to risk his freedom and posh lifestyle.

Even with Abraham out of the way, Bakr would have to report to the board of directors as well as any criminal interests they'd been involved with.

While she worked through the information, she heard Carson dealing with the security team. She needed to thank him as soon as things calmed down. It was much easier to focus on her part of this operation knowing he had her back.

Hearing Ross's voice at the door, she closed the cases on both laptops and walked out to greet them, only to watch Ross cross through the trashed kitchen to see the intruder.

The man didn't utter the smallest groan while Ross demanded answers, but that changed when Ross signaled to Abraham. The intruder shouted and tried to scramble off the paramedic's gurney. She couldn't make out the words, but she got the impression he would've made some sort of a sign to ward off evil if his hands hadn't been cuffed.

When the intruder had been silenced, Eva finally faced the man she'd let down so terribly.

"Mr. Morcos," she said, extending her hand as Ross guided him into the den. "I'm Eva Battaglia."

He hesitated, sizing her up before raising her hand to his lips.
“It is an honor.”

How could he say that? She swallowed around the lump in her throat.

“My apologies for the deplorable behavior of my brother.”

His obvious discomfort, layered over guilt, surprised her. He was a different man than she’d researched and analyzed before that fateful mission.

“I have apologized to your man in the hospital as well.”

“I’m sure he appreciated that.” It seemed as though they’d both brought plenty of baggage to this meet. She turned to Ross. “How is he?”

“Running the nurses ragged and complaining about the coffee.”

“So he’s on the mend.”

“Should be released later today. I’ve notified the right people.”

“Great. Then let’s get down to the more urgent matter here. How did your brother kill you?” From his position a half step behind Morcos, Ross rolled his eyes.

“Car accident.”

“Common enough.” She stepped back, inviting them to join her in the den. “I know we don’t have much time, but it would give me a better understanding and possibly a way to find him if you could tell me about it.”

Abe nodded in agreement. “We were returning from a photo opportunity with a local school. The brakes went out. Amelia and I survived only because we were expecting it and had taken precautions.”

Used to seeing Abe in nothing less than thousand-dollar suits, Eva thought he’d managed the typical American business casual look perfectly with a polar fleece vest, cable knit sweater, and khaki trousers. “Amelia helped with the ruse?”

“Yes. We had further assistance from my driver. Bakr believed he had the man’s loyalty. The money Bakr paid funded a new playground at the children’s hospital.”

Eva chuckled. “He will hate that if he finds out. Amelia and your driver are both in a safe location?”

“Yes. My man on Bakr’s team here has told me where your soldier is being held. He is generally unharmed.”

“We’ve handled that much,” Ross said.

“You have already rescued him?” Abraham’s gray brows arched in surprise. “How interesting.”

“Eva,” Ross said with a pointed look, “Abe wants his life and his company back. How do we make that happen?”

Running the company, Abraham had access to information that would be helpful to American interests. “I’ve been working on it,” Eva replied. “Did you know your brother bid on a project in Fort Bragg, North Carolina? He presented his

bid with a new company name, claiming it was a new division.”

“That is irrelevant,” Abe grumbled. “A ruse.”

Taken aback, she glanced to Ross, but her boss only shrugged. “Why?”

Abe leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “You are talented with languages and assessment. What do you know now that you missed years ago?”

“I—I’m not sure. I haven’t yet checked the file.”

“You do not want to.”

“It’s not a fond memory.”

“The official file will help you?”

Probably not. The evening was etched in her mind. “At the time, we believed the kidnapping was meant to encourage you to sell weapons to a new group.”

“Those weapons were already gone. The transaction completed another way,” Abe said. “Whether or not the weapons were there, something was out of place that night. You are an analyst, you know this. What was wrong with the rescue?”

“The chatter,” she said quietly. “I didn’t realize it until later. Until the team was stuck,” she finished on a whisper. “We were too late.”

“We were all too late.” Abraham massaged his fist with his other hand. “My son left me a message. Bakr arranged my

death when he learned I had it in my possession.”

Eva perked up. “What kind of message?”

With an apology to Ross, Abraham switched to Russian.

“I am afraid it is technology beyond my ability. Information I only recently learned about. The last time I saw my son, I interrupted a heated argument between him and Bakr.”

“What was the problem?”

Abraham shrugged, spread his palms out wide. “I heard my son arguing with his uncle over family and honor and heart.” He tapped his chest. “He accused Bakr of being a curse on the Morcos name. The next day he was kidnapped.”

Eva struggled to breathe, to listen, as the memories of that night rushed in and meshed with this new information. Tears welled in his eyes as he explained finding—and doubting—the note from his son that claimed Bakr was betraying the company. That his brother was diverting funds and hijacking a carefully staged weapons exchange.

“I did not want to believe,” he finished. In the end, he’d had mere hours to prevent the disaster and move the weapons out early, but he’d lost his son when Bakr retaliated.

“You still have proof?”

Abraham nodded. “Proof that will get him killed, or worse, jailed.”

“Why now?” She asked in English. “It’s been two years.”

“I received a new message,” he replied in Russian. “There is a file. It was sent to Bakr as well.”

“So knowing you know, he kills you. Thank God he missed. But what does that have to do with me?”

“In my opinion, my brother believes you overheard something—the code that will unlock the file and release the funds that will save him from the mafia he double crossed when my son interfered with his plan. I am sure he has been doing other favors for them, but the score is far from settled.”

All of them turned toward the sound of more voices in the hallway. Eva recognized Special Agent Nichols and immediately switched back to Russian. “You believe the code is in the message from your son?”

“I do not know. As I said this is beyond my understanding. What I believe is that *you* can figure it out,” he replied, pressing a flash drive into her hand. “You are my only hope to stop him.”

“Thanks for picking him up,” Nichols said to Ross as he joined them. “I’ll take over his security if you’re done here.”

Eva nodded, her mind already working through her memories of that mission. What signals had she overlooked the night Abe’s son was killed?

While Ross and Nichols worked out safety, communication, and access she noticed Abe’s slumped shoulders. “Mr. Morcos?”

“Forgive me.” He blinked several times. “Sometimes my sorrow is overwhelming. But you will put an end to my brother’s madness.”

Her throat clogged up at the sorrow radiating from him. “I’m sorry,” she managed. She wanted to explain, to assure him they’d done their best to get his son out alive, but the words wouldn’t come.

“You must not be.” He took her hands. “My son lives on, he guides me still. I pray he will guide you to justice.”

She watched them go, turning the message over in her mind as she tucked the flash drive safely into her pocket. She was eager to open it up, to compare whatever was on the drive with the after action report from that mission, assuming she’d find a connection or clue.

Unfortunately she wasn’t eager to share what might be on the flash drive with the ghost on the other end of the FBI computers.

Carson assessed the problems within the security team and dealt with the repairs to the back door while Eva and Ross met with Mr. Morcos in the den. Ross had warned him Special Agent Nichols was on the way in from Columbia.

Unhappy it made them easy targets, Carson ordered the perimeter security team to close in, posting guards at the front door as well as the deck. It couldn’t be helped. They’d all volunteered for this detail and the move was standard

procedure while they waited for the all-clear from the team exploring the rest of the property. The guard who'd been compromised by the intruder still hadn't been found.

No shock to anyone that Ross hadn't gotten any helpful information out of the intruder. What surprised Carson was that he hadn't put much effort into it. When the injured man had recognized Mr. Morcos, he'd erupted with a terrified outburst. Carson might not have known the language, but he understood a man pleading for mercy when he heard it and he was shallow enough to appreciate the fear contorting the intruder's features.

Morcos hadn't been moved. The man's cold stare had promised retribution rather than understanding as the paramedics were finally allowed to wheel their patient away.

Neither Eva nor Ross showed concern for the situation and Carson reminded himself it wasn't his business. And as long as Mr. Morcos took his revenge elsewhere, it wasn't a sheriff's department problem.

No, this was a Cypress Security problem. And an FBI problem, he added when Nichols came rushing in a few minutes later.

Carson pointed toward the den and went back to the cleanup.

He felt terrible that Ruth's Santa Claus cookie jar had been killed in action. The colorful pieces of ceramic and broken cookies made a sick sort of kaleidoscope, swirling with the glass from the window as he swept up the mess.

Maybe one of the women in his family would know where to find a replacement.

The radio at his hip crackled again and he jerked. His reaction irritated him, even though he knew it was typical to be edgy so soon after a fight.

“There’s a delivery van pulling into the driveway,” the guard out front reported.

“On my way,” Carson replied. Assuming it was the new door from the hardware store, he left the debris in the kitchen to go help haul it in.

It was a rush of relief when his brother, Wade, hopped down from the driver’s seat. “Hey.” He’d known it was inconvenient, but he refused to take any more risks with Eva’s life or Ruth’s property.

“Got yourself a nice little vacation home here,” Wade teased, pushing up the bill of his ball cap. “Ruth give you a good deal on it?”

“Shut up.”

Wade only grinned as he opened the back of the van. “What’s with the armed guard?”

Carson leaned close, like he was about to impart the wisdom of the ages. “That’s need to know.”

“Typical.” Wade snorted. “Word at the Rooster is you pulled bodyguard detail for that hot Italian girl,” he said when Carson’s hands were too full of door to smack him.

“You want details, join the department.”

“Touch-y. I just want to meet—”

Wade finally accomplished the rare feat of silence when he caught sight of the mess in the kitchen. “Holy shit, J.C. Are you okay?”

Carson held up a hand, warding off the concern. “Just put the door in. And don’t touch anything on the island. I’m waiting for evidence bags.”

“Okay, but—”

“You can keep the current lockset right?”

Wade nodded. “Sure.”

“Good. That’ll make things easier for Ruth.”

Carson resumed his cleanup while Wade tore the protective wrap off of the new door.

“Mom says you might not be at Christmas Eve dinner.”

“Not now, Wade.” He dumped a full dustpan into the trash can and went back for the next.

“I was just thinking if you can get away with a to-go sort of thing, it opens up options for the rest of us.”

“Dare you to try it.” He knew his mother had no intention of making an exception, for him or any of his siblings, regardless of the circumstances.

Suddenly it seemed like a stupid idea to bring his brother into the mix, this close to the danger. If the bastard pulling the

strings was watching... He cut off the thought at the knees. Negativity wouldn't help him get past this any faster.

Second-guessing good decisions changed nothing. Still, the sooner Wade was gone, the better. "Just get the door done."

"We're adults," Wade continued, warming to the subject. "When do we get treated accordingly?"

Carson figured it wouldn't be until their elders were dead and gone. Morris family tradition wasn't going to change for either of them anytime soon. And when they were the oldest in the room, they'd probably pull the same stunts with their own children. Life was like that.

He didn't want to have the 'oppressive older generation' conversation. "How's Sheldon doing?"

"Your stupid dog—"

"Brilliant dog."

"Your opinion. He's fine and having a blast teaching my pair to howl at everything."

Carson chuckled. Wade might gripe, but it wasn't sincere. "Don't spoil him too much."

"Like I could do any more damage on that score than you already have. You've been feeding him from the table again."

"Not true. He's just testing you. Being brilliant, he knows a soft touch when he sees one."

"Whatever gets you through the night," Wade grumbled.

Carson turned up the volume when the radio crackled again. The sheriff's voice filled the kitchen, announcing the discovery of the missing guard and a request for an ambulance.

“Are you hunting anywhere around Turkey Run in the next day or two?” The property had been in his mother's family for as long as anyone knew. She claimed her grandfather had turned it into a hunting club when he'd retired to hide from her grandmother.

“No. Why?”

“Anyone else going that way that you know of?”

Wade frowned as he removed the old door. “Doubt it. There's been more action on the other side of Bishopville this year.”

“Good. Keep it that way if you can. And keep this conversation to yourself.” Carson turned away from his brother's wide-eyed shock. “I'm doing a walk-through upstairs.”

He took the stairs two at a time, mentally crossing his fingers. Ruth's twenty-two revolver was in the nightstand. He wanted Eva armed. Now.

In his mind, the scene played out again as the intruder tried to get through him to her. He didn't care what Ross thought about her ability to hit a target. Weapon was better than no weapon.

Sirens cried out across the quiet morning once more and he knew if things didn't settle down soon, the sheriff would have his hands full. The Haleswood community took pride in their general safety.

Pulling open the nightstand drawer, he saw the soft gleam of the snub-nose revolver and he sagged onto the bed, staring at it. Reality was sinking in and feeling heavier by the minute.

He'd shot a man in the line of duty. Not fatal, but the guy would limp for the rest of his days. Wasn't he supposed to feel more remorse? He didn't. No, he'd gladly do it again without a second thought if it kept Eva—or anyone else—safe.

He heard footsteps in the hallway and knew it was her. No one else in this house had such a light step.

“Carson?”

“In here.” He glanced up as she stopped at the open bedroom door.

“I'm supposed to—” She reached for her pendant. “Oh. I know that look. There had to be a first time.”

“How'd you know?” He reached for the revolver, flipping the cylinder out. Pleased to find it loaded, he flicked his wrist and it dropped back into place.

“I'm the queen of intel, remember? Accessing your personnel file was no big deal.”

He winced. Beautiful and regal might describe her to a 'T', but he hated her old nickname right now.

“My apologies,” she said. “I know that’s supposed to be private.”

“It’s not that.” He shook his head, tried to smile. He didn’t need to give her any cause to worry. “I’ll get over it.”

She stepped closer. “I met your brother.”

“I’m sure you did.” He rolled his eyes. “Wade’s good with his hands.”

“All that Morris family training I’m sure,” she said with a smile. “And you’re not in much of a mood to trust anyone but family.”

“It shows, huh?” He reminded himself it was her job to observe and analyze. “Ross warned me this wasn’t an average situation.”

“Warnings are nice, but it’s always different when you’re in it.”

She took another step, putting her within arm’s reach. He’d wanted to touch her since he’d first seen her. Staying under the same roof, danger aside, was quickly turning that initial want into a driving need. He held out the revolver grip first, instead of doing something stupid like dragging her down onto the bed. “It’s loaded.”

“I noticed.” She winked at him, but didn’t take the gun.

“Will you carry it until we’re done here? Please?” If he failed to stop the next attack, he wanted to know she had a fighting chance to defend the computer between her ears.

“Maybe,” she said, gently pushing the gun aside.

He studied that singular point of contact, taking in every detail. Her hand was warm and so much smaller than his, but he knew size was no indicator of her real strength.

“One condition.”

“Don’t tease me.” He couldn’t have stopped his body’s response to her husky voice if he’d been dead. He kept his mouth shut, all too ready to promise her anything—everything—for the chance to hold her. Just until the fear subsided.

Another step brought her too close. Her legs brushed the inside of his thighs and her hands cradled his jaw, before drifting lightly to rest on his shoulders. Her eyes held him captive as she slowly leaned in until her lips met his in a feather-light kiss.

It wasn’t much more than friendly. Might even have stayed that way. But her fingers flexed on his shoulders and her tongue darted across her lower lip.

Gun forgotten, he reached out and gripped her hips, pulling her snug against him. Her dark eyes flashed as he speared a hand into her hair and brought her mouth down to his.

She opened to him with all the heat and passion she applied to everything else. Greedy, he took the kiss deeper, losing himself in her sweet taste.

“Whoa.”

Eva tried to leap away, but he held her in place. “Go away, Wade.”

“Get a room, dude. Oh wait you’ve got one.”

“Is the door done?” In his arms, Eva trembled with suppressed laughter. He should let her move, but Wade didn’t deserve the satisfaction of seeing him rattled.

“Yeah. The sheriff arrived with a couple of the crime scene techs. Didn’t want to leave without saying goodbye. He put out a call for you on the radio, but I guess you were too busy to hear it.”

“I’d gladly beat him senseless,” he whispered to Eva, “but he’s dog-sitting for me.”

Eva twisted within his embrace until she was settled on his thigh. He barely resisted the urge to run his hands over the warm, firm curves of her backside. Desire was something he understood and recognized. But Eva redefined the word, turning it into an intense awareness. He wondered how much of her response to him was simply a result of convenience. Or worse, an infatuation with her bodyguard. The uncomfortable thoughts cooled his ardor a bit.

“How is Sheldon?”

Carson watched Wade’s appreciation for Eva ratchet up another notch, matching his growing annoyance with his brother.

“Doing fine.” Wade leaned against the door jamb and smiled broadly as if he didn’t have anything better to do with his day than talk dog care with Eva.

The radio crackled again, and the sheriff's voice simultaneously carried through the device and up the stairs.

"Up here, Sheriff," Wade called out.

Eva scooted out of his embrace and reached for the gun. "This'll do," she said a bit louder than necessary. "Thanks."

"What are y'all doing in here?" Sheriff Cochran's scowl slid back and forth between them.

Carson stood up and gave a nod to the gun in Eva's hand. "I wanted her to be armed."

"Smart. It's a good gun. The forensic team is doing their thing, J.C." He shifted his gaze to Eva. "Did I miss Ross?"

"He just left," she replied. "What's the word on the downed guard?"

"We found him under a pile of leaves. Drugged, but otherwise uninjured."

"Good."

Carson urged everyone out of the bedroom and back to the relatively neutral territory of the kitchen. When Wade had left, Eva asked the sheriff for an update on Matheson.

"Haven't heard a thing. Take that as a good sign though."

"I will," she said.

"Did your new client give you anything helpful?"

"New client?"

Eva beamed with pride as she answered Carson. “Abraham hired me. Well, officially he hired CS.” Her delighted smile faded and her voice returned to that all-business efficiency as she gave a concise report to the sheriff. “He says Bakr sent a team of three to deal with me, but one of the men is loyal to Abe.”

“Not the one I, ah, injured?”

“No.” She started to pat his shoulder, but yanked her hand back.

The sheriff eyed them for a long moment. “So. One of the men involved with the kidnapping is on our side?”

“Yes.”

“Where is Abe now?”

“I can’t say. Special Agent Nichols is handling his security.”

“That’s a relief. We’re spread thin enough. You two okay to stay here? We’ve got the perimeter in place again.”

Carson glanced at her, knew the resolve in her eyes matched his own. “We’re good here.”

Sheriff Cochran shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. “Good. I’ll tell Ruth that Wade did a fine job on the new door.”

“Tell her I’m sorry about the cookie jar.” Carson said. “I promise I’ll track down a replacement.”

The sheriff clapped him on the shoulder. “You’re both safe. That matters most to all of us.”

Chapter 12

Bakr read the text message on his phone and let the fury sweep through him. The queen was still on the board, still a wild card.

She'd surprised him, making an astute and unexpected leap of logic, sending the team to Matheson earlier than expected. And her guards were competent, keeping her secure behind the castle walls.

When his nephew had been the hostage, she'd followed the breadcrumbs he'd laid out, leading her team exactly where he wanted them to go.

He wasn't sure if he should attribute the change to her increased experience, personal growth, or some other factor. Did it matter? Maybe the night that had proven so pivotal for him had been equally transforming for her.

The idea intrigued him. How could he use it against her?

He wasn't worried about the man currently in FBI custody. All three of the men he'd selected for this task would gladly

die before they'd betray him. He had trained two out of the three personally, seen to their advancement and provided them all enough to live luxuriously.

They understood the rewards he'd offered for capturing the queen were greater still.

He sighed. The primary perk of this game—like any other—was adapting, effectively countering her moves, until she was cornered, with no choice but to betray that which she held dear.

Then he would have what he wanted: the queen's surrender. She would give him the information he needed to secure his place at the top of Morcos Construction and remain there for the rest of his natural life.

Without her, without the details only she could find, his reign was likely to be cut short.

It was a mere formality to be voted in by the board of directors, but those who oversaw the darker side of the company's interests were already impatient for him to make up for his past errors.

He picked up the phone and dialed the pilot's number. "I need a repeat of last week's route."

The pilot gave him a timeframe and Bakr hung up.

He smiled; a predator eager for the hunt.

Abraham had been the perfect son, the exemplary older brother, lauded for his leadership, asset management, and forward thinking. Naturally, he had time for all of those

worthy pursuits because Bakr was doing the dirty work behind the scenes.

It had been his role within the family to support their mutual interests in this way. The second son had been groomed to attend to the less desirable tasks through generations.

He might have fought the system, but why? It functioned for the benefit of all. He had skills and a lethal edge his brother lacked. This was a game for the strong, and when Abraham showed signs of weakness, it was Bakr's duty to step in. For the greater good.

Looking out over the hard glitter of New York City, he still couldn't understand the shock and disgust in response to his own brand of innovation. They had both been trained up from birth for their respective roles. If his brother had been able to manage his weak nerves, they would have been partners for years to come.

It hadn't been pleasant to dispose of his brother, but it had been a necessity.

Bakr shook off the melancholy. None of that mattered now. He was in charge, he held the company and family fortunes in his hands. They would thank him soon enough.

He paused as he passed the chess set and, knowing he'd be back soon enough, decided to leave it here. The queen who mattered most would soon tell him everything. Before, during, or possibly after he destroyed all she held dear. But she would tell him.

Returning to his desk, he drafted one more email but saved it rather than hitting send. It wouldn't be complete without a current picture.

Calling for a cab, he prepared for one last errand in the city. He could almost hear her weeping as he showed her his checkmate move.

Chapter 13

Eva spent the rest of the day and into the evening working through the old files and ignoring the tingle on her lips whenever her thoughts strayed to the man in the other room. When this was over, she'd address her feelings. Right now, she had to track down Bakr before he hurt someone else from her old team.

She believed Abe's story, believed both brothers thought she knew something, but she had yet to turn up anything in the transcription to verify it. She did mental run throughs of every stage of the rescue, wondering what she'd missed then, what her mistakes would reveal now.

The flash drive was burning a hole in her pocket, but she couldn't bring herself to open it on the FBI equipment. Keeping them in the loop was one thing—defined in her mind as intel she knew before handing it to someone else. At this point, opening that drive might be spoon feeding them information they would jump on prematurely.

If Abraham had made some sketchy decisions in the course of doing business, Bakr was ten times worse. She'd suspected him of the kidnapping two years ago because it fit his MO of violent, deceitful behavior.

Now Abraham was a client and she would protect his privacy to the best of her ability. He might operate in the gray area, but the Army wouldn't have tried to assist him without good reason.

She could search the records, replay the night in her mind, but without the context of the flash drive information, she'd never understand what she was looking for. To the best of her recollection, Abe's son hadn't said anything during the rescue that shed light on the current circumstance.

"Come on." Pushing her hands into her hair, she forced herself to think about what she did know. "There's a connection."

She did an online search for poetry and literature regarding family, honor, and heart, and nothing in the search prompted anything in her memory. She would have to take a look at the flash drive.

"You want dinner in here?" Carson stood in the doorway, a plate in his hand.

Her stomach rumbled while she debated the wisdom of eating with him here or in the kitchen. Both were too domestic for her peace of mind. "Here's fine," she said as an idea struck. "We can shop for a new cookie jar for Ruth."

“You don’t have more important things to do?”

“Important is relative. I’m banging my head against the proverbial wall here. I could use the distraction.”

With a shrug, Carson handed her a plate with a thick wedge of lasagna, salad greens, and a slice of warm garlic toast. “Smells heavenly.”

“Wish I could take credit, but I just pulled it out of the freezer.”

When he returned with a plate of his own and a glass of water for each of them, she opened a browser window and started poking around at holiday websites while they ate.

“The woman is a genius,” she said with a sigh.

“The cookie jar was full of snickerdoodles.”

“That puts our trouble into perspective. I used to sneak those for breakfast when I was a kid.”

“Good choice,” he said with a chuckle.

She liked that she could make him laugh, especially after the day they’d had. “Oh, yeah. I only really got away with it when I came home from college.”

“Right. Like you can’t get away with anything whenever you want.”

“What’s that mean?”

He took another bite, chewed slowly. Why was that so damn sexy?

“I have sisters. Y’all are sneaky.”

He'd turned up the dial on the southern drawl and it was her turn to laugh. "Sneaky is an important life skill." And it had served her well. "I bet you did your share of sneaking."

"Maybe."

"Aha!" She swiveled the laptop to give him a better view of the cookie jar pictured on her screen. "What do you think?"

He leaned forward. "That's it. Can we get it gift wrapped?"

"Sure. And delivered by Christmas too."

"Should we send it to the Rooster or here?"

"I vote here." She heard the hitch in his breath. "You're worried about another incident."

"What are the odds we'd lose two cookie jars to unwelcome guests?" He shrugged and unfolded himself from the chair. "Besides, we're ready as we can be."

"I can order two." He didn't laugh this time, just turned and walked back to the kitchen, with a slow shake of his head.

She placed the order online and followed him. "Go turn on a Christmas special or something. I'll do the dishes."

"I don't want to keep you—"

She turned, found him closer than she thought he'd be. Her pulse jumped. It was breakfast all over again. By some miracle she managed not to leap into his arms. "It won't bother me and you need a distraction too."

He looked at her with enough heat she thought she might combust right there.

“Go on.” She cleared her throat. “I’ll bring in something for dessert in a minute.”

“I saw ice cream when I pulled out the lasagna.”

“Deal.” She shooed him out of the kitchen, pleased to catch a glimpse of his normal relaxed smile.

She really could work through any number of distractions, Carson realized, watching her pretending to be interested in the television show. Her fingers had been going, quietly tapping the keyboard, the whole time and that furrow of concentration between her brows had shown up frequently.

When the scowl hadn’t let up and the reruns got boring, he encouraged her to give it a rest and head up to bed. Surprisingly, she’d agreed and shut everything down.

Carson glanced up at the soft squeaks of the floor boards as she moved from bedroom to bath and back again. He wouldn’t head upstairs until he was sure she was in her room and effectively out of his reach.

He did another walk through the house, watched a late night comedian, and waited for the next scheduled check in from the guards posted outside before he even contemplated going upstairs.

That kiss was front and center in his mind unless he forcibly pushed it back. And why would he want to do that when it had

been better than he'd imagined? He'd done a lot of imagining since she'd shown up in town.

It was dumb to get distracted this way. Having one of Bakr's men in custody didn't mean much. There were two more out there and Bakr himself was a completely unknown variable. Any feelings he was developing for her should wait.

Her scent lingered in the bathroom, tempting him to forget waiting and go knock on her door. He really needed to get control of himself. This wasn't a romantic getaway, this was a security detail to protect her from a madman. She didn't need Carson disrupting her sleep trying to charm her out of her pajamas.

Big mistake. Now he wondered what she wore to bed. Aggravated, he finished brushing his teeth and quickly ducked into his own room across the hall. In bed, he yanked the covers to his chin and tried to think mundane thoughts that had nothing to do with Eva while he waited for sleep.

The shouting came first.

Eva's voice. A dozen scenarios raced through his head. All of them ended badly, with her disappearing. He threw back the covers grabbed his side arm and raced across the hall.

He rapped softly on the door. "Eva?"

No answer.

She was fine. She had to be. He was overreacting. The security system hadn't sounded. He turned back to his

bedroom, stopping short at the sound of another shout, this one accompanied by a loud thud.

He opened the door, and turned on the light, keeping the gun ready, but down at his side. She was flopped on the floor along with half the bedding. The sight of her twisted up in the sheets might have been funny under other circumstances. Just now, his body responded predictably to the sheer white tank top and camouflage boxers while his brain tried to overpower hormones with sympathy.

Looked like a pretty bad nightmare.

“Eva!”

“Bart!” Her own voice seemed to wake her. She blinked rapidly. “Carson?”

“Got it in two.” He knelt beside her. “Let me help.”

She wrestled a hand free and waved him off. “I can do it.” She swore softly as she extricated herself from the mess.

“Sorry to wake you.”

“No problem. I wasn’t asleep.”

She eyed him closely. “Is there another problem?”

“Only in here,” he countered. “Nightmare?”

“No.” She scooped the bedding up and he crossed to the opposite side of the bed to help her restore order.

They both knew she was lying, but he didn’t want to push. The day had been bad enough without him harping on her for

facts she might not be able to provide and feelings she didn't care to acknowledge.

He wasn't all that sure he could form complete sentences and he seized on the task of re-making the bed as a much-needed distraction from the way the soft cotton of her top and shorts clung to her curves. Knowing what type of pajamas she wore wouldn't make sleep any easier.

The woman epitomized sexy with her strong, feminine silhouette. His palms itched to touch her and learn the feel of her golden skin. His thoughts nearly beyond recovery, he might have tucked the sheets and blankets a little tighter than necessary on his side. Better to keep her in and him out.

"Fine. It was a nightmare," she confessed as they smoothed the bedspread into place.

"Uh-huh."

She slid under the covers, propping her back against the headboard and drawing her knees to her chest.

He hadn't known her long, but he'd never seen her look so young. Or sad. She'd been worried for Bart in the office, but plenty of temper had been mixed in with it.

Same at the hospital and, well, everywhere else. Whatever the day held—good or bad—it seemed like Eva greeted everything with her temper primed and ready.

It was an odd personal philosophy, he thought now, because she didn't come across as unhappy, negative, or even angry. But that willingness to do battle always gleamed in her eyes.

“My mother insists that talking about it helps.”

He smiled. “Mine too.”

“Well, settle in, if you’re willing,” she said, patting the space beside her. “It’s a long story.”

Knowing his limits, he pulled up the rocking chair and propped his feet at the end of the bed. Any closer and he’d find a different way to help her forget her nightmare.

She raised an eyebrow, but didn’t comment. “You’ve probably figured it has to do with Abe’s son.”

He shrugged. “Stands to reason.”

“Yeah.” She gave a gusty sigh. “And I’m stalling.”

He waited. When she didn’t say anything more, he got up and turned off the overhead light.

“What are you doing?”

“I’ll stay here tonight.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Then I’ll stay until you fall asleep again.”

“Carson, that’s not necessary.”

He ignored her, settling back in the rocker, feet up on the corner of the bed. “Talk, don’t talk, doesn’t matter. I just don’t think you want to be alone.”

How did he know that? Eva wondered. What was inside him that just knew the right thing to say to her? She couldn't see his features in the dark, wasn't sure she wanted to. She knew he'd have that steady kindness in his eyes. The same kind, compassionate look he wore when Mrs. Jackson asked him something about her new iPhone.

She was suddenly irritated with his kindness. What would it take to turn him speechless? Would he have a kind, ready answer if she told him she wanted him close—not for comfort—but for something much more elemental?

The attraction was there and she knew he'd been more than willing to lock lips in the kitchen after breakfast. He'd been more than willing to turn her soft kiss that had been meant to soothe into something heady and steamy after the intruder's attack.

She almost voiced the invitation, but stopped herself. He'd turn her down. Gently, of course, with a wry smile before he posed a question of his own. A question about the source of her nightmares.

She listened to his steady breathing and wondered if he'd managed to drift off. "Carson?"

"Here."

"The mission hasn't been declassified yet."

"Okay."

More of that steady breathing. Why did he have to be so damned understanding? "He fooled me."

“Hmm.”

And she wasn't going to fool Carson. Hold her tongue or tell him the truth, but no middle ground with this man. She sifted through the details, picking out the relevant points that wouldn't breach security.

“You know when you're absolutely sure you're right about something?”

“Yeah. I'm an oldest kid.”

She smiled. “And sometimes that certainty causes you to interpret things to support the conclusion you've already drawn.”

“That works on both sides of any debate.” He cleared his throat. “It's called spin. Or perception.”

“Let's go with perception in this case. I had one scenario in mind and everything backed it up. On the surface.”

“The surface is all you've got most of the time.”

“Wrong.” That was the hitch for her. “It was my job to go deeper, to look at what wasn't there and figure out what it meant to the bigger picture.”

“Ross thinks you were set up.”

Really? She wondered why, but it didn't matter. “He's a good friend, but Ross wasn't there that night.”

“Does every mission go as planned?”

“Yeah, most of them do.”

“But not all.”

“No.” She wondered if he knew how to be anything other than nice. “My role was to guide the rescue—”

“Based on the information you had.” The rocker creaked. “You did that. Everyone has a bad day, falls for the bad joke. I get the impression your team never blamed you for what happened.”

She sniffled. “I can still hear the chatter of machine guns operated by people who shouldn’t have been there. They were pinned down because of me.”

“That’s where the nightmare starts?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “Every time.” She shivered and hugged her knees.

“How did they get out?”

“What?”

“I know what you were doing is classified, but is it still classified how you were doing it?”

She forced herself to think. To replay that night step by step.

“The shooting surprised me. It was too early as they approached the warehouse and it took some time to assimilate the reports from each position.”

“But you did it.”

“Not without casualties.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but Special Forces soldiers know the risks that go with the job.”

“Yes. My job is—was—to minimize those risks. I got cocky and they got caught in a trap. I was so sure it was a simple, straightforward rescue.” She listed off the cues she’d missed, the paper thin trail until he stopped her.

“You’re doing it now.”

“What?”

“Spinning. Twisting the perspective. You’re skewing all the evidence to support your current theory that you suck at your job. It’s my understanding you don’t suck. That, to the contrary, you are damn good at what you do.”

“Well, yeah,” she mumbled. “I was.”

“The situation was a mess, I’m sure. But they got out. Thanks to you.”

“The hostage died.”

“Cut yourself some slack. You must’ve done something right or Mr. Morcos wouldn’t have hired you now.”

“You’re awfully confident for a guy who wasn’t there.”

“Bart was there.”

“Yeah. So?”

The rocker creaked some more, then stopped. “The man stepped in front of a bullet for you—and zip it,” he ordered, “before you say ‘maybe’.”

“Yes, sir.”

“That has a nice ring to it.”

His voice reflected the grin she knew was on his face.

“Facing Abe, dredging it all up again, is tough.”

“Even more so if you’re piling on.”

“I suppose.” She knew he was right. Knew the self-doubt and second guessing were making her assessment more difficult. “Thanks for making me feel better.”

“Anytime.”

She expected him to return to the room across the hall. Instead the rocker kept *creaking* that soothing rhythm, lulling her closer to sleep. Except she couldn’t sleep as a new image kept her awake for a completely different reason.

She’d been disoriented when he’d stormed into the room, but she wouldn’t soon forget the view of those long, well-muscled legs and ripped abs on either side of a pair of gym shorts. Since high school she considered herself a fan of the bulky, barrel-chested type, but the lean, trim form of Carson was sure hitting all the right buttons tonight. He really needed to go before she did something stupid.

“You’re staying?”

“You’re still awake.”

Huh. She closed her eyes and recited the Night Before Christmas poem to herself. It was the happiest, most innocuous thing she could remember. Almost remember. Getting stuck on seven out of eight reindeer names gave her brain enough time to leap back to Carson.

She took it as a sign. “My mom used to tell me once you understood the nightmare you could control it. Change it up with other thoughts or memories.”

“I’ve done that. Go to sleep and give it a try.”

“It’s never worked with this nightmare.” She eased out from under the covers, crawled toward the foot of the bed.

The rocker stopped creaking. “Eva?”

“Right here.” She reached out and touched his ankle, trailed her fingers up to his knee. The rocker creaked once as she leaned forward and braced her hands on his strong thighs.

“What are you doing?” His hands covered hers and his hoarse voice sent a ripple over her skin. “Creating a better memory.” She brushed her lips against his, offering a taste, an invitation, a wealth of seductive promise in that one point of contact.

She couldn’t have anticipated the charge, the absolutely electric response zipping through her system.

His hand cruised up and over her arms, skated down her back to settle on her hips.

Those wide palms dragged her forward into his lap with an unmistakable urgency as he teased her lips apart.

Matching his enthusiasm, she pushed her hands into his hair and held on tight as her tongue tangled with the heat and demands of his.

The faint taste of peppermint toothpaste was eclipsed by something darker, more enticing. A raw something that called her every nerve to attention.

Her sheer tank top was no real barrier against the heat of his skin and she trembled when he caressed her breast with the back of his fingers.

“Do it again.” She arched into his touch, wanting more, wanting everything.

The kiss, the tender demands of his mouth on hers, spun out, and she thought she could happily drift on the dizzying pleasure forever.

Then he pulled back.

Her breath sawed in and out of her chest. “What?”

“Wow.”

She smiled, unable to come up with a better description. “Yeah.” She trailed her fingers over his shoulder, across his chest.

He trapped her hand, raised it to his lips. “As much as I’d like to follow through...”

She interrupted with a gentle nibble of his earlobe and smiled as the goosebumps rippled down his neck.

He scooped her into his arms and stood, carrying her around to the other side of the bed.

“You have good moves,” she said, expecting him to crawl under the covers with her.

But he pulled the covers up to her chin. “You need rest and we have a date at the range in the morning.” He leaned down and kissed her on the nose. “Sleep well.”

She heard him move the rocker back into place and he was almost out the door when she found her voice. “Carson, wait!”

“I’m trying to do the right thing, here, Eva.”

“So I didn’t misread the signals?”

“Lord, no. This just isn’t the right, *umm*, timing.”

“Timing?”

“Yeah.”

He had her so amped up she was willing to pick a fight. Worse, she was ready to beg. She clamped her lips shut on that unacceptable urge and put her back to the door.

Carson waited another few seconds, then bolted for his own room. If she’d said anything, he would have leaped into her bed, to hell with the consequences.

He checked the safety on his sidearm and then slid it under the edge of the mattress.

Timing? What kind of coward offered up a lame excuse like that?

In bed, he stared at the dark, listened to the night, and prayed for sleep. It was a futile effort.

She was the one. He'd known it this afternoon when she'd kissed him instead of taking the revolver. Something had changed, shifted deep inside when their lips met, and he'd just known.

It sounded sappy in his head, but it was simply the truth.

He tried to tell himself that kiss had been sympathy on her part, a way to soothe the raw edges after the fight. Sympathy wasn't what he wanted from her, wasn't what he wanted to give either.

Rolling over, he punched the pillow. He could practically hear his brother mocking him if word ever got out about this.

What man in his right mind walked away from a lap full of a woman like Eva Battaglia?

But he didn't want to be the quick diversion she used to get over a nightmare. He wanted to be there, beside her for the long term.

How that might work was too complex for his sex-addled brain to figure out right now. All he knew for sure was his gut instinct told him jumping in too fast would backfire.

His body ached and the need nearly drove him back across the hall. He practically dared the universe to send an intruder this way now so he could channel the sexual frustration into a more productive outlet.

With grim visions of a fistfight running through his mind, he finally fell asleep.

Chapter 14

Eva got up early after a restless night and prepared a casserole for breakfast so Carson could eat whenever he came downstairs. No way was she subjecting herself to sharing a meal with him after last night's humiliation.

Her dreams—full of Carson, naturally—were as disruptive as the nightmares. The only consolation had been knowing the attraction was mutual.

Why wouldn't he act on it?

She supposed it wasn't the most pressing question facing her today, but it sure as hell felt like it. He'd been so damn nice, tucking her into bed when she'd done everything but strip naked and throw her legs over her head.

After her cold shower, she'd patted concealer under her eyes and applied plenty of mascara and a shiny lip gloss. Anything to hide evidence of her sleepless night.

Lighting up the computers, she decided if timing was his issue, she'd solve this pain in the ass case and remove the

obstacle.

She hadn't gotten anything useful out of the video feed Bakr had put on Matheson. The taunting text messages had ceased for the moment. Ross assured her Bart and everyone else involved on that mission were now in safe locations.

It was progress and it narrowed his focus on her.

She opened the instant message window and asked the ghost on the other end if the stuff in the syringe had been identified yet.

"Come on," she coached under her breath when he didn't answer right away. Her money was on sodium pentothal. Truth serum made sense after talking with Abe. Bakr wanted her alive and willing to share whatever he thought she knew.

And there was the real question: What did she know?

She'd been over the transcripts and reports. Replaying it in her head wasn't getting her anywhere. The lack of sleep wasn't helping. She rolled her head from side to side, wishing she could just shake loose the missing details.

Hearing Carson on the stairs, she sent another question to the ghost, this one requesting the footage of the Matheson rescue.

The ghost replied immediately, answering both questions and giving her plenty of details to sort through, which kept her in the den and out of the kitchen.

It had been truth serum in the syringe. Clearly Bakr was serious about getting some lost detail out of her head. Old school and relatively risky, but a sign of his desperation. She

set the laptop aside and paced while the video buffered. The walls were closing in on her, but she knew it wasn't the confines of the house. Her agitation had more to do with the hole in her memory.

“Hey,” Carson said softly from the doorway. “Are you okay?”

“Sure,” she answered brightly, choosing to assume he was referring to the present and not the recent past. “Why?”

“You were swearing. Well, I can't be sure about that.”

“Probably. I can't shake it loose. They all think I know something.” She growled. “All I *know* is that I don't know what I'm missing.” She pushed her hands through her hair, then thrust them out in front of her. “It's right in front of me. Except it's not.”

“Hold on. You changed languages again. I'm only fluent in English and Southern English.”

She paused, did a double take, and laughed. “I suppose that qualifies as bilingual.” Running the risk of revealing her true emotions, she turned to face him, and gasped. Angry bruises marred his skin where the intruder had tried to choke him. “Your throat is a mess!”

“Looks worse than it feels.” He rubbed the scruff shadowing his cheeks and wouldn't quite meet her gaze. “I won't mind skipping a few days of shaving. You were saying?”

“We should put something on that.”

“Forget it. Tell me what you need. Preferably in English this time.”

You. For a long moment, it was the only answer she could come up with. Who would Bakr lash out at next in this deadly game of cat and mouse? “I should just set up a meet.”

Carson’s gaze found hers now, hard and unyielding. “No.”

“No?” Folding her arms across her chest, she waited for an explanation.

“Fine.” He held up his hands. “I’m just the bodyguard and they told me it was my job to accompany you wherever the case led. I’ll go with you to meet him, *if* you get approval from Ross and Nichols.”

Knowing that had less chance than a glass of ice water in hell, she leashed her ever-ready temper. “Sorry. I’m just mad at him. What I need is a look at the flash drive. But that means the FBI will see it too,” she added when he sent her a questioning look. “I’m sure Abe doesn’t want that.”

“Abe who deals black market weapons on the side?”

“Fair enough. But life’s not always that cut and dried. If I had to get over my black and white way of thinking you do too.”

“Is that a requirement to stay on the job?”

It was obvious he was teasing, but now she was curious. “Come on. You can’t be saying all the citizens of Haleswood land on either the good or bad side of the fence. Someone around here must make gray area choices.”

“There may be one or two real people around here. But no one’s dealing weapons.”

“What a relief. Besides, I’m supposed to protect the client’s interests.”

“Sorry to sound judgmental.” He held up his hands in surrender. “You know the client and you know what you’re doing.”

“I’m glad you think so.” She flopped back down on the couch. “It might require that syringe to figure out what I don’t know that I know.”

Carson laughed and that deep rumble just rippled right though her. Thank heaven he couldn’t see what he did to her. Bad enough she’d nearly given in to the urge to sneak into his bed last night.

“We could swing by the topiary gardens on the way to the range.”

“Why?”

“My grandmother would let you have a few minutes with her computer. The FBI isn’t tied into that one.”

While she wouldn’t put it past Nichols to anticipate that kind of move, it was highly unlikely. “That can work. I’m more surprised we’re still going to the range.”

“I want you familiar with that revolver.”

“Hey, I’m not complaining, it’s just the security factor I guess.”

“Sheriff Cochran says the perimeter team will keep things secure here. No one else knows we’re going, so we should be safe. And obviously no one knows about the extra stop to see my grandma.”

“You’re not afraid my presence will be a safety concern for your grandmother or the rest of your family?”

“Nah,” he said, shaking his head. “Let me clean up the dishes and then we’ll head out.”

“Okay. I’ll shut things down.” Just as she moved the mouse, a signal sounded.

“What’s that?”

Forgetting her hormones, she motioned Carson over. “Facial recognition. Hot damn! Meet Bakr Morcos.”

“Not a friendly looking guy.”

Another window chimed, even as she was bringing up the location on the first one. “Well look at that. The ghost is actually helpful.”

“What did he do?”

“He’s got a second hit. Oh.” She reached out, clutched Carson’s arm. “The address is Queens. I— Oh.” Her stomach pitched, threatened to toss back her breakfast. “They shop there. My family.” Panic gripped her heart in an icy vise, her composure splintered. All of her positive affirmations about standing tall, about not playing Bakr’s game, were beyond her reach now. “He’s been to my house.”

“Ross has it covered, remember?”

“Does he?” She lurched to her feet before she let herself collapse on the comfort of his strong shoulder. “If he had someone on my family, wouldn’t whoever Ross assigned have seen him?” She flung a hand at the monitor. “Wouldn’t they have picked him up?”

“When was this taken? From what I understand, this kind of software and search takes time.”

“Yes. But it can’t be a coincidence. I *told* them Bakr was already in the states.”

She ranted, all of the emotion and worry, no matter how useless, pouring out of her in a mad rush of various languages. As she wound down, she found herself in Carson’s warm embrace, his shirt damp from her angry tears. He didn’t shush her, just held her steady until she ran out of words in every language she knew.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled. She wasn’t ready for him to let go. Sliding her arms around his waist she held tight. “I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing.” He pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “Do you trust Ross?”

“Yes.”

“But that’s not enough?”

“No.” It only added to her misery. “It should be, but it’s not.”

“So call them. Call your family.”

“I can’t use that thing Nichols gave me.”

“Use my phone or Ruth’s phone. You won’t feel better until you call and I’m not dumb enough to take you shooting when you’re this upset.”

She looked up at him, blinked the tears away. “I want to go shooting. I need to get out of here for a while.”

“That’s the spirit.” He turned her toward the kitchen. “Go make the call. I’ll shut down the computers.”

“But—”

He gave her a little push. “They trust me to protect you, they can deal with whatever I see in the process of shutting down a machine.”

There it was again, his no-nonsense side that sent butterflies zipping through her belly as effectively as his sexy grin.

“Thanks.” She picked up the landline in Ruth’s kitchen and dialed her home number.

Her mother answered on the second ring with the annoyed ‘hello’ she saved for telemarketers and political callers.

“Hi, Mom. It’s Eva.”

“I can tell my daughters apart.”

“I know. I know. How are you guys doing?”

“We’re fine. Are you calling to tell me when your flight is coming in?”

“No, ma’am.”

“*What* did you call me?”

Eva laughed at her slip up. “Sorry. It’s sort of a habit down here.”

“All the more reason you should come *home* for Christmas.”

“I wish.”

“You know, it wouldn’t take much for me to convince your father to go south for the holidays.”

“Don’t do that either. I’ll come home as soon as I can. I promise.” She wanted to ask if her mother had seen anyone out of the ordinary, if anything odd had happened, but it seemed silly. Her mother wasn’t the least bit distressed and if Ross said he had it covered, he did.

“When you left the Army I expected you to find work closer to home.”

She smiled as the old discussion started to unfold. Usually it irritated her, this time she was comforted. “I love you, Mom,” she said, smiling as the panic faded. “If I lived closer we’d only argue more.”

Her mother chuckled. “Not about where you live. You know, I ran into Tony Accio yesterday.”

Eva rolled her eyes. Talk of her high school boyfriend was as predictable as her living arrangements. “How’s he doing?”

“He looked happy. Says he’s engaged.”

“Give him my congratulations,” she said, watching Carson clean up the kitchen. He’d been right. This was exactly what

she needed. She'd have to find the right *time* to show her appreciation.

“I could tell him you looked happy if I ever saw you with my own eyes.”

“Soon. I promise. Give everyone my love.” She ended the call and, feeling a thousand times better, rushed over to hug Carson.

“Good idea. Great idea. Thanks.” She stepped back, suddenly unsure what to do. “I’ll, um, be ready in two minutes.”

She dashed upstairs to check the mascara damage, thinking she could name on one hand the men in her life who made her weak-kneed and giddy inside. Tony Accio had been one of them, but she'd been seventeen and stupid.

Her mother might have had a wild, misplaced pipe dream of a Battaglia-Accio wedding and little Accios getting underfoot at the holidays, but Tony hadn't been inclined to wait out Eva's Army plans.

The few men who'd interested her after Tony didn't compare to what she was feeling for Carson. She faced herself in the mirror, patted cool water on her heated cheeks. For a woman who didn't go for nice guys, the southern deputy in charge of her safety sure was pushing all the right buttons.

“I'm ready,” she declared upon returning to the kitchen.

“Got the flash drive?”

She nodded. “Got the guns and ammo?”

“You bet.”

“Is anyone planning on tailing us?”

“Probably. I wasn’t going to worry about it.”

She slid into the passenger seat. “Not even with our extra stop?”

He matched her whisper, leaning close. “Not even.”

She almost kissed him. Again. Except somewhere between her meltdown and restored sense of empowerment, she decided that the next time they kissed she wouldn’t stop, wouldn’t let him stop. No, next time she wouldn’t settle for an excuse about timing or anything else. From either one of them.

Just sitting here in the car, she felt drawn to him. The sensation got stronger with every contact. She had to wonder, maybe even hope, that the feeling would fade when they finally got their hands on each other. It would be so much cleaner if they could react to this attraction and be friends when her work here was done.

Carson wasn’t surprised by the dark sedan tailing them out of Haleswood. The sheriff had warned him about the extra precaution. He had bigger concerns.

Specifically his grandmother’s reaction to Eva. There was the small chance Wade had said something to the family about seeing that kiss. He’d learned the hard way age had done nothing to mellow the little brother factor. Right now he

couldn't think of anything he'd done that would give Wade cause to seek revenge, probably because right now all he could think of was Eva.

"It's a gorgeous day," she said, rolling down the window.

"Feels good to be out of the house?"

"Definitely. It's a nice house, but there's only so much sitting still I can manage."

"Ross warned me you were prone to cabin fever."

"Only when there's nothing interesting on the internet."

He smiled. "I hear fresh air and sunshine are important. Healthy, even."

She sighed. "I suppose the rumor mill got that right." She rolled down her window and the blast of cold air teased strands of her dark hair out of her sleek ponytail.

"For the record, my grandmother is a founding member of the local rumor mill."

"Thanks for the warning. But if she heard about you and Shannon at the hospital, it didn't come from me."

"Glad you can laugh about it."

"I can hardly throw stones." She shrugged. "I made a career out of eavesdropping and deciding which nuggets of info mattered more."

"Have you decided that Morcos being in New York doesn't matter?"

“Not exactly. I’ve decided to cling to what you said. To trust Ross and his resources. Bakr’s made it obvious he wants me. Worse, he wants to mess with me. He can loiter all he wants in Queens, but that won’t help his endgame.”

Carson agreed. He didn’t know the bastard messing with her, but he felt better about their chances of bringing him down when Eva wasn’t battling her fears. When she’d turned into his arms it didn’t matter that he didn’t understand the words. He was able to give her something that steadied her. The feeling of knowing he’d helped her regain her self-control made him want to leap tall buildings.

“She’ll behave while I introduce you,” he said when they were close to the topiary gardens. “After that, you should prepare for the third degree.”

“Won’t be the first time. Your maternal relatives don’t have the exclusive on invasive questions.”

“See, now, I thought that sort of thing originated here.”

“I think it’s a genetic thing that happens when a woman becomes a mother and it kicks into overdrive when her ‘babies’ start dating.”

“It’s like you were a fly on the wall at my house,” he said, making her smile. “Regardless of where or how the nosy habits began, it’s likely she’ll make some crack about you and me. So ignore that and just go do what you need to do on her computer. I’ll field the personal questions.”

He had to work not to squirm under her assessing glance.

“Got it,” she said at last. “Sounds like you’ve got the harder task.”

“I guess we won’t know that until you have a look at the flash drive.”

Her throaty laugh bubbled out of her and he gave himself a mental high five. He turned the car off the highway and into the long gravel drive. Neither of them were surprised when the dark sedan kept right on going.

“You okay?”

“Sure. They’re on our side.”

“True enough.”

“Security is a good thing,” she mumbled. “This is me refusing to worry.”

“Glad to hear it,” he said, pulling to a stop in front of the small building that served as the office and sales center.

“You could at least pretend you believe me.”

“We’ll get through this. We *are* getting through this. And I’m not just referring to your case.” He tipped his head a fraction at the main door where his grandmother stood beaming at them expectantly.

Carson made the introductions as soon as they were out of the car.

“Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Morris.” Eva extended her hand but his grandmother ignored it.

“Call me Sylvie, dear.” She wrapped an arm gently around Eva. “Let’s go inside. It feels like snow.”

Eva shot him a look over her shoulder, caught him rolling his eyes.

“He doubts me, all my grandchildren do, but my knees are never wrong.”

“Grandma, Eva needs to borrow your computer for a few minutes.”

“If you don’t mind,” Eva added.

“Not at all. Just ignore my mess back there. I’ve started the end of year reports,” she explained.

The moment Eva was through the office door, Carson’s grandma dropped the kind old lady routine in favor of the full-force information assault.

“Why, she is stunning. Everyone said so, but I wanted to see her myself. Heard you sat with her at Thanksgiving dinner at the Rooster.”

“The whole town was sitting with her, Grandma.”

“Not me.” She winked. “Guess I left too early.” She looked Carson up and down. “Just look at you. She makes you happy.”

“I’m just working an assignment, Grandma.”

“Don’t expect me to believe that look in your eye is work related.” She waved off his protest. “The O’Kelly girl never gave you that glow.”

“Men don’t glow.”

“Not with her. Good riddance, I say.”

“Grandma.”

“She was a phase, that’s all. We all go through them.” She pointed to a cabinet behind the sales counter. “Pull out the plastic sheeting and help me set up for the afternoon class.”

“You’ve got a class today?” It made him feel better that she wouldn’t be out here alone. He didn’t think Eva’s troubles would spill over onto his family, but as a precaution he’d sent a request to Mrs. Jackson to arrange for visitors to drop in and check on her.

“It’s a boy scout troop. You remember those days.” She beamed up at him. “Want to stay? The kids would get a kick out of you snipping a rosemary into a spiral.”

“As much as that appeals, we can’t. We have other things on the schedule.”

“Lovebirds would.”

“Grandma, hush.”

The older woman looked around. “You want to play hard to get, it’s your choice, but she strikes me as the direct type.”

“You’ve been chatting with Mrs. Jackson.”

Ignoring him, she reached up and planted her wiry hands on his shoulders. “Just don’t let her slip through your fingers.”

He sighed, exasperated that she thought she saw something he wasn’t yet sure about. Oh, he knew he was feeling

something more serious than a crush, more than the proximity of the situation. He just didn't know how to convince Eva of that.

“You forget how well I know you. Knew you'd fall hard when it happened.” She gave him a quick shake. “You'll figure it out.”

He mumbled an agreement, anything to get some distance, and helped her set up the tables, tools, and plants for her class.

“I can't believe you were going to do this alone,” he said. “You need to hire someone.”

“Maybe. Your sister will be along eventually.”

“Good.” He knew he shouldn't feel guilty for choosing law enforcement. Yet every time he walked in here he had this overwhelming sense that he'd let her down.

His father had invested a life here, learning the business from before he could walk and building on the solid foundation. Carson had learned at his father's side and quickly realized it wasn't where he wanted to spend his life.

He enjoyed certain aspects of the topiary gardens, and nursery and landscaping were a good hobby, but day in and day out, this place just wasn't the career for him.

When his dad died, his grandparents abruptly dispensed with the idea of retirement and stepped right back into the role of primary business owners. He and his siblings were splitting their time to help out, but it wasn't the same as having a successor.

“Where’s Pop?”

“I sent him off to Columbia with the last minute shopping list.”

“So he has time to shop for your gift.”

“You are a smart boy,” she said with a chuckle. “Marriage takes understanding, work, and more than a little finagling.”

Eva stepped out of the office, her face pale. He wanted to go to her, to ask questions, but this wasn’t the best time. “Did you get what you needed?”

“Yes.” She bobbed her head. “Thank you so much, Mrs. Morris.”

“Sylvie.”

“Sylvie,” Eva repeated. “We should be going, unless you need Carson to stay?”

“Not at all. He says you have plans. Go on,” she shoed them toward the door. “Enjoy.”

Carson waited until they were in the car. “Can you talk about it?”

She shook her head. “Don’t want to just yet.”

He kept quiet as he headed toward the shooting range. There had to be some sort of small talk he could offer, but he couldn’t think of anything other than questions related to the flash drive.

“My grandmother hadn’t met you before.” *Way to go, Deputy Inane.*

“Really? I was sure I’d seen everyone in this town at least once.”

Her quiet, distracted reply told him more than anything else. She was worried by whatever she’d seen on that flash drive.

“She won’t be alone.”

He felt her staring at him. “Come on. You’re worried. If it has anything to do with using my grandmother’s computer, you can relax. She won’t be alone.”

“We just left her alone.”

“My sister is on her way. A boy scout troop is on the way. And Mrs. Jackson has probably drawn up a spreadsheet to schedule visitors by now.”

“Mrs. Jackson doesn’t like spreadsheets.”

“You know what I mean.”

“When did you put all those precautions into place?”

“I can only take credit for Mrs. Jackson.”

“You told me not to worry.”

“You told me you weren’t worrying,” he countered. He preferred the attitude she was giving him now. He reached over and took her hand. “Focus on dealing with your case. I’ll worry about the local details.”

“Thanks.” She slid her hand away. “Here’s hoping the two don’t collide.”

Chapter 15

The plane touched down on the runway and taxied toward the small terminal. Bakr unbuckled his seat belt and turned on his phone.

“Sir,” the steward stepped forward. “You have a call.”

He accepted the aircraft handset and waited until the steward had moved out of earshot.

“Yes?”

“She’s out of the house.”

“Where?”

“They’ve stopped at a police-owned firing range.”

She hadn’t fled from the intruder, yet she willingly left the safety of that house for target practice. Interesting. “The bodyguard is with her?”

“Yes. He is a sheriff’s deputy.”

“The same man who has been with her?”

“Yes.”

“Kill him.” The small town officer had proven himself valuable to her. The man’s blood would be on her hands. More guilt, more leverage to use against her.

“And the woman?”

“Leave her.”

The man hesitated. Bakr gritted his teeth. Annoying yes, but it would be foolish to ignore the instincts of the man in the field.

“You are questioning my orders?”

“Only that they would move her further from our reach.”

“She will not let them take her out of the game. Her value is greatest behind the computer. Everything else is a distraction. We shall drive her back to her real work.”

“Yes, sir.”

Bakr set the phone aside as the aircraft rolled to a stop. As the stairs were lowered, he draped his heavy wool coat over his arm. The cool day was balmy compared to the snow he’d left in New York.

He might come to enjoy the south, if he could find a place free of the general population. Space, solitude, and control were highest on his personal agenda. Of course, once the queen restored the money and information his nephew had stolen, he could safely live anywhere.

He realized with no small shock he would miss the queen when the game was over. His mind immediately started reviewing other entertaining options as the rental car pulled to a stop.

It might be fun to sell off Morcos Construction in small, liquidation-priced chunks. He turned the idea around, assessing the pros and cons, but just the thought of the potential uproar put a small smile on his face.

With a bit of creative accounting, he could bankrupt them while maintaining control of the major financial and intellectual assets.

A few months of living on a depleted income would bring his family begging him for his ideas and assistance.

First, the queen. There would be plenty of time to plan the next game.

Chapter 16

Eva didn't think she'd met a better man—on either a professional or personal level—than Carson Morris. She wasn't sure how he managed to know just what to do or say to make her feel better, but she was grateful that he kept doing it.

She wasn't used to feeling fragile. Despite doing most of her work in a room with more computers and gadgets than people, she'd always felt like an integral part of a strong team. Bakr's tactics were working; distracting her with worrisome stunts and isolating her.

It was a game. She didn't have to like it; she just had to find a way to win it.

“Any sign of the sedan?”

“They're probably already at the range.”

“Because you cleared this with Ross,” she said, remembering.

“He scares me,” he said with a theatrical shudder. “No way I'd run off with his prized tech guru without giving him a

head's up.”

“Right.” She took a long, deep breath, pushing aside the details stashed on the flash drive. Nothing she could do about it now and as enlightening as it had been, it hadn't unlocked anything new about that night.

When would she remember what Bakr thought she knew? What Abe needed her to know?

Without that memory, and without Bakr in custody, they couldn't use information on the flash drive to take him down. When she got back to the FBI set up, she'd enlist their resources and see what they might do together to get her brain to cooperate and resolve this damned situation.

“You're okay to shoot?”

She rubbed her shoulder. “As long as we're not firing an AT-4.”

His lips twitched. “Deal. I only brought the revolver and my department-issue nine-millimeter.”

“Sounds like plenty.”

“You're okay between the ears?”

“That's fine too,” she said, tapping her temple.

It became apparent as they checked in that Carson was a regular here. She gave herself a mental shake. He was a sheriff's *deputy*. Of course he'd be a regular at the local firing range. When they were directed to a lane outside, the bite of winter air and tang of spent ammunition cleared away her

mental cobwebs. She hadn't done any qualifications outdoors since leaving the Army. Already she felt better, more centered, by the physical focus required to do things right here.

With the ear protection looped around her neck and eye protection propped on her head, she loaded the cylinder and flipped it back into the gun with a grin. "Revolvers are the best," she said as he checked his clip.

"For six rounds."

"If you use 'em right, six is plenty," she teased. When the range light went green she put the ear and eye protection in place and raised the revolver. Both eyes open, gun braced with both hands, she took aim at the target.

The revolver was a sweet little weapon with a smooth action and the smallest bit of kick. In close quarters, she could be effective with it.

Six rounds in the target, she popped out the empty cylinder and laid the weapon down, muzzle pointing downrange. The light went red and she and Carson, along with two other shooters, walked out to the targets.

Finding six holes in a loose group low and to the right, she swore.

"What's wrong? You put all six in the target," Carson said.

She circled each hole with a red marker. "I should have better control by this point."

"Could be worse," he said as they turned to walk back to the firing line.

She arched one dark eyebrow.

“You have a grouping. I figured you’d be all over the place.”

Eva gasped in mock outrage and punched him in the shoulder. He overplayed the stagger and a bullet whizzed between them—where he’d been a split second before.

It seemed like things unfolded in slow motion as she watched the bullet dig a furrow into the ground.

No cover, no escape. Their weapons were useless, out of reach, at the firing line. Time suspended, she willed her feet to move, her legs to cooperate as Carson caught her arm and urged her to run. He sheltered her body with his and two more bullets missed them by the narrowest of margins.

“Inside,” he ordered. He wasn’t shouting, but it felt that way in her ear with her senses heightened.

She felt naked, utterly exposed, in the few seconds they were apart. She stood inside the double doors, praying he’d come through them without any bullet holes.

“Ammunition!” Carson stormed inside.

The kid behind the counter scrambled, tossing boxes at them. She fielded one, Carson snagged the other.

He held her back with an arm bar move as he looked out over the parking lot. “No.”

“No what?”

“We can’t leave in my car.” He turned back to the kid behind the counter. “Jeremy! Your keys.”

“J.C. you can’t—”

“Now. We’ll trade.”

With an eager grin, Jeremy fished a key ring out of his pocket and they swapped. “Side lot.”

“Don’t drive it until Sheriff Cochran says you can.”

He motioned Eva closer. “You have the phone?”

She nodded.

“Leave it here.”

Pulling it out of her pocket, she carefully set it on the floor.

“Good. Let’s go.”

She followed him out the side door and straight to the car with the flashing parking lights.

“Get in the back. On the floor.”

“I can help if—”

“I’ll let you know.”

She found herself sharing the space behind the front seats of the aging SUV with fast food wrappers and a pair of muddy boots. At least she hoped it was mud. “What’s happening?”

She expected him to tear out of the parking lot. Instead he maneuvered slowly out of the space and drove away from the range as if he had nowhere to be and all day to get there.

“We’re moving to a safe location.”

“Got that.”

“You don’t think the sniper will notice the car leaving the lot?”

“He’s got his hands full with the other two shooters on the range.”

“I didn’t hear return fire.” How had she missed it?

He didn’t answer and she couldn’t blame him. It wasn’t easy to behave in a calm and rational manner when that fight or flight instinct kicked in. When everything inside told you to bolt—and fast.

Being tucked back here out of sight, with Carson dealing with the immediate physical threat, reminded her of her active duty days when she unraveled intel while the team handled things on the ground. Except she was absolutely blind and mostly useless right now.

Her heart pounding, she forced herself to breathe deep and slow, despite the unappealing aroma of the cluttered floorboards. “How about we pay Jeremy back for the inconvenience with a gift card for detailing.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

She braced against another abrupt turn, grateful he wasn’t driving any faster. “Are we being tailed?”

“I don’t think so, but I’m not taking the chance.”

She felt the car slow, heard the sirens of emergency vehicles blow by. Anyone on Bakr’s team would be looking for a man

and a woman in a deputy's car. "Fair enough. Let me know when I can stop being a sack of potatoes down here." Being useless wasn't an acceptable long term solution.

"Will do. Hang in there."

It was the only option, so she went with it. Replaying those critical seconds in her mind, she tried to recall the return fire, to remember anything about the sniper's location. But she'd been looking at the target, not the tree line.

What kind of desperation drove a person to launch an attack at a police-operated firing range?

There wasn't much else she could do until they got back to Ruth's house and the FBI set up. The only support she could offer Carson was to sort out the information she had and brainstorm solutions to put a stop to Bakr's power play.

The car lurched and bounced along and she didn't bother to ask if they'd gone off-road. For all she knew, Carson was taking back roads and hunting trails to Ruth's house. Not a bad plan, really. She'd have bruises on her ribs and knees, but all of that was better than a bullet in her head. Or his.

Analyze. Assess. Abe had said Bakr had tasked a three-person team to track her down and force her to give up whatever intel he thought she had. One of those three men was loyal to Abe.

"Oh! I've got it," she said, pushing up enough to peek over cracked plastic of the center console. "Abe's man is the sniper."

“What? Where?”

“Not here,” she began, but Carson hit another rut that strained the suspension and tossed her back. She landed on her healing shoulder and hissed at the lance of pain.

“Shit. Eva?”

“I’m fine,” she lied, trying to draw air into her lungs.

“Stay down. Please.”

“Staying,” she rasped. She’d seen just enough through the windshield to know it was overkill. There was no way anyone else was out here touring this anonymous field with them. And a sniper at the police range couldn’t possibly have found them and set up in the stand of trees she’d seen.

The sounds changed as the tires rattled over something different. “What was that?”

“Bridge.”

She couldn’t recall a bridge on any route to Ruth’s house. “Where are we?”

“Just a few more minutes.”

She waited it out, hoping like hell wherever they wound up had a decent shower.

He slowed, shifted, and backed up again. “One more second.”

His door opened and she heard him wrestling with something outside of the vehicle, and watched the loose weave of camouflage netting mar her limited view of treetops through

the rear window. All things considered, she sided with him on this. It wasn't paranoia when they really were after you.

Then the back door opened and she looked up at him, except he was upside down. Twisting around, she tried to smile. "Hi."

He scowled, taking in the trash she was lying in. "Car detailing. Yeah. That's a plan, but he should do it himself."

"Can I supervise when the time comes?" She let him help her out of the car.

"Sure. Watch your head."

"Where did you come up with the netting?"

He pointed to a box tacked against the base of a tree. "This is one of the parking areas for hunters who come out this way. Some of them think it fools the wildlife."

"Got it." As they stepped out of the shelter of the netting, she gasped. "Whoa." She realized with a start that this is what the middle of nowhere must look like.

"Where are we?"

"Turkey Run Hunt Club." He loaded the revolver and handed it to her. Checking he had a full clip in his sidearm, he tucked it back into the holster at his hip.

"Are we planning to go hunting now?"

"No. And I'm not planning on being hunted anymore. It's been slow out here this season. We'll be safe in the cabin."

She looked around, noting a distinct lack of any kind of structure. "How rustic is this cabin?"

Her visions of a long, hot shower were fading fast.

“It beats a deer stand, but isn’t as posh as the motel in town. I purposely used this spot for the car because it’s furthest from the cabin.”

“But the cabin exists?” She would *not* complain. He’d saved her from a sniper for heaven’s sake. “With four solid walls and a sturdy roof?” She told herself to shut up and deal. Her team had faced far worse conditions in the line of duty. A little mud and trash weren’t the end of the world.

“Hey.” He waited for her to meet his gaze. “Trust me,” he said, grinning down at her.

“I do.” She watched his expression fade from cocky relief to something far more serious. Mesmerized, she wasn’t quite ready when he suddenly snatched her into a fierce embrace.

“I thought...” His voice trailed off as his arms banded tighter.

Sliding her arms around him, she let herself cling, understanding everything neither of them wanted to put into words right now.

“How’s the shoulder?”

“Good enough.” Belatedly, she realized she was putting all of the foul smell on him. She leaned back. “I must smell awful. You don’t have to put yourself through this.”

“It’s a short walk. The fresh air should knock some of it off.”

“A girl can hope.” Falling in beside him, she let him take her hand as they started hiking deeper into the trees. “So, about this cabin.”

“There’s a shower.”

“How do you do that?”

“What?”

“You always seem to know exactly what I want to know.”

He wriggled his nose and sniffed. “Not a big stretch in this case.”

She smiled, relaxing a fraction. Putting her at ease was another thing he did well. Most men just weren’t that comfortable around her. Dangerous circumstances aside, she was going to miss him when this was over.

“In the car you said something about the sniper.”

“Abraham has a man on Bakr’s team. It must be the sniper.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“You’re not dead.”

“It’s a good start.”

“Yes, it is.” She squeezed his hand. “I’ve been replaying it over and over. Not obsessing,” she insisted. “There wasn’t anything else to do while you were driving.

“If I hadn’t shoved you when I did, that bullet would have winged you, much like the bullet that tagged Bart. The next two shots went dead center between us.”

“You’re counting those misses as skill rather than our good luck or the shooter’s bad aim?”

She nodded. “Bakr wouldn’t have anyone on this job who wasn’t a crack shot. Oh!”

“What?”

“I remember the return fire now.”

“Shock and adrenaline warp perspective.”

“Very true, deputy. That’s excellent.”

“Shock and adrenaline?”

“No. The return fire. It will help whoever it is maintain his cover. Bakr doesn’t tolerate mistakes. He’d have the sniper killed for failing without a second thought.”

Warming up from the walk, she unzipped her jacket and fanned it, trying to dissipate the pungent fumes clinging to her.

“Washer and dryer in this cabin?”

“Nope. It’s primarily a guy place.”

“Don’t men ever want to be clean?”

“We do, just not when we’re hunting.” He lifted their joined hands. “It’s right there.”

“Hmmm.” She looked at the cabin. “What’s your internet access like?”

“You packing a computer I don’t know about?”

“Good point.” How would they manage to make any progress on the case without even a smartphone?

“What it lacks in formal amenities, it makes up for in privacy.”

“It’ll be hard to flush Bakr out when we can’t even contact him.”

He grunted and she glanced up to see a hard scowl clouding his features. “A phone call to the right number should be enough.”

“What’s that mean?”

“I was counting on you having a few key numbers memorized.”

“You’d be right. But Bakr’s texts were coming from a blocked number.”

“I don’t think that will be a problem in the long run.”

She stopped abruptly. “What are you thinking?”

He pushed a hand through his hair and studied the sky before meeting her gaze. “It takes time to set up a sniper’s nest. Who knew you were working at the court house? Who knew we’d be at the range?”

“You said you told Ross about the range.”

“Right.”

“He wouldn’t betray us. No one on the perimeter team knew, did they?”

“Nope. Besides, all of them are friends with either Ross or the sheriff.”

“Well I didn’t post anything on the FBI computers.”

“You’re forgetting the team in the sedan was FBI. We talked about going to the range a couple of times in the den and in the kitchen. They weren’t waiting for us when we left Grandma’s nursery.”

“That’s absurd. The FBI—”

“Wanted kept in the loop, if I recall.”

She shivered at the implications. “You think there’s a leak,” she whispered.

“Come on, let’s get inside,” he said, draping an arm over her shoulders.

“I’m not cold.” Her mind was spitting out conspiracy theories like a popcorn machine. “That would mean Abe’s in danger. We have to tell Ross. Nichols. Someone.”

“We will. But I want you to get a shower and think it through. You’re the analyst, not me.”

She didn’t argue, but she thought he was doing a pretty fine job of analyzing.

As they approached the cabin, she recognized Morris-family craftsmanship in the tidy log building with a wide, low-slung porch that seemed to wrap all the way around. Carson sorted through his key ring and found the right one. He pushed the door open and motioned for her to go on in.

He gave her the grand tour of the front room, the kitchen, and the short hall that ended with a bathroom splitting two bunk rooms.

“Not bad.” The claw-footed bathtub looked like absolute luxury.

“Towels are in the closet there.” He pointed. “You go ahead and clean up and I’ll get a fire going.”

He closed the door behind him and she stripped out of her smelly clothing in record time. Her hair smelled like stale French fries and something she didn’t want to contemplate. Ugh.

It didn’t occur to her until the spray was beating down on her head and the scent of an Irish meadow was swirling around her that she didn’t have a change of clothes.

Her first thought was to use that misfortune to their mutual advantage and jump him. Not bad as plans went and she believed one hundred percent in following intuition. Warming to the idea, she decided what the plan lacked in finesse she could more than make up for in sexual satisfaction.

Turning off the taps, she squeezed the excess water out of her hair and swept the curtain aside.

Chapter 17

Carson froze in the bathroom doorway when the taps shut off. He'd gone through the clothing his sister kept stashed out here and found a sweatshirt and pants that would get Eva through until her clothes aired out.

He opened his mouth to warn her when the shower curtain rings rattled across the rod. In the face of Eva's naked beauty, he could only stare, slack jawed, at the incomparable view.

He'd gotten a pretty clear idea of her form last night, but this was the stuff of fantasies. His imagination hadn't done justice to her stunning curves. Knowing it was rude, he couldn't stop staring at her full breasts, narrow waist, and subtle flare of her hips.

"I might just steam dry if you keep looking at me that way." She brought her hair over her shoulder in twist, wringing out the excess water. Left loose, her long hair would cover her breasts.

"I brought clothes for you."

“Hmmm. I don’t think I’ll need them just yet.”

His arousal agreed with her.

“Carson?”

“Yeah?”

“In the shower or against the nearest wall?”

He’d promised himself it would be in his bed when all this was over and the bad guy was gone, but her smoldering gaze made it perfectly clear she wasn’t about to let him make a gentleman’s exit this time.

Convenient, since he couldn’t manage the basic decency to even look away.

He shrugged out of his jacket as he advanced. “Shower.”

Her eyebrows lifted and her smile turned absolutely wicked. With a coy glance over her shoulder, she reached down to turn on the water.

Yanking off his boots and socks, he set the gun and holster aside, and was about to undo his fly when she was there. In front of him. Hot and damp and overwhelming his senses. She tugged his t-shirt up and over his head, tossing it behind him. Her delicate fingertips skimmed over his chest and down low across his stomach.

He held himself back. Needing to touch her, but half afraid that once he started, he’d rush it and miss something. Fighting for some measure of control, he lifted the chain from her skin. “St. Michael medal.”

“Patron saint of the military and police officers.”

“The same.”

Her talisman, her comfort. How many times had he seen her reach for it in times of stress or absently slide it along the chain when she was thinking through a problem? It was as much a part of her as her smile, her hair.

He turned it over, squinting at the small script under the Army seal. “Who’s Neri?”

“Patron saint of the Special Forces.” Her voice was rough and steam from the hot water billowed behind her, turning her into a vision as she pressed a gentle kiss to the bruises on his neck.

He tipped her chin up and kissed her, a soft, tender meeting of lips that did nothing to slake his desire to feast on her. Cupping her cheek, he slid his mouth along her jaw, then up to trace the delicate shell of her ear.

She popped the buttons on his fly one by one. He caressed those curves, that dusky golden skin until they were both panting. “Hurry. Hurry.”

The breathless command snapped him out of his lusty stupor. Damned if he would. If he played this right, they’d have years to hurry, but only one *first* time. He kissed her, long and deep, holding her curves close until he couldn’t stand it anymore.

Breaking the kiss, he reached past her and twisted the water off once more.

“What the—”

The question finished on a squeak of surprise as he scooped her into his arms. She looped her arms around his neck and he thought life couldn't give him anything better than a wet, naked Eva.

Sex was one thing, Eva thought. What she and Carson had just accomplished deserved a whole new definition. She needed a term that effectively combined glorious, phenomenal, and mind-blowing satisfaction. When she could think coherently again, she might work on it.

At the moment it was enough to bask, caught between his hard, hot body and the crackling fire. Steam dry, indeed.

She laughed softly.

“What’s so funny?”

“Not funny ha-ha. I think hysteria might be setting in. That was amazing.”

He nuzzled her neck. “Next time we can hurry.”

“I might just be over the hurry thing.”

“We’ll see.”

“Is that a promise, deputy?” She hoped so. Her theory that acting on the attraction would make it go away had just been blasted to bits. Bakr might be a crazy bastard, but she couldn't be unhappy he'd driven them to this moment.

Except now, if Bakr hurt Carson, it would hurt her that much more. Her heart was engaged now, not just her hormones or her basic need to protect people from monsters like Bakr. She didn't know if this was love—wouldn't know how to cope if it was. But it was strange how feelings worked, how they morphed and changed the perspective, the purpose. She wondered if this is how it had been for Ross and Rick.

“Already back to business?” Carson tickled her hip bone again. “I must have missed a spot.”

“You didn't miss anything. And I wasn't just thinking about business.”

“Do I want to know?”

“Maybe.” She kept her gaze on the fire. “Situations like this make people think differently.”

“Sexual situations?”

“Well, that too, but I was thinking about the case.”

“I knew it.”

She poked him in the ribs. “Your idea of a leak. Maybe it's there, maybe it's what we want to see because we're tired of being cornered. Last month, working Allie's case, Ross suspected you of working for Allie's enemies at one point.”

“How did he reach that conclusion?”

She felt his body go rigid, and not in the good way. “You can't take it personally. He would have suspected Mrs.

Jackson if she'd said a questionable word." She chuckled. "Knowing him, he probably did."

"I get that. Kind of. He and Allie were inseparable back in the day, whether they were in the same room together or not."

"Meaning?"

"It was just all over them." He sighed, rolled to his back. "They were friends and they were careful, since her daddy didn't approve. It was obvious to everyone else that they belonged together."

She'd seen it too, almost from the moment they'd picked up Allie's case. "I worried about him," she confessed.

"It worked out."

"It did." She stretched up, rubbing his nose with hers. "Allie broke down his walls."

"Hmm." He smoothed her hair behind her ears. "I think it was inevitable. He walled the memory of her in there with him when he left Haleswood."

"That's a weird way to put it." But she understood it. She'd have to build a wall around these special days with Carson when the time came for her to leave town.

Chapter 18

Reaching Florence, Bakr pulled over and checked his phone for messages, eager for word of a successful attack. He'd already drafted another text for the queen about her useless, sacrificial pawns. His advantage was growing.

But the new email notice was from another source. The message consisted of nothing more than a question mark and a photo attachment.

He scrolled down for the thumbnail image and experienced his first moment of doubt since he'd put his plan in motion.

That could *not* be his brother. Alive? No. It was a clever trick.

His finger shook as he tapped the screen, enlarging the image. Determined denial stood no chance against reality. His contact would not take this risk unless it was real.

That *was* Abraham, sitting in an FBI office alive and likely cooperating. Bakr recognized the name plate on the desk and swore again at the injustice of the world.

“How?” he screamed at the phone. “When?”

He had laid all the groundwork. Executed his plans perfectly. He’d seen the aftermath of the car accident he’d arranged for a substantial fee. Two mangled bodies had been identified as Abraham and his secretary. Only the driver had survived.

Or so they’d planned.

Enraged, Bakr barely managed to put a leash on his temper. He wanted—needed—to throw something. The phone wouldn’t be enough. Tossing his brother into the foundation of a new construction project... there was an image he found soothing.

Wouldn’t it be a delightful secret to build the Army’s shiny new building on his brother’s lousy, whistle-blowing carcass?

Betrayal stung and he embraced the pain, the shock.

“How?” he snarled again.

With a little time, he would use this, turn this around and reclaim the advantage. Abraham might have run to the American authorities, but it was too little too late for him to change the course Bakr had set in motion. If they wanted to accelerate the game, to rush forward to their inevitable demise, who was he to quibble?

Thinking through the options, he wrote his reply. *Deliver him to the prepared location.* He would rectify this error personally. Then his brother would taste the bitterness and pain Bakr had endured so quietly for all these years.

Chapter 19

Carson could've stayed with her in front of the fire for the rest of his life if his stomach hadn't started grumbling. He might even have ignored that for a while longer if hers hadn't joined the chorus.

Still, food was delayed by a shower that quickly digressed into another sexual fantasy turned real. It was gratifying and more than a little surprising that a woman like Eva, who could have her choice of men, was as eager to be with him as he was to be with her.

It had been an act of will to leave her to finish the shower so he could work up some dinner. They needed to talk about what she'd seen on that flash drive, about how to put a muzzle on Bakr, and—hopefully—what was left for them after that. As he assembled a stew from the stock in the pantry, part of him wished they could stay out here until someone else caught the Morcos bastard.

Except his Eva wouldn't be satisfied with sitting this one out. Bakr had made it personal. He shook his head, it was too

early to think of her as his. Definitely too early to tell her he thought of her that way.

He turned, smiling, as she padded into the kitchen wearing his sister's sweats. "Hey." He brushed a kiss on her cheek when she joined him at the stove.

"Hey." She ran a hand over his butt. "I've got my clothes airing out on the porch. How can I help?"

"I've started a stew here. Do you want dumplings?"

"Sure."

"Need me to walk you through it?"

She shot him a dark look. "Only if you want me to beat you with a skillet," she said, opening the pantry.

"It was just an offer. You might have to pull some dry goods out of the freezer," he added.

"No. Everything looks to be right here."

"Whoever was out here last—" He paused when a vivid, unwelcome picture of his sister playing house with some faceless jerk filled his head. "She's not even dating anyone."

"Carson?"

"Sorry. It's nothing. We have a checklist for closing this place up and someone just didn't follow through."

"Or is out here often enough they don't see the need to freeze the flour."

"Or that."

“How is Heather doing?”

“Can we save that for another day?” He had such a grip on the wooden spoon it was a wonder it didn’t snap. “Or do you know something I should know?”

“Of course not.” Chuckling, she came up and gave him a kiss. “No one in Haleswood confides in me. You’re a good big brother,” she said, patting his cheek. “And having a brother, I had to bait the bear.”

She turned back to mixing the dumplings and he marveled that the tension over Heather just lifted from his shoulders. Suddenly he understood the ‘kiss it and make it better’ phrase. Did she know she had that power over him? In his mind that ability to comfort and share the burdens was a key ingredient in the lasting relationships of his parents and grandparents.

Whoa. Jumping the gun, he thought. Eva wasn’t someone who’d be rushed into anything, much less a relationship with a small town deputy. Just because he’d had her on his brain for weeks, didn’t mean she was anywhere close to the same feelings.

“When this is over, we should have a real date.” He wanted to bang his head into a wall. He hadn’t meant to voice his thoughts. Could he have sounded more clingy? Keeping his eyes on the stew, he waited for her to say something.

Anything.

“Dumplings are ready to go.”

“Great thanks.” She was going to ignore the date comment. Good. He dropped dumplings on top of the bubbling stew. “This’ll just be another few minutes.”

“Want a beer?”

“Sure.”

“Well?” She popped the tops off both bottles and handed him one.

“Well what?”

“You know I won’t say yes to a date unless I know your plans.”

He couldn’t stop the grin spreading across his face. “Well, the shooting range was my ace in the hole. A dinner and movie thing sounds a little tame at this point.”

“Hmm.” She rolled the bottle between her palms, pouting a little. “That depends on the movie.”

She finished the statement with a slow wink and he heard his heart fall with a thud at her feet.

No, he wasn’t about to let her slip through his fingers. He couldn’t believe that something this right wouldn’t have a way of working itself out.

If she felt the same about him.

But, like thoughts of his sister’s antics, it was better to table that for another time.

He scooped stew and dumplings into two bowls and carried them to the table she’d set with napkins and spoons. “*Bon*

appetit!”

Her smile lit up the room. “*Buon appetito!*” she replied in Italian.

Eva sat across from him and wondered at her good luck. Capable in bed and in the kitchen. Tasting her first bite of the stew, she knew capable was a terrible understatement on both counts.

He had her feeling things she didn’t want to feel. Great sex was no reason to go crazy here, she coached. Great food might be.

Stop it.

“Something wrong? You’re scowling.”

Idiot. She used the heel of her hand like an eraser on the lines her mother claimed would be a permanent fixture one day. “Food is delicious. I was just thinking.”

“About?”

You. “That flash drive.”

“Hmm.” He sipped his beer, studying her in that way he had. “You looked pretty upset when you came out of the office.”

“The Morcos brothers aren’t humanitarians. Or they weren’t until Abe’s son was killed. They made plenty of shady deals with various governments to get the contracts they wanted.”

“So Abe’s turned over a new leaf to make up for previous bad deeds?”

“That’s the thing. Abe isn’t all bad. He had his causes, and those changed after he lost his son, but based on who’s involved and the introductory file on that drive, someone in the Morcos family was working with the Americans.”

“On what?” He waved that off instantly. “I don’t want to know. I want to know how it affects you now.”

“Abe’s son stumbled onto Bakr’s plans to take over the company. I’m not sure how he did it, but he hijacked the transactions and put the evidence in a sort of time capsule. If the file isn’t accessed by a specific date, the information gets sent out.”

“Smart.”

“Oh, yeah. It explains why Bakr’s moved now. Bakr must have been trying to unlock these files for the past two years.”

“Abe’s son gave him the files?”

“Diabolical really.” She admired the kid’s skills. “Bakr can see the money, can see the evidence to be used against him, but without the code phrase, he can’t do anything to stop it.”

“And he thinks you know the phrase.”

She nodded.

“What’s the timeline?”

“Midnight on December thirty-first.”

“So we have a little over a week. Christmas Eve is the day after tomorrow.”

“Theoretically.” She pushed the stew away, reached for her beer, and thought better of that too. “He knows time is running out and he’s toying with me. Shooting Bart, kidnapping Matheson, showing up in my mom’s neighborhood, going after us at the range.”

“Sending you text messages.”

“Yeah,” she nodded. “Makes me glad I left my phone behind. Annoying bastard.”

“Well, we have one advantage.”

“We do.” She smiled at him. “He couldn’t have planned on your resourcefulness.”

“Thanks. But I was referring to the sniper you think is loyal to Abe.”

“Provided he’s not already dead for missing you.”

“Let’s think positive.”

“Okay.” She reached for her pendant, raised it to her lips. “I’m positive I don’t know how to trap Bakr now that we’re in this rustic, yet lovely, cabin.”

“I’m in no rush to end our good start here, but I have a couple of ideas.”

She leaned forward. “Share.”

“If there is a leak in this hide-Eva operation, we can use it to draw him to us. Only the people on your security detail knew

we were going to the range today.”

“Right. You said they were clean.”

“And I believe it. But what if the FBI equipment is bugged?”

“The leak is on the FBI side?”

He nodded. “It fits.”

She played it out in her head. “How would Bakr have convinced anyone in the FBI to cooperate?”

“Does it matter?”

“No. It just makes me sad. Americans aren’t supposed to be traitors.”

He reached out and covered her hand with his. “Isn’t that the black and white thinking you claim not to indulge?”

“No fair turning my words back on me.”

“I could be wrong.”

She shook her head and pushed back from the table to pace in front of the window. “You’re right. It fits. I might even know who it is.”

“Nichols.”

She spun back to face him. “Now that’s creepy. It’s like you’re in my head. Why do you think that?”

“Who better to get him into the country than an FBI agent? Nichols isn’t a regular in town, but people know his face because he showed up here when Allie was attacked.”

“Maybe I just want to think badly of him. He’s so damned arrogant.”

“It’s just a theory.”

She clutched the pendant again. “Ross and I handed Abe right over to him.” Dropping her head against the window, she swore softly. “*Stupido!*”

“Pretty sure I know what that means and I’m not buying it.”

She let Carson turn her around, let herself wallow and lean a little. “How do we get him? Get them both?”

“For now, we sit tight. You try to recall what Bakr wants to know. When the sheriff gets here we can finalize plans.”

“When did you tell the sheriff we were coming here? When did you know?”

“Yesterday? The day before? It runs together.” Carson shook his head. “I didn’t really tell him though. Knowing we might need a fallback location, I left him a message. When he figures out I wasn’t just being stupid, he’ll show up.”

“Clever, aren’t you?”

“I have my moments.” He nuzzled her neck.

She slid her hands over his shoulders, down his biceps. “You certainly do.”

Kissing him, she let go of the worries of the case. “I might not know what to do with myself, all disconnected from the world like this.”

He boosted her up and she wrapped her legs round his waist. “Good thing I’m feeling another moment coming on.”

“A girl could get used to this.” She laughed as he carried her out of the kitchen toward the bunk rooms. A bed would be a nice change of pace.

Hours later, she came out of the nightmare like she’d been shot from a cannon. One minute lost in the hell of the failed mission, the next in absolute quiet of the cabin.

“Shhh,” Carson murmured. “You’re safe.”

His voice was a touchstone in the dark and his long body a comfort stretched out beside her.

“You finally remembered?”

“Yes.” Her breath shuddered in and out of her lungs. “Yes,” she said with more confidence. It explained why the sniper took a shot at Bart, kidnapped Matheson. In an effort to save Abe’s son, Bart had been with him, had heard his final words. So had the rest of the team. But none of them had understood.

She hadn’t even understood. Until now. She’d purposely left it off of the report, editing it to protect Bart’s feelings. No one would know the difference and the whole mission would be locked away in a vault somewhere anyway.

But Bakr, with his long reach and psychotic determination, had found it. Found all of them.

She murmured a prayer to St. Michael and turned to the comfort of Carson’s warm embrace. With his heart beat steady

under her ear, she waited for sunrise and prayed the sheriff would find them soon.

She was more than ready to be free of the Morcos brothers and the nightmares that came with them.

Chapter 20

Carson came awake at the sound of boots on the porch. He slid out from under Eva and pulled on his boxers. Picking up his gun, he crept out of the bunk room.

Staying low, he followed the sounds of movement outside as one set of boots circled the cabin. That didn't mean others weren't hiding elsewhere outside.

The firm knock on the door was unexpected, but the voice that followed had him smiling with relief. "Turkey hunting license," the sheriff called through the door. "I considered docking your pay for stupidity."

"Hope you didn't," Carson answered.

"Not yet. Better get some clothes on, deputy. We're wasting daylight."

"Yes, sir."

"Here." Eva, wrapped in a blanket, hair tumbled from sleep, stood in the hallway with his jeans.

“Told you he’d figure it out,” he said, rushing forward to kiss her soundly. “I’ll start coffee.”

“Good plan.” She shuffled off toward the bunk rooms.

When they were gathered in the kitchen with hot coffee, the sheriff brought them up to speed. “Abraham has been kidnapped.”

Carson exchanged a look with Eva, knew they were thinking the same thing. “From the FBI.”

“Yes.”

“Has Abe’s man made contact?”

“No, but the FBI got a chip on Abe somehow. He’s at the rectory behind St. Michael’s Episcopal church.”

Eva touched her pendant. “Should’ve anticipated that one.”

“He’s sent photos and threats already. The man doesn’t have long unless the ‘queen’ shows up or unlocks the file. Whatever that means.”

“Even if she gives him the information he wants, he’ll kill his brother.” Carson couldn’t imagine how that would weigh on Eva.

“And we can’t let Abe die,” she said.

“Your boss agrees,” Sheriff Cochran said. “He and I have worked up a plan, providing you two can carry it out.”

Carson listened, watched Eva’s face go pale as she took it all in. When the sheriff left, he pulled her into his arms. “You’ve said it yourself. The sniper is on our side.”

“If he’s alive.”

“You’ve gotta think positive.” He pressed her close until he could feel her heart thudding against his own. “We’ll get through this.”

“He will hurt you just to spite me.” She ran her fingers over the bruises at his neck.

“Don’t chicks dig scars?”

“Yes. We do.” She gave him a watery smile as she pulled his face down for a kiss. “But try to keep them off this handsome face.”

Nothing in her previous experience prepared her for the stress of sending Carson out to bait Bakr nearly twenty-four hours earlier. Almost an entire day knowing what could happen to him, picturing the worst. While Ross read her into the full details on Abe, the FBI, and the code phrases she needed to memorize, she couldn’t shake the fear that she’d never be in Carson’s arms again.

It was the worst mission assessment of her life. She’d had the training, knew fear had to be squashed. But Carson wasn’t a solider. He was a small town deputy. A decent, southern gentleman with a big heart, who hadn’t been trained to take on the likes of Bakr.

She shivered. *Think positive.*

The sheriff had said they'd learned the sniper had reported the attack at the range as successful. Bakr probably didn't know anything about Carson or what he looked like. She could only hope he'd believe the deputy's appearance at the abandoned church was a matter of inconvenient timing.

Still, Ross's dire warnings echoed in her head as she crept through the cemetery toward the back door of the rectory behind St. Michael's church. Bakr had resources and at least one man still on his side. He knew how to rig explosives and had proven himself capable of cold-blooded murder.

At the cemetery gate she paused, looking for a sentry. In another context, she might admire Bakr's choice of meeting places. Today she had to hope the patron saint of the US Army Airborne was standing ready to provide back up.

She held her breath as she rushed across the open space between the gate and the back door, staying low, a prayer on her lips. Making it without incident, she wondered if the intel was wrong or if he'd ordered them to let her come.

She checked the door for any sign of a tripwire and said another prayer as she tested the handle. Unlocked. Braced for anything, she pushed the door open and closed her eyes. When nothing exploded, she breathed a sigh of relief.

“All hail the queen!”

She recognized Bakr's voice, though she hadn't heard it in years. It was one sound, along with the many others of that night, permanently etched on her memory.

“Do join us.”

Us. He sounded too happy. Too confident. She stifled the worry and dread, a dangerous blend of emotions that threatened to swamp her. Whatever surprise he had in store, they both knew he needed information only she could provide.

She eased down the dark, narrow hallway toward the light seeping from the kitchen.

Peeking around the corner, she saw two hostages. Bakr had Carson duct taped to a folding chair, his head slumped forward on his chest. Unconscious.

Please let him just be unconscious. Across the room, Abe was shackled with a short chain to the pipes under the sink.

Where was Bakr? He'd arranged this scene just for her, for the sole purpose of gaining her attendance. Why wasn't he here, front and center, ready to gloat?

Eva rounded the corner, advancing with her arms outstretched, the revolver cocked and ready.

Bakr stepped out of the shadow and put the muzzle of a gun to the back of Carson's head. Her stomach churned as she recognized Carson's service weapon. “Stop right there.”

He smiled, a smug, reptilian expression. “At last I have my audience with the queen.” He gave her a bow better suited to a royal court of ages past.

She swallowed back the bile that rose in her throat. His arrogance would be his undoing. She could take him. Her finger tightened slightly. Just a smooth squeeze of the trigger

would send a bullet through Bakr's forehead. She could end this right now.

"Give me the word," he snapped.

"Let them go first."

"Don't you understand? This is checkmate, your highness." He fired once, into the air. Suddenly the red dot of a sniper's rifle appeared on Abraham's chest. "They live or die at my whim."

"Cheating? Really?"

"You are out of moves." He flicked a remote and a computer monitor flickered to life. A picture of him standing behind her mother at the grocery store popped up.

She refused to panic. "I thought you had more confidence than that."

"I have your knight," he hissed. "Your rook will be next if you don't cooperate. Checkmate."

She tilted her head, studying him as if he were a curious exhibit in a zoo rather than a homicidal monster. Terror pounded through her veins, but she wasn't about to give up. Or give in.

"I shouldn't be surprised. You killed your nephew after all. How many more lives will it take for you to give this up?"

"Only those who matter to you, if you fail me," he said. "The game is over." He motioned with the gun. "Go on. Give me what I need."

She agreed the situation looked bleak. Impossible even. Her twenty-two was ridiculously outmatched by Carson's nine-millimeter and the added advantage of a sniper.

Silently, she prayed to St. Michael. "You'll never get away with this," Eva said through gritted teeth. "Even with the code, you can't get away with this." There had to be a solution. There was always a solution. "You'll never even get out of the county."

"Still, you underestimate me? I have friends in high places, your highness."

Her eyes darted from Carson to Abraham. The red dot of the sniper's rifle scope held steady on Abe's chest; Bakr's pistol remained pressed to the back of Carson's head.

Her palms itched and a red haze seeped around the edges of her vision. She struggled to beat it back, to find the solution.

The Army needed Abraham's intel. Without him, they couldn't prosecute business owners working against American interests. They'd be right back to square one.

She needed Carson. No further rationale required. It was simply the truth of her heart.

Training, target practice, analysis—none of it mattered now.

"Do you believe in karma?"

"I believe in power."

"You certainly believe in drama." Eva lowered her weapon a fraction, hoping Bakr would instinctively follow suit. He

didn't. "That surprises me. You've played this game, manipulated people accordingly—"

"Stop stalling and tell me what I need to know."

"None of this dramatic presentation was necessary. I have complete and perfect recall of every communication that night."

"Tell me!" Bakr roared and fired at Abraham. "Tell me," he repeated. "Or all you love is dead."

If Carson would just come around. According to the plan he was supposed to be awake by now. She looked to Abe, slumped against the counter.

"It is over." The older man said with a groan. "Just let him win."

"Shut up!" Bakr yelled. "I have earned this!"

In the chair Carson jerked, raised his head. She glanced his way. Had he just winked at her? It was hard to tell with one of his eyes swollen nearly shut.

"Let it be done," Abe whispered, drawing her attention, his hand clutched to his stomach where blood seeped between his fingers. Bakr must have shot him during his capture. "I will soon join my son."

"Tell me!" Bakr repeated.

Every word mattered here, no one was willing to take the chance that Bakr's allies weren't listening in.

“Your heart is black,” she said, in English, her voice catching on the altered code phrase. It wasn’t fear that had caused the hitch, it was sheer relief. The sniper’s sight had shifted to Bakr’s throat. Ross, St. Michael, or someone, had arrived to back her up.

“That is the phrase?”

Eva’s smile was full of malicious intent. “That is the truth.”

Bakr fired at Carson’s head as she raised the revolver and unloaded all six rounds, each shot accompanied by a prayer of protection for Carson.

Bakr collapsed, his screams of pain ricocheting around the small room.

She rushed forward to move the gun out of Bakr’s reach, but it was a moot point. The sniper had opted to blow off Bakr’s hand rather than take the kill shot.

She wasn’t ashamed that the knowledge of him suffering pleased her. Death was too quick, too easy for a man who’d tortured his family so mercilessly.

“You blew out his knee,” Carson said, completely alert, his eyes shining with pride. “Nice job.”

“Dammit!” She rushed to him, tearing feverishly at the duct tape. “I was aiming for his gut.”

His rich laughter rolled over her and she paused her effort to free him long enough to plant a hard, grateful kiss on the healthy side of his battered mouth.

“No fair,” he protested when she leaned back. He struggled against the remaining tape. “I want to hold you.”

“Me first. My heart stopped when he shot at your head.”

“Blanks, remember?”

“Tell it to my heart.” The moment he could move, he opened his arms and she went gleefully into his embrace, wrapping her arms tight about his waist. “Blanks can still do damage. You don’t ever get to be bait again.”

“Deal. You did it. You won.”

He rained kisses over her face, both of them heedless of Ross and the others releasing Abe and treating Bakr with the minimum required compassion.

“Ms. Battaglia.”

Reluctantly, she eased away from Carson. “Special Agent Nichols.” She looked him up and down. He’d traded in his suit and perfectly knotted tie for a jacket and cargo pants in a hunting camouflage pattern.

Knowing now that he’d been behind the sniper scope, that he’d been working undercover as the man ‘loyal to Abe’, she rushed to hug him.

“Thank you.” Bart and Carson were both alive because he’d stepped into the breach. He resisted for a moment and then awkwardly patted her back. Taking pity, she released him with a friendly pat on the shoulder. “Active duty looks good on you.”

He rolled his eyes and his strong jaw jumped with impatience. “We’ll need you to come in and give a statement.”

“Sure thing. Right after Christmas.”

“The car’s waiting now.”

He motioned her forward, but she ignored him to help Carson to his feet. “Not tonight, Dan. It’s Christmas Eve.”

“Certain things have come to our attention.”

“By ‘things’ do you mean certain possible infractions?” They couldn’t have been happy with the firewalls she breached while sending the ghost on a few wild goose chases.

The muscle in his jaw jumped. “Let’s just go in and sort it out.”

“No sir. I have plans.” She sent a questioning glance toward Carson, got the slight nod in return. “Do you have plans?”

“Yes. At the office,” he said, scowling as paramedics rolled Bakr away.

“Consider your plans changed. If you want to talk to me, it will have to be after dinner with the Morris family. His grandma is delightful. I think she’d like you.”

“She makes the best red velvet cake in the county,” Carson added.

“It’s Christmas Eve, Nichols. Live a little.”

“Give me the address, I’ll think about it while I get everyone here sorted out.”

“That’s the spirit.” Eva patted his shoulder. “We’ll tell her to expect you.”

“Ms. Battaglia.” Abraham paused, signaling Nichols to go on, but the agent waited. Taking Eva’s hand in his he said, “I owe you more than can ever be repaid. Thank you.”

She couldn’t speak around the lump in her throat. No matter the shady sidelines this man dealt with, she respected him and his hard fight to keep the balance. “I’m sorry for your loss.” Through greed and murder, his brother had torn apart the Morcos family and nearly crippled the business. But he was still a brother.

It was impossible to understand the depth of his shock and despair, knowing his brother hated him enough to kill.

“My life is restored. Truly. As is my hope. My family will be grateful.”

She ignored the hard look Nichols aimed at her and focused instead on the tears glistening in Abe’s eyes. She could practically hear Nichols adding ‘enemy sympathizer’ to his list of complaints against her. But what had this all been about, if not to restore a man to his rightful place where he was willing to cooperate for the greater good?

In Russian, she invited Abe to the Morris family dinner as well.

He declined with a wan smile, offering a blessing on her and her house instead.

As the official business wound down and everyone went their separate ways, Eva contemplated Abraham's words. Where was her 'house' as he'd put it? It seemed incomprehensible to feel most at home in Haleswood after such a short time, but it was true. When had she become a small town girl?

With Bakr out of commission, she could go home to the CS office and her apartment in Columbia. She could go home to New York and sip mimosas with her family over Christmas brunch. She slid a glance at Carson. Columbia wasn't that far away, just over an hour's drive. Would he visit her?

Would she visit him here? An hour's drive was a long commute for a booty call—if Carson was willing. If she followed up those nights with a Midnight Rooster breakfast, she could keep up with everyone. Maybe find out who his sister was dating.

Good grief. What was wrong with her? She hadn't left town yet. She couldn't be missing the Haleswood camaraderie and friendly routine at the Midnight Rooster already.

She gladly handed Carson the car keys and let him drive. He was quiet until they turned onto the main road. "What's the matter?"

"Just winding down." She pulled the elastic band out of her hair and rubbed at her scalp. "It's going to take forever to get my hair dry. We'll be late for your family dinner."

"I can stop by, make excuses and load up a couple of plates to go."

She laughed. “It’d serve Nichols right if he showed up and we bailed. But no.” The bruising on Carson’s face and neck might bother them, but she knew what his being there meant to his family. “They’ll want to celebrate that your case is closed. And I’m sure Ruth wants her house back.”

“Tomorrow’s soon enough. Ruth and the sheriff were headed to dinner with Allie and Ross at his house.”

“So much domestic bliss.” The trace envy she felt surprised her. “I’m happy for them.”

“Do you need to call your family?”

“Tomorrow is soon enough.” She yawned. “They didn’t know about any of this so they didn’t know to worry. If you want to just drop me at Ruth’s and go alone to see your family I’d understand.”

“We’ll go together.” He reached across and caught her hand. Under the warmth of his touch the envy faded to something closer to contentment. It might be too early for all the long-term logistics, but for tonight, she was exactly where she wanted to be.

Chapter 21

It was nearly midnight when Carson pulled up in front of his house. When he opened the door, Sheldon leaped over the back of the seat and out of the car, racing around in circles. “He’s glad to be home.” Eva’s throaty laughter carried across the cold, still air.

“Me too.” For a second, he just enjoyed the view of her wide, warm smile.

He felt an answering grin on his own face and knew they were both too wired to sleep anytime soon. Maybe, after the insanity of taking down Bakr, he should wait until morning to tell her how he felt. He should definitely wait to tell her what he wanted to do about it.

Inside, he crouched at the hearth and built up a fire, giving himself a chance to gather his thoughts. When the kindling caught, Sheldon turned three times in a circle and curled up where he could keep an eye on them.

“Your family does Christmas Eve big,” she said, flopping back on the couch.

“We have generations of practice.”

Cleaning up and changing clothes made them very late to dinner, but they’d been forgiven quickly enough when his grandmother had someone new to fuss over. Nichols had handled the whole situation with a friendlier version of his normal stoicism, thanks to Eva’s persistent social guidance.

She giggled. “I thought Nichols would have a coronary when he saw all those people.”

“You seemed to have a good time tonight,” he said. “At dinner,” he clarified, stretching out next to her on the couch.

She’d been beautiful, fitting in with his relatives like she’d been a part of boisterous Morris family dinners for years. Now, if he could just find the words that would keep her with him for years to come.

“Too bad your family’s got nothing on Battaglia gatherings.”

“Really? That’s hard to imagine. Do you miss your family?”

“Sure.” She laced her fingers through his. “I’ve been away a long time, helping Ross get CS started.”

“You said you could run the business from anywhere. Did you ever think of working closer to your home?” Was he delusional to think she could be happy in Haleswood? With him?

“For about two seconds.” She sat up, a small frown puckering her brow. “My mom threatened to come here if I didn’t make time to get back there soon.” She wrinkled her nose. “It just doesn’t feel like ‘home’ anymore.”

Air quotes had never looked so good.

“Why don’t you head back sooner rather than later?” He’d always wanted to see Times Square on New Year’s Eve. He tried to imagine growing up in a place as big and populated as New York City.

“Are you trying to get rid of me?”

“No.” He tugged on her hand, but she resisted, scooting further away. “Not at all.”

“Wow.”

“What?”

“It just dawned on me. We don’t have to be joined at the hip anymore.”

Panic landed like a fist in his gut. He hadn’t felt this vulnerable when Bakr had clocked him on the back of the head and dragged him into the rectory. While he was perfectly content to not have anyone chasing them down ever again, he didn’t know what he would do if she was more than an arm’s length away. All night they’d been reaching for each other, just small touches and quiet smiles as if they needed the mutual reassurance that they’d come through hell unscathed.

“I don’t mind.” He smoothed his hand over her hip, down her thigh. “I’ve enjoyed it.”

“I should go back to the motel,” she said, as if he hadn’t spoken. “Everything can go back to normal.” She went to stand by the fire, holding her hands out to the warmth. Sheldon shifted, scooting around and resting his chin on her foot. The dog understood what he was about. Maybe this was just the wrong time.

“Dan took his toys back and returned my computer. He’s dreaming if he thinks I’ll ever use it again. I wonder if it’s too late to ask Santa for a new laptop.”

He checked his watch. “It’s technically Christmas already.” This wasn’t at all how he wanted this conversation to go. He racked his brain for a way to get back on point. “There’s no chimney at the motel. You’d better stay here and give Santa a better chance of finding you.”

Her shoulders hitched. “I don’t need a babysitter anymore.”

Sheldon gazed up at her with a forlorn expression Carson feared mirrored his own.

“You never did.” He’d never met a more capable woman. Brave, determined, independent. He could practically feel his heart shriveling up if she left. Rolling to his feet, he came up behind her, drew her into his embrace and kissed the top of her head. If she didn’t want to stay, he had to let her go. And he would, eventually. “I’ll drive you over if that’s what you want.”

“It’s Christmas. The motel is probably booked full.”

Not likely, he thought, but he didn't give her the easy way out. "So stay."

"Just one more night," she whispered.

He had the image in his mind, had clung to it when he'd been taped to that chair afraid Bakr would pull off the win. She was his hope, his heart, and it was past time he told her so. Circling around, stepping over Sheldon, he dropped to one knee.

"How about we make it every night?"

She scowled at him, typical, gorgeous Eva. "You're not serious."

"I am." He grinned at her consternation. "Please, Eva. Say you'll be my wife."

"But—" she looked to the ceiling, blinking rapidly. "This is so fast." She met his gaze and seeing her dazed, at a complete loss, his confidence grew. "My work—"

"Matters," he finished for her. "I get it. So does mine. Love matters more. Stop analyzing and say you'll marry me, Eva."

She hesitated long enough to stop his heart.

"Yes!"

Pulling his grandmother's engagement ring from his pocket, he held it up and they watched it sparkle in the firelight. "This is temporary, but my grandmother said I couldn't propose without a ring."

"She knows? She's okay with you marrying a stranger?"

“Nah.” He shook his head. “You’ve been a local for a while now. You were just too busy to see it.”

“I love you.”

As soon as the ring was on her finger, he swept her into a hug and a fierce kiss. “I love you too.” Sheldon joined their celebration with his own happy dance and a chorus of cheerful barking.

“Oh!” Eva pointed to the window. “It’s snowing.”

Wrapped up in each other and a throw from the couch, they stood on the porch and watched Sheldon chase snowflakes.

“You’re so much better than a new laptop,” she said, pressing up on her toes to kiss him again. “Best Christmas ever.”

He laughed, hugging her close. “And we’re just getting started.”

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About the Author

Regan Black, a USA Today and internationally bestselling author, writes award-winning, action-packed romances featuring kick-butt heroines and the sexy heroes who fall in love with them. Raised in the Midwest and California, she and her husband enjoy an empty-nest life in the South Carolina Lowcountry where the rich blend of legend, romance, and history fuels her imagination.

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