

Nicole's
SHELTER

CYPRESS SECURITY  BOOK TWO

REGAN BLACK

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Free Read

About the Author

Also by Regan Black

For my son, you've grown into a man of character, standing
firm in your beliefs,
and lending your strength and protection to those in need.

Introduction

The **Cypress Security** series features protective heroes who will go the distance for their clients, and stop at nothing for the strong, daring women they love.

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Chapter 1

The blaze reached toward the night sky, leaping away from firefighters and warring with the billowing smoke trying to blot out the stars. It was mesmerizing, might even have been beautiful, if the end result wasn't so devastating.

Rick Dreyer had better things to look for. His boss would ask if this fire was tied to the case he was working and the woman under his surveillance or simply a lousy coincidence.

It was a sucker bet and a Murphy's Law kind of moment, but he was too jaded to assume coincidence.

Using the cover of displaced residents and gawking bystanders, he skirted the crowd to keep his target in sight. The target, a gorgeous brunette, was the only perk of this assignment. Her hourglass figure and sleek, long hair would tempt any breathing man. But there was something in her eyes, a wariness he caught whenever he zoomed in with the camera lens or binoculars. It made him wonder what put it there.

He didn't care for the feeling. Wondering, experiencing genuine concern about a target wasn't in his repertoire anymore. He worked his cases straight forward and knew the boss valued his ability to remain neutral.

As far as the current case went, Nicole Livingston wasn't a threat to the client. Being displaced by a fire just weeks before Thanksgiving didn't constitute immediate danger. Pulling out his phone, he sent a cursory alert to the office until he could file the full report.

Relieved he could leave Virginia as soon as he finished the verification appointment slated for the morning, he knew it was time to walk away.

He moved closer.

* * *

Huddled with her neighbors, Nicole let them watch their chic suburban apartment building go up in flames while she watched the shadows and the spectators for any sign of who had done this. It was a nightmarish end to another tedious day at work.

Her best friend, Allie, had disappeared a few days ago amid terrible rumors circulating at their office. She desperately wanted to know if Allie was okay, but her company laptop had died a sudden death, and now her personal computer—along with the rest of her personal life—was being incinerated.

It could be a coincidence.

Right. Obviously she still believed in fairy tales.

Nicole knew she was the last person to have contact with Allie and the only person who knew where her friend had been planning to hide from the trouble dogging her.

She glanced around, looking for a face that didn't belong, for anyone wearing an expression that didn't match up with the traumatic situation. There were plenty of reasons for an apartment building to catch fire. It was a wonder accidents didn't happen more frequently with so many people living in close quarters. Still, she had a feeling there was more to this particular blaze.

Seeing one of her favorite neighbors in tears, she went over to give the woman a hug. "They'll have it out soon, Mrs. Beaumont." The worst of the blaze was confined to Nicole's side of the building. "Your apartment might survive."

The older woman pressed her fist to her mouth, her gaze locked on the firefighters coming and going from the building. "He'll never make it," she cried, seizing Nicole in a terrified hug. A retired science teacher, Mrs. Beaumont's classroom iguana, Oscar, had retired with her.

Nicole rubbed the older woman's back. "Did you tell someone?"

"He was in my hands," she said. "I heard the alarms. There was too much smoke in the hallway." She pushed up her glasses to rub her eyes. "He was in my hands. I dropped the fire ladder out the window and he leaped away. Oh, my poor baby."

Nicole carefully extricated herself from Mrs. Beaumont's grasp. "Let me go ask someone."

"Do you think they'll actually search for a lizard? Not many people have a fondness for reptiles."

"Let me try," Nicole said, forcing her lips into what she could only hope was a reassuring smile. Having experienced more than her share of grief and loss, she resolved long ago to spare others that pain whenever she had the chance.

Wanting to race around the building, she had to use a cautious approach. Displaced residents and curious bystanders had been herded into a flexing knot of humanity near the emergency vehicles. She rummaged in her purse for her work ID card and the digital camera she kept with her at all times. Clipping the badge to her jacket lapel she hoped the dark and the confusion would get her past the safety line if they thought she was a journalist.

With a confident stride she moved closer to Mrs. Beaumont's side of the building. Pretending she had permission, she mentally rehearsed a response if anyone stopped her.

But no one did. It never ceased to amaze her what a valuable tool a camera was. When she reached the rope ladder, she dropped the camera back into her purse and looped the strap so it crossed her body, pushing it behind her to make the climb.

Mrs. Beaumont often said Oscar liked to curl up in the bathroom sink when he was stressed out. Nicole hoped the lack of smoke coming from this side of the building was a good sign for the iguana and her attempt to save him. Mrs.

Beaumont was a kind woman who didn't need the guilt, however misplaced, of abandoning Oscar.

Determined, Nicole jumped for the lowest rung on the ladder but it slipped through her hands. She wiped her palms on her jeans and tried again.

Successful this time, she hauled herself up toward the apartment window. At the edge, she peeked inside, but saw only thin smoke, no flames. Maybe Oscar had a chance.

The incessant wail of the fire alarm battered her ears and set her heart pounding as she worked against her most basic survival instincts. She crawled under the smoke, feeling her way through the dark toward the bathroom. Carpet gave way to cool tile under her palms and she breathed a little deeper before reaching up into the sink.

It was empty.

“Oscar?” She called his name with as much calm as she could muster under the circumstances. Pulling her phone from her purse, she used the flashlight app, praying the light wouldn't aggravate the poor reptile.

She spotted the leash, and followed the bright ribbon of it to the corner between the tub and commode, careful not to flash the light directly into his eyes. “Smart boy,” she said. “Let's get out of here. Your mom is worried about you.”

She tucked the phone away, and securing the loose end of the leash around her hand, she scooped him to her chest and used the straps of her purse to help hold him in place.

Oscar wriggled around, clearly unhappy with her rescue attempt. Pressing her lips together, she held back the cry of pain and shock as Oscar's claws raked through her shirt and scored her skin.

Clutching the panicked iguana, she hurried back to the window and leaned out into the fresher air. Navigating the ladder with one hand wouldn't be easy, but waiting for rescue wasn't an alternative.

Above her, the window exploded with a boom and sparkle of raining glass. Flames shot eagerly into the night and the fire roared in victory.

Nicole slid and jerked her way down the ladder, her mind focused solely on reuniting Oscar with Mrs. Beaumont.

* * *

Rick watched his target sneak past the perimeter of emergency personnel toward the building, raising more questions in his mind. Baffled, he watched her climb up the rope ladder and wondered what could be so important she'd risk her life. This apartment wasn't even on the same floor as hers. Had she stashed something valuable in a neighbor's place?

It wasn't adding up. None of their intel said Nicole knew much of anything about illegal activity at the pharmaceutical company she and Allie worked for. With a sigh, he prepared to follow her up the ladder, but another figure moved from the shadows toward the same goal.

Cloaked in a hoodie the Unabomber would envy, the guy—he couldn't be sure, but the person moved like a guy—climbed halfway up the ladder. Rick recognized the practiced motion that brought a butterfly knife to life. Not good. The blade flashed with the reflection of the emergency vehicle lights on the street as the guy worked on the rope ladder.

What the hell?

As the kid leaped back to the ground, Rick caught a glimpse of the local gang colors. Which meant he was outnumbered, even if he couldn't see the others right now. Gangs weren't about individuals and bangers didn't do anything without the support of an audience.

If Nicole didn't die up there in the fire, she might well break something trying to escape on that ladder, leaving her vulnerable. Part of his assignment here was to verify her safety.

Going in after her meant he'd most likely trap them both. It was a fool's errand to try and go in by another route. He could just as easily die in the process of searching for her.

Rick wasn't ready to breathe his last, but he wasn't about to leave his target in danger either. Besides this was an intriguing development and it might have bearing on the case. Curiosity wasn't the worst of his weaknesses and he'd honed other skills through the years to offset it.

The firefighters had their hands full with the blaze ripping through the building. Rick's gaze cycled between his watch, the window, the shadows, and the flames.

Just as he was sure she'd succumbed to the smoke and become a statistic, she appeared at the window. With a thunderous boom, the glass blew out of the window above her. The fire had shifted.

No other escape route, she had to use the damaged ladder. He watched her, concern mounting as she lurched her way down with one hand. She must have hurt herself in there.

"Wait!" He rushed forward as she neared the place where the ladder had been weakened. "The ladder won't hold you."

She looked down, her eyes wide and edging toward panic in her soot-streaked face.

Rick did a fast count of the rungs, judged the distance. "Come down two more."

She did.

"Now hold the rope on the left. Not the step, the rope," he clarified as she moved into place.

She had to be getting tired using just one arm. As if on cue, she gave a little whimper confirming his theory. He glanced around, but so far no one was taking exception to his rescue attempt.

He coached her down, relieved with every inch they got out of the sabotaged ladder. "Almost there." He eyed the distance and moved directly under her. "Drop to me. Use my shoulders."

"Can't."

She was dangling in front of another window. If it blew out... Well, he didn't need that visual in his head.

"No choice. On three." He counted. She dropped, skidding down his body. As the momentum took them both to the ground, he twisted, absorbing most of the fall.

"You okay?"

She nodded. "Thanks." Tears gleamed in her eyes, on her face, and the arm she favored was tucked between them. "I have to go," she said, pushing off of him and limping away.

He let her think she was rid of him, taking a minute to catch his breath before winding his way back to join the rest of the crowd and resume his surveillance.

This time he was looking for a certain hoodie as well as Nicole. He expected to find her getting treatment with one of the paramedic crews on the scene. Instead, he found her huddled on the curb near the parking lot with her neighbor. Both women were smiling through the tears shining on their faces.

From his vantage point, he couldn't see much and he didn't want to spook her by coming too close. Still, nothing could have surprised him more than the flash of a spiked head and a long green tail wrapping around the neighbor's arm.

Nicole had gone into a burning building to save the neighbor's lizard? He'd seen some crazy things in some dangerous parts of the world, but he couldn't imagine anyone handing out a bronze star for iguana rescue. Having watched

her for a few days she didn't strike him as a glory hound, but that was one hell of a risk for any pet. She didn't strike him as stupid either, until she'd climbed into a burning building without backup.

He also didn't believe the ladder sabotage was about stopping a lizard rescue or as simple as a gang jump in. He'd have to check the database for local gang trends. Arson maybe, but he sensed there was something more behind this.

As if the world wanted to affirm his logic, he caught sight of the same gang colors on a pair of kids leaning against a glossy modified Honda. The way the pair was watching the blaze made Rick think the only thing missing was a bucket of popcorn. He wanted to snap a picture with his phone, but it wasn't worth the risk.

Nothing was lining up the way it should be here. Splitting his attention between Nicole, the Honda pair, and the crowd, he searched for anyone else with undue interest in Nicole. Fortunately he came up empty. Either the hoodie knew he'd missed a golden opportunity, or it had been a random act of stupidity and opportunity after all.

Rick ducked behind an SUV when Nicole parted from her neighbor. He assumed the typical shock of displacement was setting in as she retreated to her car rather than seek help from the nearest ambulance crew.

His car was parked nearby, but he didn't have to rush or call attention to himself. He'd put a GPS tag on her vehicle so he wouldn't lose her if she did manage to get a head start.

But she just sat there, cell phone in her hand and her gaze steady on the colorful collection of emergency vehicles.

What was she thinking?

Concerned, he pulled out his cell phone and sent another text to the office. They had a basic background on her but his gut—and the sabotaged ladder—told him it was time to dig deeper.

* * *

Nicole's chest burned from Oscar's claws. It felt like she might never be rid of the imprint of his teeth in her collar bone and she could feel the blood seeping into her shirt. Her arms ached from the awkward descent on the broken ladder, but the rest of her was remembering the feeling of the muscled body that broke her fall.

She blamed the spike of desire on the adrenaline as her mind turned over the bigger question. *Who was he?*

He might actually have been a journalist who'd spotted her where she didn't belong. She shook her head. He might just as easily have been the sicko who'd started the fire. Assuming this conflagration was arson. And the ladder had been in perfect working order when she'd gone in for Oscar. If he'd sabotaged the ladder while she was inside, why had he changed his mind and helped her down?

Who he was seemed irrelevant—*was* irrelevant—in light of her more immediate troubles.

Sitting in her car, Nicole looked down at her phone and tried to make herself dial the number she was supposed to dial in the event of a life threatening crisis. Yet, it was impossible to drum up any enthusiasm to make the call that would pluck her up and away from this mess like a magician pulling a rabbit from his hat.

Except the rabbit wouldn't look like an amnesiac while it adjusted to yet another fabricated name and background.

Really, she should be grateful to have been Nicole Livingston long enough to get through high school and college as one person. She studied the chaos, searched her surroundings, and rather than irreparable destruction, this time she saw the singular opportunity.

The small, rebellious corner of her soul, the one place where she still felt like her original self, had been preparing for this chance. Did she dare take it?

She toed the rubber floor mat, knowing there was a prepaid credit card and enough cash tucked under the lining of the carpeting for a train ticket to get her to the next step on her private underground railroad.

They'd taught her well in the two previous incarnations of her life. She knew how to stay under the radar, how to create a history, and most importantly how to let go of an identity.

This time the names, preferences, and profession would be of her choosing. She smiled into the rear view mirror, master of her fate once more.

The smile turned to a wince as she pushed the key into the ignition. The movement aggravated the wounds the panicked Oscar had inflicted.

The medical assistance nearby was tempting, but would only reduce her head start—or completely prevent her escape. Whether or not she made the call, she knew someone would be dispatched as soon as the address of the fire made it up the chain of command. Once she was away, she could risk a visit to a drugstore to deal with the cleanup.

She bid a silent farewell to Mrs. Beaumont and Oscar, and drove away from the scene.

Catching sight of a couple of kids sporting gang colors in the parking lot, she didn't go directly to the train station or even a motel. She drove carefully through the neighborhood and took a turn around a nearby shopping mall before joining the light traffic on the interstate.

As best as she could tell, no one was following her. Of course, the powers that be had likely tagged her car with GPS and she knew they could do the same with her phone, no matter that she'd turned down the service when she'd bought the thing.

But after all this time being compliant and cooperative, those magicians who controlled her life would surely underestimate her determination to be free of them, regardless of the personal risk.

A small voice in her head told her this was a ridiculous mistake, insisted she was throwing away a steady, secure life

on a whim. She told the voice to shut up, but it persisted in reminding her that to take this step, to push on down this path, meant justice might never be served.

“To hell with the system,” she said aloud as she took the ticket at the airport long-term parking garage.

She’d forfeited more than any one person should for the sake of justice in a case that no federal attorney felt any rush to pursue. Well, she’d had enough with their excuses and the rigors of their programs. None of it would bring back her mother and her sister. Nothing they did now would restore everything she’d lost along the way.

Retrieving the card and cash from the floor of the car, she grabbed her purse. She was tempted to leave behind her wallet and everything with her current name in it, but decided that would only tip her hand. Instead, she locked the car and hurried toward the terminal as if she was running late for her flight.

Passing the trash bin near the stairs, she tossed in her cell phone and car keys. Mentally, she crossed her fingers they’d assume kidnapping and spend precious time chasing down the wrong leads.

* * *

From his parking space two rows away, Rick checked his phone for any reply from the office. Where the hell was Eva with the details when he needed her?

He knew Nicole hadn't come to the airport to make a previously scheduled flight. And no one meeting an incoming flight would choose the long term parking garage.

She was up to something, running scared if he was reading the signals correctly.

He turned off his phone and slid it into his jacket pocket as he stepped out of his car. At the trunk, he checked his pistol, hoping he wouldn't be forced to toss the convenient Hi-point 9mm compact pistol and the .22 revolver at his ankle in order to pass through airport security. Slipping the backpack over one shoulder, he closed the trunk lid and used the key fob to lock the car.

He used his phone as a flashlight to check the trash can and a cold curiosity settled in the pit of his stomach when he saw her keys and cell phone. That kind of behavior signaled a rather permanent change was in the works.

Why?

He picked up his pace, worried about losing her. That was a report he didn't care to send to his boss. Cypress Security hadn't failed yet, and Rick didn't intend to start now, even if this was currently an unofficial, peripheral inquiry.

He spotted her at a ticketing kiosk and made his way to stand in line at a different airline while he watched her.

With her dark expression and large purse, she gave every indication of being a harried business traveler whose reservation had gone missing.

He stayed in line when she stepped away from the kiosk. Remained there while she paced to the wide windows overlooking the unloading area and rummaged through her purse for a phone he knew wasn't there.

He gave her points for performance and scanned the crowd wondering who she hoped to fool.

The cameras, it had to be. No one else was too interested in her. Did she have reason to be this paranoid, or had she just been watching too many crime dramas on television? Nothing she'd done this evening lined up with behavior he expected from a media packaging professional with a photography hobby.

When she exited the terminal, he counted to five before he followed.

"Cameras are still on you," he muttered, catching sight of her crossing to the taxi stand. She wasn't doing herself any real favors here. Ditching the car was smart, maybe, but taxis could be easy to track with all the numbers and security upgrades.

She was clearly trying to get away from something or someone and he felt inexplicably compelled to help her.

When she reached for the door of the next cab in line, he threw a shoulder into the back of the businessman behind her. The guy tripped off the curb and into the cab as his cell phone went skittering to the pavement. Ticked off and confused, he clearly didn't know whether to save the phone or attack Rick.

Rick helped him make up his mind with a right cross to the jaw. “That’s my girl!” He grabbed Nicole’s wrist, pushing her toward the front of the cab. Her eyes went wide with recognition, then panic. “She’s with me.”

As he’d hoped, he suddenly had his hands full with a chivalrous Mr. Business. The man glanced at Nicole who shook her head denying the claim, then he lunged for Rick.

“You’re crazy! Leave her alone!”

Rick released Nicole, taking the hard shove, and stumbling back. He grabbed the guy’s lapels and took him along as they bounced against the cab and caromed off of other bystanders until the crowd was simply a writhing mob of irritable, defensive humanity.

Perfect.

Security would be here any second and no one would have any kind of coherent story to tell.

He shouted more possessive nonsense in his best imitation of a jealous drunk and kept them stirred up until he saw the flash of the cab’s turn signal. Before the vehicle eased into traffic, he rushed forward and jumped inside.

Crouched on the floorboards, Nicole stared up at him in wide-eyed panic. “Stop! Help!”

Rick caught the cabbie’s eye in the mirror and flashed his badge. “Keep going,” he ordered. “I’m her protective detail.”

“That’s—”

“Enough of your tricks for one day, I agree. Stay down.”

“But—”

“We have been through this time and again, your highness,” he added, hoping to distract the cabbie. It worked. Rick smothered a grin. Between the cabbie’s arched brows and Nicole’s stupefaction, he figured his performance was right on target. “My apologies for the scuffle.”

“Uh. No problem,” the cabbie replied. “Still headed for the train station?”

Nicole gave a tiny, pleading nod.

“No.” Her scowl gave him fair warning she wasn’t ready to give up. “One moment.” Rick checked his phone and then gave the address of a mid-rate motel across town. Respectable area, easy access to the interstate and most importantly, within walking distance of a 24-hour shopping center. They both needed to get rid of their smoky clothes.

“Do you have a camera in this cab?”

“It doesn’t work.”

Rick raised an eyebrow and held up a twenty dollar bill.

The cabbie shrugged. “It’s monitored at the barn. Sorry.”

Rick sighed. He had to hope the distraction bought them time. From who or what was the question.

He studied the woman on the floor. “Better if you stay down.”

She sneered. “Who are you? What are you doing?”

“My job,” he answered honestly, giving her a look that told her to play along. Leaning down, he added, “I promise you’re safe.”

After another moment’s hesitation, she wriggled out of her hiding place. Her jacket gaped, giving him a good look at her blood-stained shirt.

“You’re hurt.”

“I’m fine.” She tugged the jacket closed but the pain twisting her features was unmistakable.

Rick’s breath stalled, his mind full of the horrible image of a different woman, her face lax and colorless, her white blouse stained with crimson. “H-hospital,” he rasped.

“Absolutely not.” She glared at him. “I’ll clean it up later.”

Rick dragged himself out of the terrible memory and blamed his unexpected reaction on the lack of sleep from tailing Nicole. Had to be that simple. Because he’d put those awful details out of his head years ago, tucking the memories, both good and bad, into a box where no one could use them against him.

Rick turned his attention back to the immediate task. When the cabbie took the exit, Rick instructed him to let them out at the shopping center instead of the motel. They needed every advantage and he wasn’t taking any more chances until he had more information.

He paid cash for the fare and included a hefty tip, and turned down the offer for a receipt. His boss wasn’t the sort to argue

about expense reports.

With his arm draped across her shoulders he escorted Nicole into the discount superstore, making sure their heads were averted as they passed the likely placement of cameras. In ideal circumstances he'd do this alone, but he didn't trust her to stick around if he parked her in a motel room.

"First stop is first aid, then clothing."

"I'm not staying with you."

He smiled as if she'd just professed her undying affection. "Of course you are." He ran his hand over her hair and then turned abruptly to the vast selection of bandages and antibiotic creams. Anything to banish the feel of that lovely silk under his fingertips and mute the sudden urge to keep touching her. "Whatever you're running from, I can help you."

Her brief laugh was brittle and edgy. "No. You can't."

"I already have." He nudged her jacket open and reassessed the contents of their cart. "Twice." He winked at her. "In case you weren't counting."

"Who are you and why are you following me?"

"Call me Rick. I'm a friend of a friend. When Allie got in trouble, they sent me to check on you." It was true enough.

"Prove it."

"Call my office." He handed her a business card.

"I don't have a phone."

He offered his, but she waved it off. "Where is she?"

“Haleswood.” The fight went out of her immediately and relief softened her features, warming her deep brown eyes. He didn’t want to be attracted to her, but couldn’t seem to shut it down.

She gripped his arm with both hands. “Is she okay?”

“Yes.” Rick cleared his throat. “My boss is on her case. She couldn’t be in better hands. Unless they were mine,” he added, wiggling his brows so she’d relax. It had a limited effect, but anything was an improvement.

He guided her to the next aisle so she could grab a few essentials and then they breezed quickly through racks of clothing so she could replace her ruined shirt and stained jeans.

He was getting antsy being in the store for so long, but he didn’t want to give the person on the register any reason to remember them. “Let’s run through a couple grocery aisles and we’re out of here.”

She shot him an odd look, but cooperated. He really should have mentioned Allie’s name earlier. It might have saved him a few bruises from the brawl at the cab stand.

Chapter 2

As they shopped, Nicole found herself thinking about the stinging pain from her wounds in a lame attempt to get her mind off of Rick's warm hands and the kindness in his eyes. But he was acting. They both were, even if neither of them understood their real roles.

She should ditch him at the earliest opportunity. Demand his credentials. He *had* been helpful. Maybe a stranger was exactly the type of intervention she needed to evade her troubles. Except danger felt like a lousy way to reward someone. As soon as someone spotted her with him, his life would never be the same. So far he hadn't let her get more than an arm's length away, as if he knew she wanted to bolt.

By the time they reached the register, she was almost used to Rick's looming presence and constant physical contact. Almost.

He only had a couple of inches on her five feet and eleven inches, but something in the swagger made him seem taller. His short sandy-brown hair wasn't quite military issue and

while it should have made him average and forgettable, there was something about him. Something capable and dangerous lurking just under the surface of that affable expression he had on his face.

From the moment he'd first put his arm around her, she'd fought the urge to burrow into his broad chest and sob out all the injustices she'd been dealing with.

How he kept that easy smile on his face when he snapped out orders under his breath was a mystery. Even if he was helping Allie—something she intended to confirm with her friend—she wasn't about to let down her guard completely.

He paid the bill with cash, and handed her one of the plastic bags. Putting the others in one hand, he slid his arm around her once more and gave her waist a little squeeze.

Three. That was three times he'd made that particular move. She shouldn't know that. Shouldn't care. He was acting, playing a part for the omnipresent security cameras.

She had to lose him. Had to get to her next stash so she could be herself again.

His arm tensed, pulling her body closer to his and yanking her thoughts away from how best to ditch him.

She glanced up, forced her lips into a smile. "What?"

"You're a quick study." He kissed her nose as if they'd been together for years rather than a couple of hours. "I like that."

"Oh." The blast of cool night air eased the sudden rush of heat in her cheeks.

“We’re going to stroll to the motel as if we have all the time in the world. Okay?”

She nodded, turning with him toward the main road.

“And we’re going to ignore that police car.”

“Right.”

“If we’re stopped, let me do the talking.”

“You must be an excellent dancer.” She grinned at his confused frown. “You certainly like to lead, that’s all.”

He laughed, softly, but she felt it rumble into her, around her, everywhere his body touched hers. She shivered.

His palm flexed on her waist. *Four*.

“We’re almost there.”

She nodded. Better that he assumed she was shivering from cold rather than desire. Maybe she should have dated more, let herself get serious with someone. Her outrageous feelings had to be a simple matter of adrenaline and relationship drought.

“Not this one?” she asked as he strolled by the closest motel. It was the least expensive of the three chains she could see.

“I’ve got a membership with that one,” he said.

“You’re thinking about points?”

“They add up,” he replied with an unrepentant grin that had her pulse skipping.

At the front desk, she suspected his choice had more to do with ease of check-in than reaching the next level of perks.

“We’ll need a rental car in the morning.”

“Yes, sir.” The attendant started tapping on his keyboard.
“Any preference?”

“Mid-size is fine.”

“It will be waiting.”

“I want your travel perks plan,” she said when they were in the elevator.

“It is handy,” Rick agreed, leaning back against the opposite wall. “We’ll get in and clean you up and then you can tell me what you’re running from.”

She agreed with the first part. “When I’ve talked with Allie.”

He made a non-committal grunt as the elevator opened on their floor. She followed him to the room, surprised to walk into a large suite.

“Nice.”

“Perks.” He set the plastic shopping bags onto the table and dumped his backpack into one of the chairs. “And it was the best way to get two beds without raising eyebrows.”

She raised her own in reply, earning a grin from him. He signaled for her plastic bag and she handed it over, but hung on to her purse.

“Let’s get you into the shower.”

“I beg your pardon.”

The grin took on a decidedly wicked edge. “I thought you might need help with the jacket and blouse.”

“I’ll be fine,” she snapped.

“Got it.” He held his palms up in surrender. “Go on. You’ll feel better when you get the smoke off.”

True. “You can go first.”

“No, thanks. I’ve got calls to make.” He waved her on and turned his attention to his phone.

This wasn’t the time to make her move. Resigned, she went into the bathroom, locked the door, and had a girlish moment just enjoying the luxury of her surroundings. The towels were plush, the shower enormous, and the Jacuzzi tub too, too tempting.

Trying to think clinically, she sniffed at the citrus-scented bath products and placed them in the shower.

The mirrors reflected her wince as she removed her jacket and she let out a shocked cry when she saw her blood-soaked shirt.

“What’s wrong?”

Her mouth dropped open as Rick stormed in. “I-I locked that.” Her gaze followed his as he took in the bloody mess. She couldn’t believe it was this bad.

“Oh hell. Are you afraid of blood?”

“Only my own.” Her vision dimmed. Everywhere she looked she saw a bloody version of herself.

* * *

“Close your eyes,” Rick ordered. He caught her as she swayed, and cradled her face close to his chest.

He’d seen the way her shirt was matted to her wounds and quickly considered the options. “Keep ’em closed.”

“Got it.”

He turned her toward the shower stall. “You’ll go a couple steps, then into the shower.”

“What?”

He pressed a towel to her face when her eyes flew open. “Relax. You’ve got to clean up. It will hurt less if you let the shower soak off that shirt.”

“Oh.”

Even muffled by the towel, he heard the fear in her voice, making him all the more determined to get through this with field-medical efficiency.

“Stand still and keep your eyes covered if you can’t keep them closed.” Her hands replaced his, holding the towel to her face. “I’m just turning on the water.” With one hand on her arm, he reached in and turned the faucet on.

“I’m not going in there with my boots on.”

“Reasonable.” He dropped to his knees in front of her, taking in the view of those long lean legs clad in snug jeans tucked into knee high black boots. The desire to run his palms over those subtle curves was about as far from field-medical clinical as thoughts could get. “Put your hands on my shoulders. For

balance.” Keeping her eyes closed tight, she did as instructed. Her touch did nothing to restore his control. It was like he’d never been close to a woman before.

“We should’ve bought a shoe shine kit,” he said. Anything to distract himself as he peeled soft leather away from her firm calves.

“You’re right. I can’t believe I didn’t think of that.”

He laughed at her sincere concern for her shoes. “They’ve had a tough time, but they’ll pull through.”

She chuckled and he glanced up. Instead of white hotel towel, his gaze was trapped by her big brown eyes. ‘Doe eyes’, his mother would call them. In his mind, he stood up, cradled her face and kissed her until the fire, blood, and the rest was a hazy memory. She jerked upright, reminding him none of that was an option.

“Need help with the jeans?” he asked with a theatrical leer.

“No, thank you.”

“Hey, I’m a guy, it’s a fair question.” He stood up, her boots in one hand and her disappointment in him obvious. “When you’re in, I’ll put a towel over the door so you don’t scare yourself again.”

“Thanks.” She put her fingers under the spray and adjusted the temperature.

“I’ll bring in the first aid supplies when you’re ready. Just yell.”

“Right.”

“The, um, red stuff won’t bother you in there?”

“I don’t intend to look.”

“Good plan.”

But he waited by the closed door, listening for any sound that wasn’t normal. The shower door opened and closed. Probably her jeans and socks. A few minutes later there was a wet slap of something against the tile. The shirt, no doubt. After that it was just water and his over-active imagination painting an all too clear picture of her skin glossy with water and soap, her hair—

Torture, pure and simple. Uncomfortable, he adjusted himself in his jeans and turned his attention to opening the many boxes of first aid supplies. If any of those wounds were still bleeding, she’d need help with it.

On cue, the water stopped and she called his name.

Walking in, he vowed to keep his eyes on hers. It was a damned hard challenge when she cowered at the edge of the shower, her face turned away and the towel leaving too much of her body exposed. Golden freckles dusted her long arms and those legs...

“One is still bleeding. I think.”

Clinical. Professional. Cold dead fish. He had to get control of himself. “Turn around.”

She did and he swore under his breath.

“I’m sorry I’m a wimp.”

“If you really can’t handle this yourself, can you trust me or do you want me to take you to a hospital?”

“No!”

“Okay. Then I’m your medic.” Clinical not carnal, he thought, reaching out to her. She placed her hand in his, letting him guide her out of the bathroom.

The bed was too intimate, too tempting. He pointed to the chair instead.

She shivered as she tried to make the towel cover more than it possibly could. He handed her a blanket, then set to work on the gouges marring the delicate skin between her collar bone and disappearing under the edge of the towel.

The wound just under the rise of her collar bone was indeed still bleeding. “Just stare at the ceiling,” he advised, pressing a square of gauze on the spot. “Hold that. Gently,” he added when she pressed hard enough to make herself wince.

“I’m going to lower this a bit.”

“You’re the doctor,” she said.

He wasn’t sure just what god-awful thing he’d done to deserve this kind of punishment, but he managed to treat the deep scratches with antibiotic cream, covering the worst of them, without doing anything inappropriate.

“Good Lord, you look like you went a few rounds with that kid and his knife.”

“What kid?”

Crap. He hadn't meant to say that out loud. “Later.” He tugged the towel up again. “For now, let's get you put back together.”

He lifted her fingers from the gauze, unhappy to see it had soaked through. It really needed a few stitches, but he wasn't about to bring up the hospital idea again.

He'd dealt with blood and worse both in and out of the Army. Why this woman's injuries bothered him so much was beyond his ability to reason right now. He used the butterfly closures, smeared the wound with antibiotic cream and covered it with a thick gauze pad.

“All set.”

She met his gaze, her eyes shining with gratitude. “Thanks.”

“Don't blame me if it scars ugly.”

“Guys don't dig scars?”

“Nah, that's a chick thing.” Her slow smile was worth the bad joke. He handed over her new shirt and the athletic shorts from his emergency stash in his backpack. “You won't scare yourself now. I'll clean up in there while you change.”

She swallowed and gave him a jerky nod. If he didn't know better he'd think the intense attraction he was fighting went both ways.

* * *

Nicole wasn't sure how she managed to stand up and dress on her shaking knees. She hadn't had an excessive amount of medical care in her life, but she'd never had a reaction like that, no matter how cute the doctor or nurse. Rick's touch, simply administering first aid, created a sensual fire she wanted to explore.

Good grief, she couldn't remember feeling like this with any of her boyfriends. Of course, she didn't let men too close anymore.

Bewildered by such a strong attraction to a stranger, she felt guilt creeping into the mix. He was here because Allie was in trouble and yet her own problems might put all of that in jeopardy.

She couldn't bear it if her past sent more lives spiraling into chaos.

Hearing the shower come on, she realized now was her chance to leave. Better for everyone if she did. A quick walk back to the store—

The bathroom door opened and Rick's head appeared. "Stay."

She bristled. "I'm not a dog." Her skin heated as his eyes raked her head to toe.

"Nope. Not even close."

"Then—"

"A dog would listen," he said with a wink. "And not even your sexy boots can make that look work."

He shut the door before she could protest or defend herself.

Irritation burned off the sensual haze, but still she couldn't just let him get sucked into the vortex that was her life. Witness Protection might sound like a good plan when nasty people wanted you dead, but the reality wasn't as charming. Especially with no end in sight. As capable as Rick had proven himself, what man could defend himself indefinitely from a determined gang with outlandish resources?

Despite what he said, despite the fashion tragedy that was her current outfit, she had to leave. It was the kindest thing she could do.

Determined, she picked up her scuffed boots and went out to the front room to find her purse.

It wasn't where she thought she'd left it on the table. She glanced around, not seeing it anywhere. She looked at the door, but knew it was absurd to think anyone who might have found them only wanted her purse.

Battling panic, she pulled on her boots before starting to search. Rick must have stashed it to keep her here. No problem. She opened cabinets, looked behind and under things. In the bedroom she checked the drawers and closet, even under the bed.

No purse.

She was calling Rick every ugly name in the book as she felt her hope for escape, her best chance for reclaiming her life, sliding out of her grasp.

His backpack sat there open. Maybe, if there was cash or even a credit card, she could borrow enough to get her to the locker at the train station.

Hating herself—furious with him for pushing her into a corner—she reached for the zipper on the outside pocket. It sounded too loud as she pulled the tab and she immediately glanced toward the bathroom. The door was closed and the water still running. The sight of a granola bar, a fitness watch, and high-end ear buds momentarily deflated her.

Leaving was the best thing for both of them. She didn't owe him anything, not really. The lie didn't feel right even in her mind. She shouldn't be trying to steal from the man who'd saved her from any number of injuries on that ladder and from her fear of blood just minutes ago. Still, she'd have a vital head start on the federal marshals if he hadn't interfered at the airport. Probably.

Gritting her teeth against the guilt of snooping, she went for the next zipper.

“Find what you're after?”

She jumped as if she'd been hit with an electric current. With no good way to explain, she went on the offensive. “Where is my purse?”

“Safe.”

“You mean like I'm safe with you?”

“No.”

She turned around to ask him what he meant by that and wished she hadn't. He leaned against the doorway wearing nothing but a towel slung low on his hips. Her mouth went dry and a ripple of pure feminine lust rushed over her skin.

She knew she was blushing, could feel the heat of it in her cheeks. Worse, she couldn't stop staring at that wide expanse of his muscled chest dusted with golden hair. Damp from the shower, it almost shimmered.

She wanted her camera to capture the raw masculine form as well as to hide the wild reactions racing through her. He could probably hear her heart pounding from there.

He took a step closer, snapping her out of her stupor. "I put your purse in the room safe."

"Oh." Her eyes latched onto a puckered scar on his side and she had to drag her gaze up to his face. It wasn't a hardship.

And she was being rude. He hadn't leered at her this way.

"Umm. Wow. Sorry. You must stop traffic in the gym." Could she babble any more? What was the issue here? Oh yeah. "Why is my purse in the safe?"

"So you couldn't leave."

She could hardly blame him for not trusting her when she had been trying to do exactly that.

Slumping onto the edge of the bed, she went for as much honesty as she could spare. "I think it's for the best if we part ways."

“I disagree.” He sat down beside her, the towel gaping to show off too much of his perfect thigh. At this rate a long swim in the Arctic Ocean was her only hope of restoring a normal body temperature.

“You should consider fitness modeling.”

He laughed and his grin gave her a new, more appropriate focus. “Seriously. I know my way around a camera and—”

His gaze was locked on her mouth. She wanted him to lean closer, was tempted to lean into him for a kiss she knew would be worth the risk. The moment spun out and gave a whole new meaning to ‘stranger danger’.

“Camera?”

She blinked as his question and the sharp edge in his voice brought her back to her senses. “I always have it with me.”

It was the one piece of herself that she never left behind. They’d asked her to, but since tons of people were photography enthusiasts and she never published her photos as art, she’d convinced them to back off.

“Did you take pictures of the fire?”

“No. Not really.”

“Not really or no?”

“No. I used my camera and my work ID to get closer to the building.”

His gaze dipped down to the wounds he’d treated, then popped back up to her face. “To save a lizard.”

“Oscar was important to Mrs. Beaumont and she’s always been nice to me.”

He shook his head. “If that kid thought you had proof, maybe that’s why he cut the ladder.”

Chapter 3

“The ladder was cut?” She hadn’t been sure with her arms full of angry lizard. “I thought maybe it had broken when I climbed up. On the way down, I was too busy trying to contain Oscar.”

“Yeah, I watched a kid slice it up right after you went inside.”

She lurched to her feet. “You let someone cut my escape route?”

“Hey, I stayed to make sure you got out safely.”

He had a point, but still. “Why?”

“I saw the gang colors and thought I’d be more use to you if I wasn’t fighting off a team.” He stood up as well, advancing on her once more. “I hoped it was something as stupid as a gang jump in, but your subsequent behavior makes me think otherwise.”

Her stomach pitched. If he so much as guessed at the truth he’d be in more trouble than anyone deserved. “Just how does

following me help Allie?”

“Where’s your computer?”

“What?” She didn’t see what one thing had to do with the other.

“You IM with her all the time right?”

“We did.” A lump of regret lodged in her throat. Allie had been her longest running friend. Until he said it, she hadn’t realized—

“Your computer?”

“One is now ash thanks to that fire and my work computer is currently an oversized paperweight. IT was supposed to get me a replacement, but as of close of business today, it hadn’t shown up.”

“What happened to it?”

“I don’t know. It’s just dead. You think you can fix it from here?”

“No. Your IM account was hacked and Allie received messages from someone posing as you.”

Nicole weighed that information against the gang kid who’d cut the ladder. The incidents couldn’t be related. Nicole Livingston had been a steady, safe identity for years. No one at the office could possibly know the ugly truth of her past. On normal days, if she didn’t think about it, she almost felt complete as Nicole.

“What are you thinking?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know what to think. Allie’s safe right?”

“Yes. I’m not sure she’s out of danger, but she has help and they’ll get her through it.”

Nicole figured that was as much as she could hope for. “The rumors circulating at work about her are awful. People are saying she stole from the company. But that’s not Allie. And her boss hasn’t been in for a couple of days. It’s shocking what small-minded people I work with.” She rubbed her temples and paced away from him. “If someone at work hacked my IM...” This time the chill on her spine had nothing to do with sensual awareness.

“Are you away from your desk regularly?”

His voice muffled, she turned back, relieved that Rick and his towel had retreated to the bathroom. “Isn’t everyone? We have meetings and there’s a security crew or janitorial staff. I’m not sure the building is ever empty.”

“Do you ever use the camera for business?” He reappeared in jeans and a snug gray t-shirt that made his biceps look bigger. For some ridiculous reason, she found him almost more tempting dressed.

“Yes.” She gasped. “You think that’s why they burned down my building?”

He froze, one hand in his damp hair. His eyes locked with hers and the intensity shocked her. She’d said too much.

“What makes you think arson?”

Her throat dry, it required a concentrated effort to get the words out. “You said you saw a gang banger. I, ah, just made the leap.”

“A lot of drug activity in your building?”

“No. N-none that I know of.”

“Stolen goods?”

“This really isn’t my area of expertise.”

“No? You sure?”

“What are you implying? I go to work, I come home. Just a normal, boring woman.”

Rick disagreed. Although the quick background check supported her statement, there was more under the surface. More she was desperate to hide from him. From the rest of the world too, he’d bet.

“I’m going to give you your camera. Not the purse.” He smiled when she grumbled at his autocratic statement. Blocking her view as he punched in the combination, he opened the safe and withdrew her camera. Smiling, he handed it over, giving her a long look. “You’ve gotta tell me what the plan was.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Come on, Nicole. You were going through my backpack, I assume for money.”

“For the vending machine.”

He laughed. “Uh-huh. You’re in baggy shorts, a Beatles t-shirt, and sexy scuffed boots. How far did you think you’d get before you got picked up for soliciting? Or worse.”

She paled. Clearly she hadn’t thought of everything. It confirmed his opinion that she was too desperate to make a clean getaway from whatever frightened her.

His ego wasn’t so overblown as to think she’d want to stay with him just for his charming smile. But if she believed it was arson—aimed at her—and that someone cut the ladder on purpose to trap or injure her, surely he was a better option than a cold night on the street.

He tried a new approach. “Can we make a deal, Nicole?”

She peered at him from under her lashes. “What kind of deal?”

“I was told you and Allie are close.”

“Best friends,” she said with a nod and dropped her gaze back to the display on her camera.

“Then think of this potential deal from her point of view. She’s worried about you. Knowing you’re safe with me, a trusted member of the team protecting her, gives her peace of mind.”

He waited for Nicole to recognize the logic in that. At last she set the camera aside and met his gaze. “What’s the deal?”

“Stay with me for the next forty-eight hours and I’ll get you wherever you are so determined to go.”

“Why?”

“Which part?”

“The time requirement first.” She leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs.

He tried not to look. He’d been lying when he said the boots didn’t work with the shorts. Probably not in a fashion sense, but the view of all that leg was stirring up crazy fantasies he didn’t know he had. It was all too easy to imagine her in those boots and nothing at all.

“I need the time to determine if the fire is related to Allie’s case. And I want to take a look at your recent photos.”

“That means we stay in town.”

He noted the defensive posture of her crossed arms, the burst of nerves that set one foot to tapping. “Only for one more day.”

“Then you’re no good at math.”

“The second day is for traveling. We actually don’t need the whole day, but just in case there’s trouble.”

“Travel where?”

“South Carolina. I thought you might like to see Allie once more.”

He caught the flash of interest and the sudden sheen of tears in her big brown eyes before she looked away. “That could be nice.”

“You’ll take the deal?” he prompted when she didn’t say anything more.

“I’m thinking.”

Rick knew when he was being played. Why couldn’t he sort this woman out? “You’re thinking about how to ditch me.” He surged to his feet, irritated beyond all reason.

“I really can’t stay in town. With or without you.”

“Why?”

She swiped at the single tear rolling down her cheek. “It’s private. I have to leave. As soon as possible. Just give me my purse and tell Allie I’ll call her.”

“No.”

“You don’t understand. It’s better this way.”

Rick’s phone let loose a riff from ‘Bad to the Bone’ and he swore under his breath. Eva had the worst gift for interrupting, but his gut told him he couldn’t take the chance of ignoring the call.

Answering, he prowled a path back and forth in front of Nicole as he listened to Eva’s rushed report. He wanted to be clear he’d give her no chance to escape.

Nothing Eva said made him feel any better about the current situation. According to Eva’s digging, Nicole’s background was too clean and orderly. In his experience, that only happened in rare cases of excellent identity theft or official government protection. Which camp did Nicole fall into?

He wanted to ask more questions, but that would definitely scare her off. As much as he wanted to study the full report, without a computer, it wasn't going to happen.

“We'll have a rental car by morning.”

Eva didn't argue, just asked his destination. “After the errand I came for, I want to snoop around the fire scene, see if I can get my hands on a preliminary report.”

He ignored the doubting signals from both the woman on the phone and the woman in the room. “Keep me posted,” he said to Eva, knowing she would interpret that to mean he wanted a warning about further developments.

He disconnected, tapping the phone against his open palm. “Well, what's your decision?”

“Can we call a truce for tonight?”

He rolled his eyes and muttered a prayer for patience. To his surprise, she laughed.

“My mother used to do the same,” she admitted.

Used to. He grinned, trying to put her at ease. “So you've been challenging the limits of patience from an early age?”

“We all have our skills.”

And he had the distinct feeling she needed his, whether she'd admit it or not. He dipped his chin at the camera. “Speaking of your skills, can we see if there's anything on there that would make you a target?”

“It’s doubtful. I didn’t even use it when I went in to see Oscar.”

“Meaning?”

“If the guy you say cut the ladder thought I’d caught something incriminating, he’d be wrong.”

“But he wouldn’t know that, would he?”

She conceded the point, handing him the camera. “There’s more on an SD card in my purse.”

“Let’s save that one for tomorrow.”

She shot him a fake pout that made him laugh again. “Even if I promise not to run?”

“Especially if you promise not to run.” He said it with a smile, as he started reviewing the pictures saved on her camera. “How old are these?”

“Just the last week or so. You can turn on the date feature.”

Rick found the setting and made the change. “You take pictures every day?”

“It relaxes me.”

He could understand that. Everyone needed a way to let off steam. There were worse habits. “Why don’t you order a pizza,” he suggested handing her his phone. “There’s a list of places who deliver in the other room.”

She sighed. “Veggie okay?”

“You’re a vegetarian?”

“No, just too queasy for anything heavier.”

Rick agreed absently, absorbed with the images she'd captured as he trailed her into the other room. “What do you do with your photos?”

“Not much.” She held up a finger, making him wait while she placed the order. When she was done, she continued. “Usually they're just for me, so I edit them sometimes, play with effects. If it's something for work, then I clean them up and send them up the line.”

“Who?”

“Public relations usually. My department doesn't often need candids, but I go with Allie to different community events and document for the various publications and articles she puts together.”

“Where is this?” He turned the camera for her to look.

“It's a fountain in the park. Two days ago.”

“Where's the park? And who is that in the background?”

“The park is between several office buildings. Sort of behind our building.”

He leaned over her shoulder while she adjusted something and magnified the part of the image with the people. “Cool.”

“This thing is all kinds of fun.”

“Seems more serious than a hobby for you.”

They were both looking at the camera, but he heard her breath hitch. It was rude to push, but this wasn't a blind date, it

was a crisis and he needed a better understanding. Particularly of her.

“I’m in media packaging,” she said, her voice rock steady. “Visuals go with the territory.”

“I just meant—”

“I’m not stupid, Rick. I know you don’t trust me, but the less you know about me specifically, the better off you’ll be.” She gave a small gasp. “That’s Mr. Roberts. I was focused on the light and water. I didn’t even realize... is he...”

Her voice trailed off and Rick took the camera back, moving the little magnifying glass over the next picture in the series. Sure enough, Roberts appeared to be chatting with a man from a far lower income bracket. As in the unemployed and homeless no-income bracket.

“I’ll be damned.”

“What?”

“It’s just a hunch for now. I’ll be able to confirm it and fill you in tomorrow most likely.” This might be the development they needed in Allie’s case. “That’s Roberts. If he realized you caught him doing something he didn’t want documented, it might explain a few things.”

“He’s not an arsonist.”

Rick cocked a brow, wondering how she could be so sure. “They don’t usually go around wearing name tags.” Roberts struck him as a man who hired other people to do anything that might possibly turn messy.

Her lips parted as if she wanted to argue, but the pizza arrived, interrupting them.

“We should eat and get some rest,” he said when they were at the table, a cold bottle of soda and thick slice of veggie pizza in front of each of them. “I have an appointment first thing.”

“You seriously just expect me to tag along with you? I have my own schedule.”

“Your schedule wouldn’t happen to include going into work like a normal person?”

“No. When the news reports this, I’m sure my boss will understand if I’m not there.”

Rick ate in silence for a few minutes. “You set the fire didn’t you?” He regretted his timing when she choked and sputtered soda all over her plate.

“What is wrong with you?” She glared at him with an intensity he admired.

Ah, finally, one question answered. When she was lying or evading, the eye contact was sketchy and she rubbed her left thigh. He’d wanted to catch her off guard, with something he definitely knew the answer to. “It’s a logical train of thought,” he said, as if they were chatting about nothing more important than the weather. “You set the fire, so you knew it was safe to go in for the neighbor’s iguana. And it seems like you’ve been trying to leave a trail for someone—arson investigators, maybe—to follow.”

“It was hardly safe in Mrs. Beaumont’s apartment.”

“Or out of it. The ladder,” he added when she gave him a look.

“Fire and gangs are unpredictable things.”

He let that go as sorrow clouded her eyes. He knew that look of regret, that lingering sadness over wrongs that couldn’t be righted. He’d seen it in the mirror many a morning.

Inexplicably, Rick wanted to reassure her, but without knowing the problem, any words that came to mind felt trite. Climbing into a burning building to rescue a neighbor’s pet wasn’t the act of a selfish criminal. But honest, innocent people didn’t just up and run when bad things happened.

He’d done enough surveillance in various capacities around the world to recognize that decent people were mostly the same. The cultures, clothing, and phrases changed, but the inherent patterns were there underneath.

Nicole was a good person with seriously troubling baggage.

“Whatever it is, I want to help.” He hoped he hadn’t said it aloud, but her startled expression proved otherwise. The words hovered over the pizza box and he couldn’t take them back if he wanted to. He didn’t want to. “*Whatever* it is.”

“What if it’s avoiding an arson rap? Might be my third strike.”

He laughed until he couldn’t breathe. Damn if he didn’t like this woman. “Even then. But I know better.”

She pulled another slice of pizza from the box, sliding it onto his plate. "I appreciate the offer, but this is something I need to do alone."

"That's a hard road, Nicole."

She slid him a long look. "Says a man who's been down it?"

He nodded, hoping she wouldn't push for details he wasn't ready to share. "Even the ugly days are better with a friend riding shotgun. Take that deal."

"If I don't?"

"You'll regret it." As would he, because he'd only follow her anyway.

"A threat isn't the best way to win me over."

"It was a promise." He winked to soften the statement. "What would win you over? I saved your life, or at least a bad ankle sprain, at the fire, covered your exit from the airport. Saved you from death by countertop during the whole 'red stuff' issue." He leaned back in his chair and spread his hands wide. "What else can I do?"

She shook her head, but he saw the twitch of her lips as she fought a smile. "Are you always like this?"

"Never." At least, he hadn't been this way with anyone since his wife died. Around the office, people probably thought he was mute since he usually only spoke with Rick or Eva directly.

“Stick with me through tomorrow and I’ll help you go wherever you need to go.” He could tell she was tempted. “I can’t tell Allie you’re okay if I don’t know you’re okay.”

“That’s a low blow,” she grumbled, blotting her lips with the napkin. “Fine. We’ll do it your way, as long as we’re clear I am totally against this.”

“Consider it clear.” He reached to clean up, but she stopped him, her long fingers light and soft as rain on his arm.

“I’ll clean up while you make the bed.” She tipped her head to the sofa.

“Sure.” He flipped on the television while they worked on separate tasks. When Nicole’s name carried out into the room, he swore.

“How did they latch onto you so fast?”

“Turn it up.”

She joined him and they stood there gawking at the report. Her hand flew to her mouth as the image from her work ID badge popped up on the screen.

“They didn’t waste any time,” Rick groused.

“*Shh.*”

The reporter didn’t accuse her outright, but the implication was there. “While none of the residents were seriously injured, a Ms. Nicole Livingston is missing. Firefighters and arson investigators will do a walk through as soon as the fire is out and the site is safe to determine a cause of the blaze.”

Nicole's image stayed on the corner of the screen as terrible pictures from the scene played out in an incriminating visual testimony.

“Is there anything viewers can do?” the anchor asked.

“At this time, authorities are asking people to call the hotline. I believe the number is on your screen now, with any information about Livingston's whereabouts.”

Rick turned off the television. “That changes things.”

Chapter 4

Nicole couldn't breathe. Worse, she wasn't sure she wanted to. They knew she was making a run for it and they intended to stop her. How soon until the cabbie or the desk clerk called that hotline and turned her in? She might only have minutes left before the suits pounded on the door, irritated with having to move her into yet another life.

What if the man who'd killed her mother and sister had set this fire too? What if he'd done it to flush her out?

"It's over," she moaned, utterly defeated.

Heavy hands landed on her shoulders, gave her a little shake. "Not yet. Stay with me, Nicole."

"No." She shoved at him, desperate to do something right in this god forsaken situation. "You have to go now. Get as far away from me as you can."

"Nicole." He pulled her close, his strong arms banding around her, chasing away the chill of dread. "Whatever it is, remember?"

His words whispered into her ear, seeped into her soul. She wanted to believe, but it wasn't fair. "Not this. I—"

He eased back, holding her at arm's length. "Tell me later. Dress now. We're out of here in two minutes."

She found her jeans and coat on the side of the Jacuzzi tub, a bottle of fabric freshener nearby. The smell was a bracing sort of intense clean, and as she dressed she let out a small, hysterical laugh at the idea that it might be enough to distract scent dogs.

"Ready?"

"Almost." She started to pull her hair back.

"Leave it down. As different as possible from your ID," he explained.

She tucked the elastic band into her pocket, staring as he strapped a revolver into an ankle holster.

"Do you know anything about guns?"

Nothing good, she thought, shaking her head.

"I have two, but I'll keep them both if you aren't prepared."

"Keep them." How had she missed that he was armed? They'd been joined at the hip during that jaunt through the store and she hadn't had a clue.

He motioned her forward, interrupting her reverie. Her purse, camera and a plastic shopping bag were on the bed. "You keep track of that," he said, pointing. "I'll handle the rest."

“Right.” She couldn’t seem to find the words to create full sentences. At this point, silence might be the best option anyway.

He hefted his backpack into place, she tucked her camera into her purse and followed suit.

He paused at the door, his eye to the peephole. “Stay close and stay quiet.”

She nodded. It was clear he was committed to this plan of action. Maybe he was just an adrenaline junkie riding from one high to the next.

He took her hand in his, his grip gentle, steadying.

Or maybe he was as real as heroes get. The unwelcome thought emphasized the panic undermining all her senses—particularly her common sense.

He opened the door with the chain still on. She’d thought it was a nervous mistake until he popped open her compact and used the mirror to check the hallway.

She wondered what else he’d managed to do when she wasn’t looking. If he’d done a thorough search of her purse and found the credit card with another woman’s name on it, she didn’t think he’d still be helping her.

Whatever it is. The words were as clear as if he’d spoken them again.

He wasn’t the first man to make her a threatening sort of promise, just the only one who made it without any obvious

strings attached. Like her death, or the death of another identity.

Pushing the door closed, he returned her compact, and then slid back the chain.

After a quick, reassuring squeeze of her hand, he opened the door once more. It was a relief to be on the move, with no time to think of any details other than coaching herself to keep up with his ground-eating stride.

He led her down the hall, away from the elevators, and into the stairwell. Her boots rang out against the cement stairs and she cringed as she immediately adjusted to her tiptoes. How did he move so quietly?

They made it to ground level without any attention and he ushered her out into the cold night.

Pulling her close, into the shelter of his arm, he murmured, “They expect you to be traveling alone. Put your arm around me.”

She did, noticing the bump of the pistol grip at the small of his back this time. The only thing standing between her and an all-out panic attack was this man.

“That’s our cab.” His chin jerked at the bright yellow car waiting at the next motel.

“But the camera inside...”

“A necessary risk. Just follow my lead.”

He slid into the back seat, leaning forward to block as much of the camera angle as possible as he told the cabbie to take them to the airport.

She tried to shrink into the corner, turning her face to the window and hoping she didn't give enough of a view for the facial recognition programs. Her breath stalled in her chest as dark sedans with blue lights flashing on the dash sped toward the motel they'd just left.

It was impossible not to worry about being followed as the cabbie slid in and out of traffic, taking them closer to what felt like a trap. She'd been at the airport once today and had made a point of being seen by cameras there. With the controlled traffic pattern, if the marshals—or worse—found her, would Rick be able to get away?

Beside her, he took her hand once more, lifting it to his lips for a kiss that captured her full attention. “We'll make the flight, I promise.”

She nodded, doing what she could to play along. For a woman who'd been someone other than herself for most of her life, she was having a hard time rising to the challenge of this particular acting job.

He kept up a running conversation, smiling encouragement when she managed a reply. If asked, she knew she could never explain what they talked about. His voice rumbled just under the sound of her heart pounding in her ears, blotting out individual words, and she only murmured into the short pauses.

Doubts swamped her. They would never outrun her troubles, not with enemies on both sides of the law.

“Hang in there,” Rick said.

Her hand was pleasantly trapped between his hand and hard thigh. She soaked up the warmth of his touch and focused on the security he offered. It would be nice to know why he was blindly helping her, but the cab wasn't the time or place for those questions. By her count, he'd surpassed his job description of 'checking on her' long ago.

As they pulled into the airport, Rick directed the driver toward the airline with the most activity. He paid the fare as she stepped out, pretending to search her purse in order to keep her head down. It was going to be impossible to avoid all the security cameras, but she realized she trusted Rick to have a plan.

He gave her a huge smile as the cab pulled away and laced their fingers together. “Almost there,” he said, with a reassuring smile.

“Oh! You forgot the shopping bag.”

He glanced down at their empty hands. “Hmm. We didn't need it anymore. Let whoever's after you have fun with it.”

It was clearly an invitation to share, but she ignored it.

“Let's get a quick shot for Facebook.” He stopped suddenly, and raised his cell phone to snap their picture. When they looked at the result, she laughed. He'd pulled a face and

looked ridiculously silly next to her strained smile. “You can’t post that. We look deranged.”

“Of course I can.” He pocketed the phone again. “Or I could if I had an account.”

“You don’t use Facebook?”

“What can I say? I’m a throwback.” He winked at her as they made their way toward the long term parking garage. “In my line of work it’s not the smartest thing to broadcast every little life detail.”

“That’s fair.” Her palms went damp. They were headed toward the same area where she’d dumped her car earlier.

“Rick?”

“Almost there.”

His persistent calm steadied her.

“Are you active on Facebook?”

She did a double take. “No. I just IM or text with a few close friends if I need instant interaction.”

“Media packaging maintains a high security standard these days?”

She gave him a light elbow jab. “Well, marketing does get a little edgy about new names and ideas but we haven’t had a leak yet.”

Just as she relaxed a fraction, thought they might get away, his whole body tensed. He pulled her to a stop behind a large support pillar in the parking garage.

“Wait here for me. I’m going to pull my car around.”

“No. I can’t.” She clutched at his arms much as the desperation clutched a cold fist around her heart. What if he didn’t come back? Sure, she’d wanted him to leave back when she had a plan. Now that they were moving on his terms, she felt like a yo-yo as her confidence ebbed and flowed. “You can’t leave me.”

“I’m not leaving you.” His eyes were kind and sincere. “Thirty seconds, tops. But there’s a team snooping around your car. If we go together they might see you—”

“You said they won’t expect me to be traveling with someone.”

“True.”

“You said together.” The operative word. She would have offered better arguments if she’d been thinking clearly. As it was, she knew if he walked away, she’d lose it. Right now, as her heart hammered in her chest, she’d likely turn herself in rather than go forward with the original plan he’d interrupted in the cab just hours ago. Courage gone, the only thing holding her together was him. If he stepped away, she would shatter.

“Please.”

“Fine. But don’t blame me if we wind up in a car chase. And play along.”

“I promise.”

“Ready?”

She nodded.

He kissed her. Not like he'd done for the store cameras. This time his lips locked with hers, full of heat and promise. His fingers speared into her hair, holding her face at the perfect angle, taking her deeper. She melted under his sensual advance, her lips parted and desire rocketed through her. His tongue stroked hers and she tasted mint and man. Sliding her hands into his open jacket and cruising her fingers over his sculpted chest, she moaned. Her enemies might well be closing in, but she didn't care. The world itself could be ending and she would happily ride it out if he'd just keep kissing her.

“Hang on,” he said, breaking the kiss.

Before she could adjust to what felt like another unfair loss, he pulled her away from the pillar and into a quick swing dance move. Breathless, she smiled at him, her hair flying wild as she spun back into his arm. He wrapped her in a hug and suddenly boosted her up and over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

She barely hung on to her purse and her laughter bounced like a rubber ball off the concrete structure as he turned another circle, making her dizzy.

Parking lights flashed, and she was on her feet for just a moment before he tucked her safely into the passenger seat.

When he was behind the wheel he beamed at her. “Well done! They blew us off.”

The rush of happiness fizzled and she felt like she was riding a hellish roller coaster designed just to torture her. One moment she was terrified, the next exhilarated, only to be dumped into a spiral of disappointment. She wasn't sure how a man kissed like that when it was all business.

“Now we just have to hope they aren't watching the exits.”

Of course they had to hope. They weren't out of the proverbial woods yet. She should know that. She *would* know that if she could think straight. Fear, desire, and unrelenting tension were a volatile mix in her bloodstream. She struggled to get a good deep breath and find her balance. “What do you want me to do?”

He glanced over. “Just sit there and be gorgeous.”

She nearly swore.

He pulled into the shortest exit line and shifted, trying to get his wallet and keep his seatbelt on. “I've got it.” She pulled her purse onto her lap and dug around for her wallet while he handed over the ticket. The price appeared on the display and she handed him cash.

“Not very long term,” the clerk in the booth said.

“Our plans changed. My uncle Oscar had a stroke.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

Nicole prayed the gate would lift faster as Rick dropped the change into the cup holder.

They were through. Hope gave her emotions a boost, but she was afraid of the next, inevitable drop. “What now?”

“Now we find a place to catch our breath.”

Rick reached for her hand, but she turned on the radio instead. She didn’t want more fake touches right now, no matter how reassuring. If the immediate danger was gone, she wanted to enjoy some logical, coherent thinking.

“Maybe they’ll give an update on the search for me.”

After a curious glance, he put his hand on the steering wheel. “Good thinking.”

That’s what she was aiming for. “Did you have something in mind for tonight?”

“Do you?” He wiggled his brows.

If she didn’t know better, she’d think he was flirting. “Seriously.”

“Seriously. When you left the fire, what was your plan? You led them to the airport, what did you want them to think?”

“That I’d been kidnapped. At least in the short term. That’s why I went in to buy a ticket, knowing they’d eventually see that footage too and ask more questions.”

She could feel him mulling that over. They’d just met, she barely knew him, and still she knew he was fitting pieces together, looking for a way to use that to their advantage.

“Is there a particular agency you wanted to believe that scenario? Or a particular perp you hoped they would

question?”

She couldn't stop the smile, but she kept her gaze on the road ahead. “Your interrogation technique is friendly, I'll give you that.”

“Give me something more, Nicole.”

The heat underscoring that reply rippled over her skin. He drew her as unerringly as a moth to flame and she stared at him, soaking up his strong profile.

“More?”

He sighed, clearly exasperated. “More. Give me information, background, trust. Hell, give me anything. If it were just me, I'd drive all night and put as much distance as possible between me and the local news.”

“But you have something to do in the morning.”

“Yeah. And you have me so twisted up I'm thinking of skipping it.”

She twisted him up? That shouldn't delight her as much as it did.

“I can't skip it. Won't. But that means staying in town. A move that's obviously risky for you.”

“You too, now that you're with me.”

He shrugged a shoulder as if any risk to him wasn't worth mentioning. “Why the train station?”

“Pardon?”

“Don’t play dumb,” he snapped. “You had a plan. The cabbie at the airport—the first time—he mentioned the train station.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I was going to ask a friend for a favor.”

“To hide you or get you on a train?”

“Both if necessary.”

“That’s likely burned now. Or will be shortly.”

“As soon as the authorities track down the cabbie.”

“Yup.”

“Should I warn my friend?”

“Does he know anything about why you might run away?”

“Nothing at all. I was taking pictures for him. He has an extensive personal collection of model trains.”

Thinking about it now, a chill slid down her spine. Most of those pictures were stored on the cloud, but she’d edited a few on her work computer during lunch. If whoever hacked her computer was after her, rather than Allie, the train station stash might very well be compromised. Good grief she was in a mess.

“Was that some line to get you into his apartment?”

“Well, it worked.” She was startled, and more than a little amused by the rigid set of his shoulders. “Are you jealous?”

“Yeah, I am.” He looked at her, a sheepish grin on his lips.
“How weird is that?”

“Pretty weird,” she teased. “You can relax. Arnold is almost eighty, still handsome as the devil though. The pictures were for his insurance company.”

“Uh-huh. What about after that?”

She knew what he was asking and she didn't want to answer. He could get her to her next destination, had promised to do so. The part of her that still hoped they could go their separate ways at that point was growing smaller with every moment she remained in his presence. Still, it wasn't fair to drag a good man into her bad situation.

“After the train station depended on which train was leaving first.”

“So you've planted stashes both north and south.”

“H-how can you know that?”

“It's not a big leap. You're smart, methodical, and it seems you've had time to think things through. You staged a kidnapping, knowing it wouldn't hold up long, but you didn't care because you only needed a short head start.”

She folded her arms. “You're right. Irritating,” she added, “but right.”

“The good news is I'm quicker on the uptake than the feds.”

“Feds? How did you leap to that conclusion?”

“Criminals dress well, but the subdued suits around your car screamed federal agent. They really don’t know how to blend in.”

She laughed, a moment made richer when he joined in. Her emotions were on the upswing, even though they had nowhere to spend the night.

“Which begs the question about why federal agents are the first on scene.”

And again with the diving emotions and disappointment. She should just throw her arms in the air and scream like she was riding Space Mountain in Disneyland. Instead, she swiveled in her seat. “How do you do that? How do you turn it off and on like a light switch?”

“What?”

“One minute you’re kissing me senseless and the next you’re completely analytic.”

Minutes, three long minutes according to the clock, went by with no answer. She should apologize for being emotional, for not understanding the game, but she couldn’t squeeze the words past the hard lump in her throat.

“I’m sorry.” Rick’s voice echoed the phrase circling through her mind. “Playing the happy couple seemed the safest bet.” His voice was cool, clinical. “I used—”

“I get it,” she interrupted. She’d scream if she had to listen to an explanation of how he used her obvious attraction to him.

“I get it,” she repeated, quieter. “The circumstances and situation are just crazy. I’m sorry I snapped at you.”

“It’s understandable.”

She didn’t want his understanding. Irrked with this new, contrary side of herself, she got them back on topic. “Since I’m out of near to town options, what’s your plan?”

“A cut-rate motel with outside entrances is our best bet. If I check in alone, there’s a chance we can get through the night.”

“That sounds safer and warmer than sleeping in the car.”

He slanted a look at her.

“What?”

“There is one place they’d never look. No cameras, complete privacy. We would definitely not be disturbed.”

“That sounds better. What’s the catch?”

“Do you have anything against cemeteries?”

Of all the things he might have said, that was completely unexpected. “You’re kidding.”

“No. There’s a chapel at one nearby that’s always unlocked.”

“You know this how?”

“I had family in this area.”

Had? He looked relaxed, but his voice was tight with emotion. Questions raced through her head. “Will *you* be okay if we stay there?”

“Honestly, I’d feel better than getting stuck in a more public area.”

“You’re the expert. Let’s do it your way.”

With a nod, it was settled and they were on their way.

Chapter 5

Rick couldn't believe he was doing this, but they needed a few hours undisturbed. He needed to put these pieces together. Not just the case he'd been sent to work out, but what the woman was doing to his senses.

He could have coached her into that scene at the garage, he didn't have to 'kiss her senseless' as she'd put it. She'd been so worried, so tense, and he'd given in to the temptation. Along with a curiosity about her that had plagued him since he'd started tailing her.

She was brave and stronger than she thought and she'd held steady during tonight's traumatic events despite her fear. As he turned into the cemetery where his wife was buried, he was about to find out just how much bravery he had left inside.

He drove down the road, his headlights cutting a narrow path through the heavy darkness. Tall trees along the lane made a canopy above them, blotting out any light from the moon. He turned at the sign, though he didn't need the direction. This was a route he knew by heart, having walked it every time he

was home on leave since getting word his wife had died in a car accident.

He parked to the side of the chapel building and doused the headlights. “Give me a second to get the flashlight out of the trunk.” And change the license plate, but she didn’t need to know that. Every Cypress Security car had a kit for times like this. He pulled back the lining and withdrew the optional plate. It wouldn’t hold up for long if they got stopped, but he felt it was necessary in case the current plate had been noted at the airport.

Popping the batteries into the lantern from the safety kit, he went around and opened Nicole’s door. “Ready?”

“If you are.”

“Sure.” The air was still, but cold. Or maybe it just felt colder since they weren’t running from anything right now.

His legs felt leaden and moved only because they knew the way. The heavy feeling didn’t fade once they were inside, though the air was warmer and the scent of lemon oil and wax offered a familiar comfort.

“I recommend up front. It will be warmer and have less of a draft.”

She murmured her agreement and walked up the short aisle.

He paused, noting the changes since his last visit. There was a fresh bouquet of flowers on the stone floor in front of the altar and someone had installed lighting that glowed softly from sconces on either side.

He cut across to a utility closet and used the lantern to find what he was looking for, hoping the supplies were still there. Finding the pillow and blanket tucked away, he pulled them out and handed both to Nicole.

“Bedding? In a chapel?” The incredulity was clear enough in her voice.

He cleared the lump out of his throat. “It’s better than the hard floor. The priest who maintains the chapel...” His blood felt like molasses slogging through his veins. This was a mistake, but he was too tired and it was too late to find an alternative now. “He, ah, started leaving them for me a few years back.”

“Thoughtful.”

“Yeah. Get comfortable and try to sleep. We’ll leave early, before the groundskeepers and caretakers come in.”

“You’re sure no one will find us?”

“We’re as safe as we can be tonight. I’ll check the doors and keep watch.” He stepped back before he touched her again. “Sleep well, Nicole.”

He didn’t think there was much chance they’d be discovered, much less disturbed here, but he refused to take chances. Outside, he gathered dry leaves and small stones to make sound traps at both doors.

With nothing left to do, he settled near the main door. Pushing his backpack under his head for a pillow, he removed the pistol from his back and tucked it by his hip.

Sleep didn't come easy, but he didn't expect it to. The energy was different with Nicole in the chapel, a place that had been his private retreat for so many years. It was here that he could face his guilt head on, knowing he'd taken his wife and their future for granted. His visits here were a penance of sorts. The only way he knew to honor a woman who'd given him nothing but love and grace only to be snatched out of his grasp when her car had spun out on an icy bridge one winter while he'd been on some mission he couldn't even recall now.

Her parents had never forgiven him for letting her die alone in a sterile ICU. He'd taken the verbal beat down like the stoic, capable soldier he was, understanding the grief behind the terrible words.

He'd been shut out of the funeral services, told in no uncertain terms that his eleven short months as a husband didn't give him any say in the matter. The photos of the accident scene were his only connection to the tragedy. The only way to comprehend the full scope of his loss.

As a spectator, he understood how right they'd been and vowed never to repeat such a dreadful mistake. His career, the inevitable sacrifices involved, wasn't conducive to real relationships.

Whispering an apology into the cold air, he turned his thoughts to the case. Events up until the fire were pretty cut and dried. And he expected tomorrow's meeting at the bank to confirm the general consensus that Cypress Security's most recent client had duped them somehow.

It seemed that was as far as his thoughts would go without returning to Nicole. Nothing they knew tied her to the trouble at the pharmaceutical company. The clean background and the suits crawling over her car raised all kinds of red flags. He never really believed she was an identity thief, but he wasn't sure he wanted to go head to head with WITSEC. Federal marshals were a tough, determined breed.

He pulled out his phone and sent an email to Eva, detailing the last couple of hours and asking her to see what she could find using what they already had on Nicole. The woman was a computer genius and without the boss's connections would probably be doing time for hacking. He wished he'd thought to get a fingerprint while he was tailing Nicole. There was no way to do it now without completely destroying the paper thin trust she'd extended.

He listened, wondering if he could go pull a fingerprint from the car while she slept, but he heard the pew creak as she changed position again. Not worth the risk.

Rick slowed his own breath to a meditative rate and silently vowed that by this time tomorrow their accommodations would be much different.

* * *

The soft glow of the sconces over the altar made it hard to tell for sure, but as she came awake, Nicole thought dawn had to be close. The pew made for a hard bed, but there was something wonderfully soothing about safety.

She actually felt refreshed, more than a little shocking, all things considered. Her contentment evaporated at the sound of a distressed moan.

“Rick?” Had she actually slept through an attack or was it a problem that had woken her? She whispered his name again, too afraid to shout, but the only reply was another moan.

The sound came from the direction of the front door, where Rick said he’d be keeping watch. Maybe he was ill.

Paranoid, she quietly rolled off the pew to her hands and knees. On sweaty palms, she crawled to Rick’s position. Nothing seemed out of place, though in the poor light by the door, it was hard to tell.

“Rick?” She crept closer, halting when he twitched, twisted, and groaned. Had to be a nightmare. Poor guy. She’d bet the last of her stashed money it was related to why he knew this place so well.

If she’d told him the truth, he might have opted for a solution that didn’t torture him. Guilt heavy on her shoulders, she went back to the pew for the blanket and pillow.

Refusing to overanalyze her motives, she curled up beside him—the side without the gun—and covered them both with the blanket. Gently, cautiously, she laid one hand over his heart, praying it wouldn’t make things worse.

He went still so quickly she thought he must be awake, but when she peeked up at his face, his eyes were closed.

Taking it as a good sign, she let herself sink into the warm, woodsy scent that was particular to this man. It was a detail she shouldn't know or even be interested in. She was supposed to be looking for the right moment to break away from him and return to her own agenda. Without the car keys she couldn't get far anyway, she rationalized, and she knew any attempt to go through his pockets would fail.

He remained calm, resting quietly until an alarm sounded. The soft chime would never be enough to rouse her from a solid sleep, but it brought Rick to an awake and alert state immediately. He sat up, scrubbed at the stubble shadowing his chin, and looked down at her. "What's wrong?"

She didn't have time to ease away to a respectable distance or come up with a plausible reason for being so close to him. "Sorry. I had a nightmare," she improvised.

"I had the gun right here."

"I saw it. I was careful."

Rick rolled to his feet, tucking the pistol at his back in one fluid motion. "Don't do that. Don't take that risk again, okay?"

She nodded, if only to move on to a different topic. He looked scared, his eyes wide and his face pale. "But nothing bad happened. We're all right."

He glanced around. "Yeah." He pushed a hand through his short hair, making it stand on end. She wanted to smooth his hair as well as his frayed nerves, but she felt like she was walking on cracking ice already. "Thank you for a decent

night's sleep. What time is your appointment?" She busied herself with folding the blanket, giving him a moment to regain his composure.

"You're welcome. Here," he reached for the blanket and pillow, "I'll put them back."

She looked toward the altar and found a prayer whispering through her mind. A prayer for Rick. Whatever haunted him, a poor choice of words in a cemetery, she prayed he'd be free of it. She might have only known him for a few hours, but it was obvious to her he was one of the good guys no matter how bossy or interfering.

"Ready? There's a truck stop close by and the owner can help us out."

"Do you mind?" She lifted her camera. "Please? I'll understand if you say no."

His head tipped to the side, he studied her for a long moment. She had no idea what he saw, but he shrugged a shoulder. "Go ahead. I'll be in the car."

When she joined him a few minutes later, the car was warm and the windshield clear, but frost still coated the side windows.

"Better than a dark tint for as long as it holds."

She agreed, peering up at the heavy gray clouds. "Looks like snow."

"Does that mean you'd like to go south when I'm done at the bank?"

“This place is gorgeous,” she said, pointedly ignoring him. The manicured lawns glowed with the heavy frost in the early morning light. It felt so peaceful, so tranquil here. Again she wondered why Rick visited frequently enough to rate his own blanket and pillow if the place only made him hurt and gave him nightmares. She wondered if he knew how restless he’d been.

“You’ll have to give me directions at some point,” he said, breaking the silence.

“I know.” She squirmed in her seat, wondering how much further until they reached the truck stop he considered safe.

“Not much longer,” he said, pointing to a massive sign advertising low fuel prices and excellent food. “I know the owner and called ahead, so he’s waiting. He’ll help us out, no questions asked, and erase any video if it becomes an issue.”

She trembled, a reaction that had nothing to do with the cold and they both knew it.

“After the bank, you need to tell me who you’re running from.”

She tugged her upper lip. It would be so easy to spill everything. And what a relief it would be to tell someone her side of the story. She got the feeling Rick wouldn’t judge. He might even be on her side.

Until he realized knowing her whole story could ruin his life or even get him killed.

“Here we go,” he said, driving around a gleaming service station and parking in a reserved spot near the back door. “Out of the car, straight up the stairs, make yourself at home.”

“You’re not coming in?”

“I’m going to top off the tank first. Go on.” His expression was mild, but she knew there was no point in arguing and honestly, she needed a bathroom in the worst way.

Chapter 6

Rick watched until she was safely in the apartment before he sent a text to his buddy inside. In less than thirty seconds, one of Bart's employees came outside and sat on the steps to keep watch.

He felt like he was making progress with Nicole, but he didn't feel like pushing his luck.

Once the gas tank was full, he parked again at the reserved spot and then went in the store to see his old buddy.

Karl Bartholomew was a bear of a man who'd been both mentor and friend on many an operation until a rough landing on a routine Airborne training exercise ended his military career. He'd packed it in and bought this place, turning it into one of the busiest hubs on Interstate 95.

"You look rough, man," Bart said with a one armed hug. "Got what you need?" He held out a mug of coffee, Bart's personal blend: hot and strong.

"Getting there. Thanks for the assist."

“Anytime.” Bart rested his beefy forearms on the counter.
“How’s Eva?”

“The same.”

Bart’s notoriously big laughter boomed through the space.
“Thanks for the warning. Stock up on anything and everything and I’ll invoice the office.”

Rick dared another sip of the coffee. It burned away the cobwebs of a restless night. “If your guy is good out there, I’ll just send a quick report and grab a shower down here.”

“My place is nicer.”

“I know.”

Bart held up his hands in surrender. “It’s your business.”

Rick refused to voice any of his concerns. He didn’t even know what they were. Job first, feelings second. The theory had carried him safely through many dangerous missions.

“You get any federal types through here?”

Bart narrowed his gaze. “DEA mostly. I’m on a thoroughfare, y’know. That a problem for you?”

“No.” Rick wanted to rub at the tension behind his eyes, but kept his hands quiet on the mug. “Marshals maybe.”

“Shit,” Bart hissed. “You sure?”

Rick gave a one shoulder shrug. It didn’t matter what you thought of the people involved, if you stuck with the facts you got done with a job faster and with more accuracy. He wished

like hell Nicole would give him the facts. “Any new reports on her?”

“Not yet.”

Well that was something. He pulled out his iPad. “Need to send these details up the line.”

“Paperwork will kill us all,” Bart said, refilling the coffee mug. “Except Eva.”

Rick sent an email to his boss about the case he’d been sent here to support. His investigation on that front was all but done since he expected to find just what they were looking for at the bank this morning. He got on a roll theorizing the current case and found himself postulating about Nicole’s situation. Damn, but he was tired. He deleted it and simplified the message.

“You have a problem. Identification is assumed, based on location of the body. Extensive damage to face and hands means official ID is pending. Will have lobby security report by mid-morning.”

“Busy night. The friend is safe after fire in building. Interview pending.”

He sent the message and checked the time. He wanted Nicole to have space enough to clean up and relax, but if he stayed away too long, she’d probably worry. Or, more likely, she’d try to escape with one of the many truckers out there getting an early start. Well, that was why he’d asked for the kid to sit on the steps and keep watch.

His only encouragement that she might plan to stick with him awhile longer was that she hadn't taken a picture of him yet. Her camera seemed to be her visual journal, a way to affirm her life experiences. It also gave her a pretty good shield as well as better access more than half the time.

And none of that mattered if they didn't keep moving away from whatever had her so scared.

Tipping back the last of his coffee, he left the mug on the counter. He headed for the showers, grabbing some clean clothes along the way. Two minutes later he was back in the store, pulling a few items for Nicole.

“Want me to send up some food?”

Rick accepted Bart's offer with a nod and a wave. Better to keep her out of sight. On that thought, he took a quick turn through the two racks of fishing gear. Gotta love Bart for keeping his income options open. The store was indeed on a thoroughfare.

* * *

Nicole peeked out the window again. The car was there, but so was that kid on the steps. How long was his break anyway?

She'd taken a shower, pleased to see nothing was bleeding, though the gauze had fallen off the bite on her collar bone. The butterfly strips were doing their job, so she managed to take care of herself without 'death by countertop' as Rick had put it the other day.

Not the other day. Just hours ago.

She felt weary enough to have been on the run for weeks already. It wasn't the rough night or even the clothes she was getting sick of putting back on. It was the emotional energy drain from the constant fear that her escape hatch would slam shut before she could squeeze through.

Surely even rumped, she could convince one of the truckers to take her to her next emergency way-point. Just as she was readying her camera, determined to talk her way past the kid on the steps, she saw Rick. In her head, she heard the slam of a door even as he walked into the apartment. Her chance was gone.

"Looks like I'm right on time," he said, with a nod for the camera in her hand.

She tucked it away, feeling caught. Trapped. "You told that kid to sit there."

"I did." He dumped the things in his arms onto a chair. "North or south?"

"None of your business."

"Yet."

She rolled her eyes.

"If you go now, you'll miss the best breakfast of your life."

She fumed in silence, wondering when she'd get another chance to get away. "Whatever."

"Were you ever in theater as a kid?"

“Not really.” Her life was one big acting job. Spending more of her time playing pretend didn’t hold much appeal. “Why?”

“I thought maybe you’d like to go to the bank meeting as a male photographer.”

A knock on the door halted her reply. She jumped, startled, while he simply answered it and thanked the person on the other side.

When he turned, she nearly drooled at the divine scents coming from the covered plates on the tray. “Oh, my. If it’s half as good as it smells...”

“It’s better.” He grinned, making her want to drool for a completely different reason.

She watched him serve, clearly as familiar with the kitchen they were borrowing as if he lived here. But the food, and her rumbling stomach, eclipsed her need for information.

From the first bite of fluffy pancake to the perfectly fried eggs to the crisp bacon, she thought she might prefer to freeze-frame life right here. If only every day could start like this.

“Can you cook like this?”

He shook his head.

“Too bad. I would’ve stayed with you forever.”

“Maybe I’ll have Bart teach me.”

She paused in the process of savoring another bite of egg. He couldn’t be flirting, could he? And if he was, he couldn’t be serious. The happy little kick in her pulse voted yes, but she

didn't trust it. When she'd managed to swallow, she glanced around the apartment. "Bart's single?"

Rick's expression sobered. "Don't go there." He pushed his plate away and sipped at his coffee. "On second thought." He stared into the cup as if it held all of life's secrets. "If you can get him to open up, you might be able to uncover the mystery of his superb coffee."

"The man *is* gifted," she agreed. "But assuming I could get in his kitchen—so to speak—I'm sure I'd feel too loyal to just hand over the secrets."

Rick's hearty laughter shocked her. The sound was richer than chocolate and far more satisfying. She wished for her camera to catch his mood and the pure happiness on his face.

"I can't wait to introduce you."

"How did you meet him?"

The laughter faded, but the warm, open expression remained. "We served together in the Army."

"Mmm-hmm." Expecting more, she waited, and was disappointed when he changed the subject.

"I need to get to the bank to visit with security for Allie's case."

"You're looking for something that will help her, right?"

He nodded. "My only other obligation to her case is you. Making sure you're safe."

“Uh-huh.” They’d been over this. As much as she wanted to explore this attraction she felt for him, she didn’t want to wreck his world.

“I meant it when I said I’d like to help you. Just give me enough information.”

She waved off his offer. “I’ll be fine on my own.”

“I’d like to believe that.”

“But you don’t trust me.”

“No. I don’t trust you—”

The front door burst open and a massive man stormed in. Nicole found herself shielded by Rick, who was suddenly pointing a weapon at the intruder.

“Stand down.”

“Bart. What the hell?”

She peeked at the giant over Rick’s shoulder. “That’s Bart?”

“Yes. Bart, Nicole Livingston.”

Bart swore and immediately apologized. “You are always mixed up in the worst sh— crap.”

“What’s going on?”

“The police scanners just announced a BOLO on your girl there and the morning news anchor says she’s now suspected of starting two fires last night.”

“That’s impossible. We were dodging the feds last night.”

“I’m on your side, man. There’s more. The second fire took down a known gang house and cocaine is missing. DEA will be crawling into everything around here within the hour.”

“He knows I’m out here.” Nicole slumped into the chair. “He knows.”

Both men turned to her. “Who?”

“I have to get out of here. You have to let me go and stay away. Please.” She hated begging. It never helped. Not when her mom and sister were dying. Not when she met with attorneys who refused to bring the case to trial.

Escape was her only option. “You have to let me do this my way.”

Rick dropped into a crouch, his hands resting lightly on her knees. “Tell me.”

“I can’t.” She shook her head, her mouth pulled into one tense, despondent line. “They’ll hurt you too.”

Bart stepped up behind Rick. “They can try, but I’ve bet my life—more than once—on this man’s skills.”

She looked from Bart to Rick; saw the same determination on both stern faces. “Why will the DEA be here within the hour?”

“I’m a thoroughfare,” Bart said.

“You deal drugs?”

“No,” Bart said with a snarl. “But I have a good eye for who’s probably transporting. It’s the coffee. Keeps everyone

coming back. Being a busy stop twenty-four-seven gives bad guys a sense of anonymity.”

“They’d be wrong,” Rick said.

“Very wrong.” Bart nodded emphatically. “Which is why the DEA hangs out frequently. That and the coffee.”

“It’s good coffee,” she said, relaxing a fraction. “The transporters don’t get scared off by the DEA?”

“There’s a certain cocky pride in running something right underneath the noses of the law,” Bart explained. “They don’t usually bust anyone here anyway.”

Nicole knew one particular DEA agent wouldn’t hesitate to bust her no matter when or where he found her. The gang house had burned and the drugs went missing because his team could pin a convincing motive on her. They’d probably even offer up a believable reason as to why she burned down her apartment building. He was closing in and he wanted her to know it.

“He knows.” She dropped her head into her hands.

“Who?”

“You wouldn’t believe me even if I could tell you.”

“Nicole.”

“You just said you didn’t trust me.”

Rick floundered. “What?”

“Just as he burst in.” She flicked a hand at Bart.

Rick sighed. “I was about to say I didn’t trust you to *stay put*.”

“Oh.”

He really should look somewhere other than her lips if he didn’t want to embarrass them both in front of Bart. Her eyes, wide and dark and miserable, weren’t any less of a temptation. He wanted to erase the misery, to fix this for her. He wanted to see her dazed with passion, like she’d been in that brief moment at the airport.

“Tell me enough to help you.”

“There’s a DEA agent who thinks he’s above the law. I can identify him. He might work with an arsonist.”

“They work in this area?”

“Not when...” Her eyes full of tears, she swallowed hard. “When this started,” she finished, gathering herself.

“You were relocated.” Obviously. “And you think the agent or the arsonist has found you.”

She gave a jerky nod.

“I’d keep her safe while you’re taking care of Cypress Security business, but sneaking her out when you’re done would be damn near impossible if she’s got a rogue agent on her tail.”

Rick patted her knees and stood, but Nicole was staring at some remembered horror he couldn’t see and she wasn’t ready to share. “Got anyone around here with her shoe size? I’ve got

a disguise, but those boots will wreck it. I'm thinking work boots, but I'd settle for running shoes."

"What kind of disguise?"

"Cameraman—emphasis on the 'man'. I picked up a fishing vest and hat downstairs."

"Well, hell. If you need guy clothes, let's raid Kyle's closet. My son," Bart said for Nicole's benefit. "Come on back."

Rick tugged on her hand, concerned by her reluctance. He recognized a person on the verge of giving in to the situation. "Don't give up yet and don't worry. Kyle's got decent fashion sense. For a guy."

Her shoulders hitched in either a laugh or a sob. "Does he have long hair?"

"Yes," Bart said with frank paternal exasperation. "He also has quite a collection of ball caps."

"What a relief," she muttered.

"I see what he's thinking." Watching Bart pull out his son's clothes, Rick had a surge of hope that dressing her like a guy might actually work. "If the jeans fit." The jeans she had on showed off the luscious curves of her hips and thighs and wouldn't convince anyone she was a man.

"Yeah, that's our biggest worry."

Rick saw she'd changed her tune when she came out of the bathroom, her curves subdued by a t-shirt, oversized oxford, and loose-cut jeans with a wide belt. It was more than a little

disconcerting that the disguise hadn't muted his attraction one bit.

"Here they are," Bart came up from the closet with a like-new pair of leather deck shoes. "He outgrew these within the first month."

"How old is your son?"

"Thirteen," Bart said with pride. "Do a man's ponytail on the hair and you can pull this off. Especially with a ball cap." He handed one over while Nicole secured her long hair with several bands spaced every few inches.

"Right."

"We only need to fool strangers and only in the short term." Unless... Why hadn't he thought of this wrinkle earlier? "You don't bank where the company banks do you?"

She shook her head.

Well, thank God for small favors. One potential disaster averted today. Maybe luck was turning in their favor.

"Which one of us will carry my purse?"

The cell phone clipped to Bart's hip went off and he mouthed 'book bag' and pointed at the closet as he answered. He listened for a minute, said thanks, and hung up. "DEA just arrived."

"And we're just leaving."

Nicole froze, looking as startled and panicked as a deer in front of a speeding Mack truck.

He gripped her shoulder. “Cram your purse in the book bag,” he directed. Turning to Bart he reached out and shook the man’s beefy hand. “I owe you.”

“We’ll settle up one day.”

Rick gave a nod, and the three of them left the apartment, Nicole between Bart and Rick.

The reserved parking space left the car out of view of anyone in the store and Rick and Nicole were soon just one more sedan at the busiest station in the area.

“God bless Bart’s capitalist heart,” Rick said, earning a chuckle from Nicole. “Want me to call you Nick while you’re a guy?”

“Not really.”

“Sal? Kevin? Gregory?”

“Stop,” she said between snorts of laughter. “Why are you so determined to make me laugh?”

Because your face lights up, he thought. “It’s a stress reliever. You need an outlet.” Kissing was another outlet, but he wasn’t going back to that tactic without a clear invitation.

“Anything I need to know about this appointment?”

There was no reason to hide it and maybe granting a bit of trust would earn some in return. “We’re meeting with the security department to review video and confirm Bradley Roberts is alive.”

“Who thinks he’s dead?”

“Local police found a body in his house, assumed it was Roberts and based on what I’m sure is a fabricated witness, they’re looking to pin the murder on Allie.”

“Bastard.”

“Nice. You’re talking like a guy. Kind of.” Her voice would be a problem. “When we get there, just shake hands and nod when I introduce you as part of the team.”

“Okay. Do I have a title?”

“Trainee.” He didn’t have to look to know she rolled her eyes. “It gives you a reason to shut up and observe.”

When she didn’t answer he glanced over. Her lips were pressed together and she was staring at him with unwavering focus. He shook his head. “You can be yourself until we get to the bank.”

“Whew. Thanks.”

Questions moved through his mind like they were on a conveyer belt set to maximum speed. Not one of them related to the case he’d been sent to investigate. He wouldn’t let the team down, but once they were done at the bank, he intended to add Nicole’s specific concerns to the case load. If she’d share them. He knew in his gut she needed all the resources his team could provide.

That was their mission statement after all: finding solutions to difficult problems for people who preferred to avoid direct law enforcement involvement.

Local police departments couldn't be expected to handle something like a rogue DEA agent. Gang task forces could make a big difference, but he had to assume Nicole's situation wasn't typical gang activity.

He shook his head. She was running from one federal agency who only wanted to keep her hidden from a bad guy in a different federal agency who was likely riding high on kickbacks from a powerful gang leader.

And she expected to survive?

“What? What are you thinking?”

“That you're either the craziest woman I've met or the bravest.”

“That's not very reassuring, considering I'm trying to be a guy.”

Nicole smiled, pleased she'd gotten a laugh out of him. Her own nerves were fraying with every passing moment as they drove into town. She rubbed her palms on the jeans as her mind raced through myriad possible disasters.

The bank was too close to the office. Someone would surely recognize her, no matter the clothing. Her face had been plastered all over the television networks. A teller with a criminal justice bent might be on the lookout and find the hat suspicious. *Or think I'm a potential bank robber.*

“What if my hat comes off?” She had this bizarre image of someone purposely knocking her down just for the potential reward.

“You put it back on.”

“Ha ha.”

“I’m serious. The more casual you are, the more confident you are, the better. Who’s to say you aren’t transgender? Then, instead of being the guilty party, suddenly you have a case for discrimination.”

She stewed on that, thinking of how guys moved, how they seemed to just shrug everything off. “Do guys ever stress out at all?”

Rick’s long, irritated look was an answer in itself.

“Are you stressing about this?”

His hands flexed on the steering wheel.

“So you agree that this is risky.” It was dumb, but she felt validated, taking his continued silence as some sort of affirmation. “Maybe I should just wait in the car. Or grab a coffee while you do your thing.”

“That might get uncomfortable. If you wait in the car, it will be locked in the trunk.”

She chuckled, certain he was kidding. “That’s actually not a big threat. They install those safety release thingies now.”

“They can be removed.”

What? She studied him. The clenched jaw, white knuckles. He was serious. Which could only mean she was testing his patience again. “You wouldn’t do that. Besides I won’t go quietly and you don’t want to make a scene.”

“Ways around that too,” he muttered, pulling into the parking garage under the bank. He parked in a space reserved for the security team. “We stay together. End of discussion.”

She nodded. Words weren’t possible under the weight of that dark, determined glare.

“I’m here to review the video feed and identify Bradley Roberts. If you see him and think I’ve missed him, cross your arms.”

Her throat was sandpaper.

“Got it?”

“Yes,” she rasped.

“You’re Nick Lazlo and you’re training with Cypress Security.”

“Okay.” If he meant this as a pep talk, it needed work. Her nerves were jumping as she imagined increasingly dire scenarios. “What if I see someone else?”

“Tap my shoulder twice and look in the opposite direction.” He gripped her shoulder. “We’ll be fine. No one will be looking for you here, especially not dressed as you are. Forget Nicole for the next half hour and just be Nick Lazlo.”

“Channel my inner dude.”

For a second, she thought Rick would lock her in the trunk after all.

“Remember high school?”

“Yeah.”

“There had to be a rock star athlete or musician you crushed on. It’s a rite of passage for teenage girls. This is your chance to walk in his shoes.”

“Oh.” Immediately she had a clear picture. The confidence. The swagger. She felt the smirk creep onto her face. “Got it. You’re good.”

“It’s a gift.”

Chapter 7

She worked the sly, masculine confidence as they entered the bank and got through the introductions. Rick's assertiveness and professionalism impressed her. The bank's chief of security was no slouch, but there was some kindred spirit respect thing happening, at least from her perspective as a woman trying to be one of the guys.

They watched video from the dates Rick requested. She recognized Mr. Roberts and crossed her arms, though she didn't know how Rick could see the move since she was positioned slightly behind him.

He made a few notes on his phone and sent an email. After a few minutes talking shop, the security chief escorted them back down to the lobby.

Through the wall of glass facing the street, Nicole recognized the federal marshals assigned to maintaining her secret life, heading toward her office building. She tugged on her cap, and debated how to tap Rick's shoulder without looking like an idiot or embarrassing them both. Should she

fake a call from the office? No way she could pull off a convincing man's voice for more than a word or two.

Fighting the anxiety, she thought guy thoughts. Zero stress, confidence, and swagger thoughts.

They might be looking for her, but she knew from experience they couldn't see into the bank from the street. And they'd never expect her to be dressed like this. Her pulse steadied. Didn't matter what they might tell her boss or anyone else. She was leaving Nicole Livingston's life behind.

With another firm handshake and a nod, she matched Rick's pace as they left the bank.

"Will that help Allie?" she whispered when they were in the car.

"Sure." Rick started the car, but didn't put it into gear. "I'd like to get that picture of Roberts by the fountain to my boss as well."

"Of course," she said with a nod, biting back the plea to get them out of here. "Want me to drive?"

"I want you to tell me what happened."

How did he know anything had happened?

"Don't be coy," he pressed when she didn't answer. "Is there a threat out there?" He jerked a thumb at the street.

"No. Maybe?" She took a deep breath. "The marshals assigned to me were walking by. I'm sure they're just trying to track me down."

“I’m sure.” He put the car in reverse and backed out of the space. “They probably won’t recognize you.”

“It took me a second, but I remembered that when we were in the bank.”

“You tensed up, but I don’t think the security chief noticed.”

She laughed at herself. “I nearly tapped your shoulder but thought that would look more suspicious than waiting it out.”

He pulled out into the bright daylight and joined the rest of rush hour traffic. The clear morning underscored her decision to make a fresh start. When the bank was a few blocks behind them, she removed the ball cap.

“Not quite yet,” Rick said.

She tugged the hat back in place, then swiveled in her seat, wondering who was following them. “What’s wrong? Who is it?”

“It would be nice if you’d tell me.” He raised a hand when she started to protest. “Before we get to that, we’re going by the apartment building.”

“Why?”

“I want to look around.”

She hunched down into the seat, her bravado and confidence fading away. “I thought you planned to get the preliminary report some other way.”

“I do. But if your marshals are hanging around your office we should be all clear to do a walk-through there.”

It was pointless to argue. She'd learned when Rick dug in, he was immovable. "What about the kid with the knife?"

"You know of any reason he'd be after my trainee?"

"Funny."

"No one knows, but my real dream is to be a comedian."

"Spare me."

"The only way to get out of my admittedly terrible amateur routine is to tell me about this guy you think has found you."

She clenched her teeth and clamped her lips together. The urge to spill it all—the good, the bad, and the gory—was unbelievably strong. She didn't know this man. *Only his actions*, that little voice deep inside her mind whispered. It sounded remarkably like her mother: kind, direct, and true as a compass.

He'd been helpful and steady, if a bit unorthodox at times. Without him, she might have walked into a trap at the train station. Her picture was out there and she didn't know how wide a net had been cast. Without Rick, the marshals might have reeled her in already. The idea made her stomach churn.

"Why are you so well known at that cemetery?"

"Even trade, is that it?" He shifted in the seat, obviously uncomfortable. She was sure he'd make some excuse, but instead he said, "My wife is buried there."

"You're a widower?" She slapped a hand to her mouth, wishing she could take it back. Could she be any more

insensitive? “Sorry.”

“No apology necessary from you.” He rolled his shoulders.
“Your turn.”

Where to start? The facts, she decided, determined to keep it simple and straightforward. “I witnessed a crime when I was in junior high.”

“Type of crime?”

“Murder.” *And arson.* One crime revelation at a time seemed like more than enough. Considering where they were headed and the allegations against her in the media, maybe she should’ve led with the arson. “When did your wife die?”

“While I was deployed.” He caught himself and glanced at her. “Or ‘when’ as in how long ago?”

She nodded.

“More than ten years. We weren’t even married a year.”

There was a wealth of bitterness in that matter-of-fact statement. She heard it because she understood it, had felt much the same when her life and family had been stolen from her.

She wished for her camera, though it would be rude. His face was unreadable as a stone mask, but the signs of pain and guilt were there. Might even be more obvious through the lens. She wanted to know more, starting with why and—

“Nicole?”

“Hmm?”

“It’s your turn. Did you know the murder victim?”

“Yes. He was my neighbor.”

“Did you know the murderer?”

“No. Weren’t we supposed to be taking turns?”

His grin was fast and unapologetic. “You caught me.”

“How long have you been doing this sort of thing?”

“What sort of thing?”

“Following people, gathering evidence, taking action despite resistance.”

“Long enough that it’s a habit.”

“Great.” He took the exit closest to her apartment—former apartment—and she blurted out the rest. “We had a rash of fires that summer. Small ones, big ones. They offered a reward and my friends and I considered ourselves detectives. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time when I saw the DEA agent execute my neighbor. I got away, but the next day I was suddenly a suspect in the arson investigation.”

“Nice stunt.”

“Not so much. My mom knew it wasn’t possible and I had an alibi for most of the dates, but even then I was a camera geek. I had pictures of the fire sites. They confiscated my camera and the pictures as evidence against me.” If she closed her eyes she could still see the arsonist’s signature at every scene. It was the last one that mocked her. She pulled away

from the pain of those memories, getting back to what Rick needed to know.

“It wasn’t until I mentioned the, ah, thing with my neighbor during questioning that things really changed.”

“You told the police you witnessed an execution?”

“Basically. I don’t think I phrased it that well.”

“And you’ve been in WITSEC ever since.”

“Yes,” she whispered. The pressure was back along with the guilt and the pain. Staring at the yawning tragedy that had been her apartment building, she wondered about Mrs. Beaumont, Oscar, and all the others she didn’t know by name. “If you drop me off, the marshals will pick me up. I just have to make a call.”

“Is that what you want?”

What she wanted never mattered much. She tipped up the bill of the cap and rubbed at the tension building in her temples. “If you step away from this situation, one way or another, this gets solved.”

“The good guys take you to a new life or the bad guys take you out, is that it?”

She nodded.

“I don’t think anyone’s ever chosen both literal and figurative death over me before. It’s a new low.” He sniffed at his shirt. “Is there a stench I don’t know about? I took a shower at the truck stop.”

“Stop it, you know what I mean.”

“What I know is you’re dressed like Nick Lazlo, my trainee. Which means I should put your ass to work. What I know is that I can return Nicole Livingston to the safety of the Federal Marshals at any time. Though you’ve worked damn hard in the recent hours to avoid that. What I know is you’re scared—with good reason—but I can help you.”

“Rick, that fire,” she pointed at the charred building, “was a message.”

“To you.”

“Yes, to me,” she agreed. “Last night I thought maybe I was just being paranoid, but when you add in the fire at the gang house and my name all over the news it becomes the logical conclusion.”

“One possible conclusion.” He pulled out his phone and sent a text. “Eva will steamroll her way through the red tape and get us the preliminary report on both fires as they come in. Grab your camera and let’s see what we can get from the scene. I don’t want to stay very long.”

“That’s a deal.”

“Finally.”

Ignoring the snark, she got out of the car with a smidge more enthusiasm. This place didn’t feel safe, despite the plethora of law enforcement milling about. Correction, the milling authorities meant it didn’t feel safe for *her*.

All of them had seen her picture, possibly taken statements from people like Mrs. Beaumont who wanted to do the right thing as a citizen and as Nicole's friend. Would the ball cap and boy jeans be enough?

"Relax, Nick. The fire's out." Rick pitched his voice so only she could hear it. "Start snapping that shutter already."

Easy for him to say, he didn't have two government agencies and a gang looking for him.

Behind the camera, she did relax, using the limited view of the lens as a filter between the harsh reality and her emotional reactions. She recorded the damage, one angle at a time. With every shot that didn't show that dreaded signature, her breath and heart rate settled closer to normal. She zoomed in and out, as different details caught her eye.

A discarded teddy bear near the breezeway drew her attention. Muddy and flattened by residents and firefighters, she immediately thought of the child who was missing it.

A child and family out of a home because of her. Where would they have Thanksgiving dinner? How long before they had a place to call their own again, or felt safe enough to celebrate the holidays?

"Let's go a little closer."

No. Closer meant more details she didn't think she could handle. Closer meant more risk. Her feet, in Kyle's shoes, felt like blocks of ice as she followed him.

Closer.

She heard him speaking—to her or other people, she couldn't be sure as the words didn't register. Keeping the camera trained on the building, she tagged along in his wake, adjusting her angle and focus, hoping she captured something that would help both of them.

They'd reached the side of the building where her apartment had been. The big oak tree in the courtyard, full of life and completely unharmed, was a sharp counterpoint to the melted, soot-covered siding of the building.

“You're thinking this is the spot?” Rick asked.

“It fits the information coming together,” came the weary reply.

It took tremendous energy just to breathe, to loosen her grip on the camera as the answers to Rick's many questions implicated her involvement in the blaze.

Swagger. Nick Lazlo wouldn't care about the answers pointing to Nicole. *Confidence.* Nick's life was under control. No one on either side of the law was searching for him.

Whatever story Rick had offered, the people at the scene were more than happy to cooperate with him. She should be soaking up everything possible. If she learned from his example, it could help her make adjustments as she developed her new life.

She listened more closely, realizing he was subtly telling her which pictures he wanted. Safety precautions kept them

outside, but she was able to zoom in on key places. Not perfect, but it would have to do.

“Have they picked up Livingston?”

“Not that I’ve heard. The police have her picture everywhere so it’s just a matter of time before they find her. Apparently she was a firebug as a juvie.”

Rick snorted. “Really? We could use a copy of that for our records.”

“Me too. One of the alphabet jackets mentioned it and I put in a request. We’ve got at least two other agencies poking around today trying to track her down. This woman’s a piece of work.”

“Must be to set the blaze in her own place.”

Nicole kept the ‘swagger-confidence-innocent man’ mantra cycling in her head. It kept her from screaming or otherwise blowing her cover. She focused her lens on the blackened area where her bedroom window had been, zooming in to get a closer look.

The fire had burned hot and fast here. From her limited experience, she guessed this was the flash point. Definitely an accelerant. She’d seen what lighter fluid could do when tossed into carpeting. If the fire had left anything of her front door, it would likely show no signs of a break in. She didn’t believe the arsonist, assuming it was the same disturbed man, had made that mistake.

“What’s the word on gangs around here?”

“In this neighborhood? No way.”

“Really?” Didn’t Rick know another reply? “I was sure I saw some gang color on the news footage. And there’s the alphabet soup hanging around. I just thought—”

“Well, it was an inferno. Those draw a big crowd.”

“Yeah. Just seemed like an odd place to stop and gawk if they didn’t have a dog in the fight so to speak.”

Go Rick! Anything that got people looking for a solution beyond her was a good thing.

She moved backward, letting him fuel the rumor mill while she did her best to document the fire’s trail through the building.

“DEA,” a deep voice said beside her. “Hand over the camera.”

She lowered the camera, but kept her finger on the shutter, capturing the guy’s face. It wasn’t the agent she feared most, but she worried he was nearby.

“No,” she said, coughing into her elbow and pulling the camera out of his reach. What cover had Rick offered? “Investigations.”

“Show me your credentials.”

“Over there.” She took a side step toward the building and the safety of Rick. “With my boss.” Like a boxer, she danced out of reach as the agent lunged for the camera strap.

Twisting free, she got another half step and screamed as he tackled her from behind. Her cap went flying as they landed and the baffled expression on the agent's face when he flipped her face up again made her panic. He realized he'd landed on a woman and in the next second, his eyes narrowed and lit with recognition.

"It's Liv—"

She cut off his cry of alarm with a knee to his groin. Squirming and shoving, she got free and rolled to her feet. "Help!"

But Rick was already on the way, cutting off the agent's partner en route.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded of the DEA agents. Handing Nicole her ball cap, he stepped up, shielding her from their view.

"That woman is a suspect," the man on the ground managed.

"Bull." Rick flashed a badge. "This *man* is my assistant. I want your names and contact information right now."

"Hand over the camera."

"Hell, no. We're with National Insurance. We've got as much right to be here as any of the other investigators. We have clients to protect."

While the agents blustered, he turned to Nicole. "Go on." He urged her toward the car, pressing the key into her hand.

Her heart pounded in her ears as she darted across the street, pressing the unlock button and wishing for a remote starter. Rick wasn't going to be able to talk his way out of this one. They would see through his identification and drop him into a legal stew.

My fault. My fault. My fault. The words haunted her as she threw herself into the car and her hands fumbled the key as she tried to start the engine. She had to get to him, give him a way to escape. Or drive away and hope they chased her.

Either way, if she didn't hurry, they'd arrest Rick. Irrevocably tied to her, his career would be over and possibly his life if the murderous DEA agent's streak continued.

Panic had her heart in a vise, tears blurred her vision, and she screamed when the driver's door opened.

"Scoot over."

Rick's voice. Calm, soothing. Glancing up into his face, absolute relief washed over her. She wouldn't have to figure out how to rescue him. She wouldn't have to feel guilty for running off without him.

"Now."

She moved, letting him slide behind the wheel. "You okay?"

"If okay includes terrified and cowardly," she confessed. "He knows it was me. God, I've screwed this up. It was stupid to think I could get away. Just take me back to the marshal's office."

"I convinced him he was mistaken."

“H-how?”

“Well, first I conceded your vague resemblance to the suspect. Then I pointed out the PR nightmare of an innocent trans employee being accosted by an overzealous agent with a bully complex. That kind of approach won’t win the hearts and minds of the general population. Assuming they care about that kind of thing.”

“Oh.” She might breathe normally again sometime before the turn of the century. “Thank you. I heard him say ‘DEA’ and then he reached for the camera and—”

“*Shh*. Take a breath. We’re not out of the woods yet. That crime scene is like a giant office water cooler. The rumors are ridiculous and most of them center on you.”

Chapter 8

Rick let that sink in while he called Eva and gave her an update so she could eventually verify the story he'd given the DEA agents.

“The lines I fed those two won't give us much of a head start. We need to dump the car and find a place to lay low.”

“Okay.”

“North or south?”

“South.”

Well that was progress, if small. Nicole's reaction only solidified his theory that the danger aimed at her was escalating. Her outright terror of the DEA agents worried him. She'd held strong through so much already, maybe she was just that close to the snapping point.

Her scream when he opened the car door had torn him up inside. She was deathly afraid of being found by the DEA agent who'd killed her neighbor. Obviously the federal prosecutors agreed with her assessment or they wouldn't have

hidden her with WITSEC. Since junior high. The mind boggled over the sacrifice of that kind of timing.

If she'd been safe for this long, how had they found her and why did they still want her dead?

"I'm sorry I didn't see the DEA team before they saw you."

"It's okay."

Her fragile voice was far from convincing. "Whatever it is, Nicole. Remember? I'm not leaving you to deal with it alone."

"You should," she whispered.

"Too late. You might as well tell me all of it."

She only stared out the window.

"How did he find you?"

Her head flopped back on the headrest and she closed her eyes. Several minutes went by and he thought maybe she'd dozed off. "I don't know," she said. "I've been so careful. Annoyingly careful."

There was a flash of temper in her voice now. Hearing it raised his hopes. Temper never went down easy and he wanted to believe Nicole still wanted to give her enemies a good, hard fight.

"I never drive more than four miles over the posted limit. No one gets to know the real me. I always know my provided background inside and out. My camera is usually between me and anything too interesting.

“You know they fought me on that. WITSEC, I mean.” She jerked against the seat belt so she could face him. “When they moved me when... the last time. They said I couldn’t keep the camera. They said I had to find a different hobby.”

“Why?” But he knew the answer.

“The whole reset button thing. Do you know how many people wish for a life reset button? It’s not nearly as cool as it sounds.”

“No.” He didn’t have to change his name when his wife died, but everything else had shifted. Other than his career, all of it still remained a little off, like a broken bone that never healed properly.

“I offered them stats about people and cameras. Hobbyists and professionals.” She sat back again, arms crossed over her chest. “Got a new camera out of the deal.”

“Congratulations?”

“It was better than the damned sketchbook they suggested.”

He laughed. Couldn’t stop it if he’d tried. He had a ridiculous image of her trying to sketch any one of the many shots on her camera.

“It’s two completely different mediums,” she ranted.

“I know.” He managed to catch his breath. “I get it.”

“He didn’t find me through the camera.”

Rick agreed. But there were plenty of other resources available to people with the right clearances, he thought as

they passed a traffic camera on the interstate. “You know that ‘taking action despite resistance’ thing I do?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m about to do it again.”

She twisted in her seat, looking for the threat.

“No one’s found us yet. I just want to keep it that way.” He noted the current mile marker and envisioned the new route in his mind. He couldn’t be sure exactly how far south they were going, but he’d feel better if they were going through less populated areas. And maybe, if he made it seem like a short detour, he could convince her to go see Allie.

“We’ll take the back roads, unless you have a better plan.”

“Works for me.”

“It would be more efficient if you’d tell me where we’re going.” He intended to loosely follow the railroad, based on her earlier determination to get to the train station. It made sense, if she’d taken the time to develop a plan, to create little caches along an easily accessible route like the railroad that connected Florida to Maine.

“What’s your favorite type of subject? To photograph,” he clarified. When he’d gone through the recent photos, it seemed like she had a thing for fountains and parks, but maybe that was just because the area was close at hand. She had been intent to the point of reverent in the chapel this morning.

“I’m pretty opportunistic. The composition matters more than the particular subject. Behind the lens I feel like myself.

It's more real. Inside the pictures I can see the world as the most real me would see it." She removed her hat and pulled her ponytail forward, taking out each band. "That sounds stupid."

"Not at all." He knew how it felt to flounder. Since losing his wife, he felt apart and alone unless he'd been on a mission with his team. Still, he couldn't imagine being forced to learn a new name, a new personal history, and to walk around essentially a stranger inside himself.

"Why do you ask?"

"Trying to find the connection. Why burn down your apartment unless there was something incriminating inside?"

"The photos or records of them?"

"Are they all on your personal computer?"

"Only while I'm editing. I use a cloud storage account and have a hard drive as back up."

One hand on the wheel, he drummed a random rhythm on his leg with the other. "Who knows that?"

"No one. Who would care enough to ask? Pictures for work I edit at work."

And that computer had been hacked. There had to be another piece. Sure, the corrupt DEA agent could point to Nicole as a firebug, hoping it would flush her out and trip her up, but how had he known where to find her?

“What if the fire at your apartment is related to Allie’s case and the agent who’s been after you just happened to catch the news?”

“Why would anyone at the company want to burn down my apartment?”

“Because your camera caught something it shouldn’t.” His instincts were humming. “I really need to get that photo of Roberts to my boss.”

“You’re implying Roberts had someone search my apartment and set the fire?”

“Yes.”

“Then why would the DEA try to snatch my camera?”

“Assuming they know nothing about Allie’s case, they were probably hoping you caught something to lead them to Nicole. To you.”

She picked up the camera and started scrolling through the pictures. “I can upload the SD card to the cloud and send pictures to any email address from there too. We just need to find a computer.”

“I’ve only got an iPad with me.”

She hummed. “That can work.” She glanced around. “In your backpack?”

He nodded, wondering what she was up to as she rummaged around behind the seat before settling back with his iPad in

hand. She turned it on and smiled at the screen lock. “Smart man. Can you unlock it while you’re driving?”

“Yeah.” He got it on the second try and handed it back to her. “Just don’t hack me or lock me out,” he teased.

“Not my area,” she said, clearly distracted.

He realized what she was doing, using the iPad camera to capture the image displayed on her camera, but he had no idea if it would work.

“Awesome!” She turned the iPad so he could see it.

“Great,” he agreed with a nod. The image of Roberts talking with the homeless man was crystal clear. “Email it to the Cypress Security addresses in my contacts list.”

“All of them?”

“Please.”

“Any message?”

“Just add the date the picture was taken.”

“Anything else?”

“Nope.” He wanted to let his boss know he had a new case, but he didn’t want Nicole sending that particular email. Eva was probably already on it. Knowing how tangled up their boss was over Allie, and how much Allie worried for Nicole, it wasn’t a big leap to conclude Rick would want to sort out Nicole’s troubles.

“All done.”

“Great. Thanks.” Now to ditch the car. It meant calling Eva again, but it couldn’t be helped. Between the DEA and the federal marshals he wanted to reduce the odds stacked up against them. Eva would give anyone who asked enough of a story to keep them busy, but that wasn’t any guarantee of long-term safety.

They were alone on a two-lane highway and not a traffic camera in sight. “Any chance you’ve got a car stashed on your escape route?”

She shook her head. “I planned to rent one at some point.”

He managed not to gawk at the volunteered information. More progress was a good thing. “Not with your own credit card?”

“No. I do have some common sense. The feds aren’t the only ones who can create an ID.”

He chuckled. “Think of the unemployed forgers if that were true.”

“An entire cottage industry down the drain,” she deadpanned. “Oh, the humanity.”

“A definite tragedy.” His mind spinning, anticipating Eva’s reaction to dumping the car, it took a moment to realize his phone was ringing. He put it on speaker, but signaled Nicole to stay quiet.

“Dreyer.”

“You have kicked over one nasty hornet’s nest.”

“How bad?”

“Bad. I’m fielding calls right and left here and none of them are of the low profile variety. Allie’s friend is trouble with a capital ‘T’.”

She’s *in* trouble. Rick bit back the instant retort along with the fierce need to defend Nicole.

“Rick?”

“Yeah.”

“I mean it. Be careful. This isn’t looking good for anyone.”

Her uncharacteristic worry fueled his worst suspicions. “I need to dump the car.” There was no good place on this rural route that immediately came to mind.

“Please don’t tell me that. Don’t *do* that. The paperwork’s a nightmare. Just get yourself back to the office, PDQ.”

“Fine. But if we’re tailed or worse, I’m blaming you.”

“Naturally. Wait. What does ‘we’ mean?”

“What it usually means.” He glanced at Nicole, but she was staring out the window, avoiding his gaze. “We’ll be on the back roads.” He disconnected the call as Eva launched into a tirade worthy of her passionate Italian ancestry.

“She’ll call back when she’s done being mad at me.”

“You two must have quite the work relationship.”

“Volatile or not, she’s the sort of person you want on your team.” It was taking considerable willpower to remember that right now.

The phone let out a shrill cry. He let it ring twice before declining the call. “Let her stew,” he grouched, irritated beyond all reason by Eva’s lousy attitude.

“She’s right about me. This is a nasty situation.”

“So help me, if you tell me to walk away again, I will pull over and dump you in the trunk. Unless you have someone else tucked away somewhere who can and will help you.”

Nicole raised her hands in surrender. “I told you to leave because I don’t want anyone else to get hurt because of me.”

For all his bluster, he clearly didn’t frighten her. Unfortunately. A little intimidation could be an asset in times like this. He was about to ask her to tell him the whole story when the phone rang again. He scowled at the caller ID before he answered. “You ready to help me?”

“You’re a stubborn, hard-headed—”

“All of that is old news, Eva. Give me something helpful here.”

“She’s with you.”

“Yes.”

Eva spat out an oath that didn’t need translated. “Take me off speaker.”

“No.” Having an audience wouldn’t deter Eva and he wanted Nicole to realize he trusted her.

“Clifton, Stephen R. of the DEA is throwing his weight around in pursuit of the alleged fugitive Nicole Livingston.

Wanted for arson, drug trafficking, and conspiracy.”

Nicole gasped.

“Told you it was ugly. Stay away from the office. Nothing personal, Ms. Livingston. I got a head’s up from a friend that the car registration was just researched and confirmed. You might claim to be with National Insurance, Rick, but they know you’re driving a car registered to Cypress Security.”

“Dammit.” He slammed his fist against the steering wheel.

“That’s putting it mildly. You got anywhere to hide?”

“I’ll think of something.” He had a couple of ideas. It all depended on whether or not they were already being tailed. “I need any pictures you can find of the gang house fire last night.”

“Okay.”

“Get me whatever you can dig up on Clifton and if his work history coincides with arson events. Big or small.”

“Do I want to know?”

“Probably not.” He didn’t have anything more solid than a nagging suspicion anyway. “I’ll let you know where we end up.”

“I have a place in—” Nicole blurted.

“Don’t say it,” Eva barked.

Rick cringed. Eva’s guarded behavior meant things were likely blowing up all over the place on her end. He looked at his passenger. “It’s clean?”

She nodded. “Yes,” she said for Eva’s benefit.

“Keep me posted on the alternate channel and for God’s sake don’t get caught. By anyone. I’ll coordinate with the boss and send what help I can when I can.”

The phone showed the call disconnect and the ensuing silence felt like the weight of the world pressing down on him. He reached out to caress Nicole’s shoulder, to offer comfort, but she jerked away.

“I’ll get you through this.”

“Clifton is his name?”

“You didn’t know?”

She shook her head. “They never told me. They never—” her voice hitched “—never brought the case to trial so I never heard his name.”

“But you can recognize him?”

“I’ll never forget his face. Or what he did.”

“They didn’t tell you who accused you of setting the fires when you were a kid?”

“Maybe my mother knew, but I was preoccupied with how I was screwing up everyone’s life. At that age I didn’t want to believe the required anonymity would last forever.”

Rick caught sight of a motorcycle in his rear view mirror closing in fast. He glanced down at the dash and kept his speed right at the limit.

“How many times have you been relocated?” Since leaving the Army and working with the investigations team, he’d learned kids were particularly hard to keep hidden. They didn’t mean to let things slip, but it happened.

“Once it was a bizarre chance meeting with an old friend in our new area. The second time it was a series of small fires.”

“With the signature?”

“I wasn’t told and I sure as hell didn’t go anywhere near them. The fires combined with an escalation of violent activity between local gangs worried WITSEC so they moved us anyway.”

The motorcycle blew past them, the driver leaning low into the wind. Any other day Rick might have considered the biker food for speed traps or something equally mundane. Today, the lone biker set off alarms in his head, despite the lack of gang colors or symbols.

“What kind of gang, Nicole? Where did you live when the execution and all of this started?”

He thought of the gang members he’d seen at the fire. They’d been near cars, and he’d been focused on Nicole. He didn’t recall any motorcycles.

“I don’t know gang names or habits, we didn’t have a big gang problem in my community. It was southern California. While I know gangs exist, I’ve never had a personal encounter.”

He swore. There had to be something he was missing. “Go through your pictures of the apartment. And check my iPad for emails from Eva.”

She started working with her camera. “What are you thinking?”

“Two arsonists.” He checked the rear view mirror again. Two headlights, but it wasn’t a car. A pair of motorcyclists rode side-by-side. “Two gangs.” As they crested a hill, he saw another motorcycle in the oncoming lane. Every instinct told him it was the same bike that passed them moments ago. “One very well-connected and determined rogue DEA agent.”

The two-lane highway didn’t give him much room to maneuver and the bikers had all the advantages. “Change of plans. Stow the camera and brace yourself.”

* * *

“Sir? We’ve lost her.”

“Obviously.” Clifton stared at the burned out apartment building, wondering if his quarry had finally snapped and staged an elaborate escape.

“Sir, she’s completely in the wind. There isn’t a sign of the vehicle since it left the interstate.”

“She’ll surface.” Clifton refused to look at the agent who’d tackled a nosy photographer only to discover Nicole Livingston, fugitive, in disguise. Whoever she’d conned into helping her was good, but the poor sap had no idea who and what they were up against.

Clifton didn't leave loose ends, but WITSEC had been particularly determined with this little girl. It didn't matter that the prosecutors had been shut down. In his line of work, with the transparency politicians were determined to offer, that could change with the next election or appointment. He couldn't get the official inquiry out of the system entirely and he didn't trust fate to keep the paperwork buried.

Years ago, he'd been offered a golden goose and he meant to cash it out at peak value. Or when things got too hot and forced him out of the game. It's why he'd kept tabs on the only witness who could tie him to a compromising event.

He'd tried everything to silence her. The repeated failure grated on his pride. When he'd managed to get a look at the limited evidence against him, he'd relaxed his search, realizing the case hinged on her word against his.

He'd kill himself before allowing the testimony of a then-thirteen-year-old to put him behind bars. Fortunately it wouldn't come to that. She could testify, but even jurors knew eye witnesses broke down all the time. Every year that passed tipped the odds in his favor if they did drag such a cold case into a courtroom.

Still, the *click* and *whir* of her camera shutter haunted him. Assuming those pictures had been developed, where had they gone?

His badge and his scowl got him into her charred apartment. He poked through the wreckage, opened cabinets, checked for

a fire safe. If she'd stored anything here, it was beyond salvation. He resented the sense of relief.

“She'll surface,” he repeated. He knew it as clearly as he knew the sun would rise tomorrow. People in nearly every level of government owed him favors. Not even her WITSEC handlers had been able to stop his media blitz and the suspicions he'd heaped on her head. And why would they? They needed her back as much as he did or risk their perfect record of keeping witnesses safe.

Technology and time were on his side. No such thing as privacy anymore with every building wired with video and cameras in almost every hand. Of course he had other assets in play as well. He checked his phone, anticipating an update any minute.

“This woman has caused me enough problems and jeopardized an operation we've worked on for years.” It was the line he fed anyone on his team who dared wonder why he monitored this particular ‘upright’ citizen. “We might not find what we need here.”

He picked his way back outside, careful not to scratch his custom eel skin shoes. “But she'll cooperate once she's in custody.” He checked the time on his phone. “Widen the search radius another fifty miles.”

“Yes, sir.”

Let her run, he thought. Let her try to slip through his fingers again. If, by some miracle, she survived the next few hours he'd silence her personally.

* * *

Rick stomped on the accelerator, praying for a break in the trees that hugged the road. “When the car stops, get under the dash and stay there.”

If Nicole gave an answer, the sharp rattle of gunfire across the trunk drowned her out. He jerked the wheel right, then back to the left, taking his half of the road out of the middle.

The first bike was nearly on him, riding the center line and playing chicken like a champ. Having a passenger meant Rick had more to lose if he miscalculated, but he also had weight and more metal on his side.

He let those details race through his mind, let the emotions ebb and flow on their own time as he zeroed in on the primary objective: getting Nicole out of this alive.

“Down!” he shouted as the oncoming biker raised a gun. Bullets marched up the hood in a menacing rush and took terrible bites out of the windshield. He held his line, forcing the bike to swerve or become a gory hood ornament.

His mind in tactical battle mode, he checked the mirror and gunned the engine, coordinating his move as they crossed a bridge.

He slammed the brakes and purposely fishtailed, sending the first biker into the cement rail. Dust from the road and smoke from the strain on the tires blurred his view of the other bikes as he straightened the wheel.

Another erratic burst of gunfire came from behind, but Rick had pulled to the shoulder. Shoving the gearshift to reverse, he bullied the protesting transmission and drove backward into the trees as far as he could go.

He cut the engine and readied his weapons as Nicole tucked herself into the relative safety under the dash. He'd defended worse positions down range and lived to never talk about them.

Ideally, he wanted one of the bikers alive enough to tell him about Clifton. Probably wouldn't go down that way, but it was better to think positively.

He heard the motorcycles rev as they closed in. Under that crotch-rocket whine he caught the sound of an agonized scream. So biker one was alive, but likely out of commission. He had to hope the guy was valuable enough to the gang that the other two would want to save him.

Rick eased open his door and slid to the ground, prepared for the inevitable attack. This crew was all urban if the bikes and weapons were any indication. He mentally crossed his fingers they expected him to behave like they would in his place. If he was lucky, that approach would make this as simple as a little extra target practice on a clear day.

* * *

Tucked under the dash, Nicole watched Rick methodically check his guns and roll out of the car. There was an eerie and lethal grace to his movements, as if he dealt with attacks like these every morning. It should probably frighten her. It didn't.

She tried to follow his calm example and breathe, but her heart hammering against her ribs made the exercise difficult. Her thoughts bounced around, riding the surge of adrenaline. She hoped he killed them all, and quickly, and she didn't feel the least bit guilty for wishing strangers dead. There was an odd clarity to be found in life-threatening situations and frankly, the experience was getting old. Memories of fires past and present flashed through her mind, interspersed with the images collected along the way as she'd repeatedly raced away from danger.

Her body quivered, cramped as it was between the dash and the front seat. The stiff carpet covering the floor was rough against her cheek and the bar to adjust the seat dug into her knee. The heat of the engine filled her nostrils, and she picked up the stale scent of spilled coffee and something else. Gasoline or oil, she couldn't decide, but it was starting to smell more like a machine shop and less like a normal vehicle.

Rick's phone shrilled with an incoming call and she struggled to reach it where it had landed under the seat. Her fingers found a straw wrapper and a pencil before finally securing his phone.

Gunfire blasted and the car shuddered under the abuse. A different gun sounded, quieter but no less lethal. She looked at the supporting structure under the seat and a rare fury bubbled up inside. No way in hell would her last view of this world be so confined, so ordinary.

She twisted around, smacking her head against the dash when another burst of gunfire raked the car. Her fingers fumbled with the door handle, but she got it open and pushed their bags out ahead of her. She waited until she heard Rick's gun and slithered out of the car, staying low.

The damp ground was slick with leaves and they stuck to her hands as she slipped and scrambled deeper into the cover of the trees, dragging their backpacks along with her.

It wouldn't be a hard trail to follow, but she convinced herself Rick would be the only one able to do so.

Maybe it was being out in the open and the fresh air clearing her head, but the intense battle seemed quieter and slower somehow. A motorcycle eased into her limited view, the muzzle of the gun flashing near the rider's hip.

She saw Rick stand up, his arms stretched forward, gun leveled on the biker.

There was a scream, probably hers, as the bike stood on end, pitching the rider up into the air. Rider, bike, and gun went in different directions, but she didn't see the landing because the car exploded and the blast knocked her back into the trees.

The kaleidoscope of red and orange leaves, a slice of blue sky, and a fluffy cloud was her last view before her world went dark.

It was so much better than the bleak underbelly of a car seat.

* * *

“Enough games,” Rick said to himself as he rolled to his feet. Two were down and he couldn’t let this last guy get away to report the crew’s failure. He fired once, and again, finally blowing out the front tire on the remaining bike. It was a dark high watching the rider, gun, and bike go flying, but his triumphant shout was silenced by the explosion of the car behind him. “Nicole! Get out of there!”

Fire engulfed the back quarter panel furthest from where he’d told her to stay, but flames reached out, greedy for more. Heart in his throat, he berated himself as he raced around the front end. He should have thought of this, should have prevented it. Should never have put her in this predicament.

“Nicole!” The fire and desperate panic scraped at his throat, He reached the passenger door, bewildered to find it open and Nicole missing.

Relief mixed with confusion. A good thing she hadn’t stayed put, but where had she gone?

He backed away as the car continued to burn. He was running out of time. Had to be. Even on the back roads, someone would eventually come along and see the mess of bikes and riders. And the car fire might as well be a flare. His need to finish the job and contain their attackers warred with the need to find Nicole.

He looked around for any sign, for a trail, but tracking without technological assistance wasn’t his strong suit. Nothing was a strong suit in the face of panic.

Think! He pushed the emotions aside. There hadn't been more than the three bikers. They couldn't have kidnapped her since they didn't know where he might stop. He had to believe she'd left the car on her own and was safe. He prayed he wasn't deluding himself. Talented as this crew was, they wouldn't risk those motorcycles off-road even if they'd anticipated his decision to make a stand rather than try and out run them.

Just a few paces from the car, he crouched down, trying to imagine what had prompted her to leave her position. If he could find the motivator, maybe he could find the trail.

A bullet grazed his back just ahead of the sound of a gun barking. Rick dropped and rolled away, aiming his weapon toward the threat. One of the bikers had enough grit to try and finish the job. "Give me the girl," he said with a sneer.

"Never." Rick pulled the trigger only to hear the click of an empty magazine.

Shit.

"Where is the girl?"

"No idea." Rick assessed, calculating the odds of drawing the snub-nosed revolver from his ankle holster before this kid squeezed off a kill shot. "What do you want with her?"

The biker's knee exploded in a fine spray of blood before he could answer. He screamed and went down like a felled tree, his M-10 automatic machine pistol tumbling toward Rick.

Snatching the weapon, he rolled toward the nearest tree for cover. Who the hell had joined this fight and whose side were they on?

“Rick! Are you hurt?”

He dared a look, unable to trust his ears. “Bart?”

“Who else could haul your ass out of trouble? Eva called, said you needed back up.” He looked around. “Where’s your girl?”

Rick lurched up toward his friend, his legs shaking from the adrenaline rush. Bart’s one armed hug brought tears to his eyes when the man’s hand landed hard on the fresh wound. “She left the car, but I haven’t found her. She won’t answer when I call her name.”

“Where’s your phone?”

Rick pointed to the car, dejected.

“No it’s not,” Bart said. “Eva claims she heard something else after the gun shots and explosion.”

Rick studied the area around the car. “Call the phone. Hurry.” He didn’t care if Bart thought he was desperate or pathetic, he just wanted to find Nicole.

Bart dialed and both men strained to hear the ring tone over the sounds of the fire while one of Bart’s employees used a fire extinguisher on the car.

“Damn voice mail,” Bart grumbled. “I’ll keep dialing. Give a shout when you find her. I’ll go get the litter off the road.”

“I have questions for them.”

Bart shrugged. “So I’ll use duct tape.”

On the wounds as well as their mouths, Rick guessed, feeling no sympathy for the bikers. He moved as quietly as possible, deeper into the trees, listening for one of the stupid ring tones Eva had programmed when he wasn’t looking. The woman made a hobby out of annoying him at every turn. At this particular moment, when he finally heard the crazy banshee scream, he was grateful, though he’d never admit it to Eva.

The phone was lighting up and vibrating under a thin cover of leaves. He scanned the area, and his heart stalled when he saw Nicole slumped against a tree, both backpacks behind her.

He rushed forward and slid to his knees, checking for a pulse. It was slow, but steady under his fingers and he murmured a prayer of gratitude. His gaze raked her head to toe, enormously relieved at no obvious signs of blood or trauma. The way she was sprawled, he had to assume the explosion knocked her back. A bad headache was the best he could hope for.

“Rick!”

He answered Bart’s call, waiting impatiently as his friend skidded down the slope to join them.

“How bad is it?”

“Head to tree is pretty much a guaranteed concussion.”

“At best.”

Rick gingerly explored her scalp with his fingers. “She’s got a goose egg started and may need stitches.” He wiped his bloody fingertips on his jeans and glanced up at Bart. “You didn’t bring a back board by any chance?”

“You’re lucky I had a fire extinguisher in the truck.”

“Options?”

“You both need attention.”

Bart had to know Rick wasn’t about to visit a hospital. Not with so many people interested in Nicole’s status.

“The stupid triplets up there are stable. Mostly. Do you trust me to take care of them?”

“If you’re willing to stand in that spotlight.” It was putting Bart in a tenuous position having him lie about how he found the bikers and car.

“We’ve done worse.”

True enough. “On more than on occasion.”

“I’ve got a tow truck on the way.” Bart held out his 9mm Beretta. “Trade.”

“What’s your plan?”

“Eva’s probably got me in Ross’s god-forsaken Cypress Security system already. I’ll step into your role here and stay with the triplets until the law arrives. You take my truck wherever you need to go.”

“Her enemies won’t give up so easy.”

Bart snorted. “I figured that one out already.”

Nicole groaned and her eyelids fluttered, but didn't open.

“You've gotta disappear. You'll have to move her and hope for the best.”

Rick agreed. “There has to be something around here to brace her neck. Just in case.”

Bart pulled a shoe off Nicole's foot and handed it to Rick. “Hey, it's better than nothing.”

Rick pulled a t-shirt out of his backpack and ripped it into strips to secure the impromptu neck brace. Far from ideal, it was the best they could do for now.

“There's a country doc down near Richmond who treats a bunch of the truckers without insurance. He's the quiet type.” Bart put the information into Rick's phone.

“Is there a code phrase?”

Bart chuckled. “Trust me, he'll know you're from my inner circle.”

When they got Nicole back up to the road and settled into the truck, Rick was amazed by the lack of traffic. He was sure they'd be fending off at least a couple curiosity seekers by now.

“Guess they picked the right road to jump me,” he grumbled.

“Not a bad choice, all in all. Too bad they didn't know who they were up against.”

Rick gave a mock salute. “Thanks for saving my ass. Again.”

“Don’t think I want to make it a habit.” He tossed over the truck keys and pulled a small duffel bag out of the truck bed.

“If you get anything useful out of these three or whoever comes to claim them, let Eva know.”

“Will do,” Bart said with a nod. “Take care with her.” He thumped the tailgate twice as Rick pulled away.

Chapter 9

Clifton felt the disposable cell phone vibrate in his suit pocket. Only one person had this number. He stifled an anticipatory smile and instead of checking it immediately as he wanted to, he finished his walk-through of the fire at the gang house and gave notes to the agent at his side for the report.

Good work, if he said so himself.

“Why would she come after this house?”

“Must have a grudge.”

“None of her friends or coworkers gave us any indication the woman had gang affiliations.”

“I’m telling you to dig until you find it.” If they didn’t dig up the evidence, his efforts to plant it were wasted, he thought.

“Right.”

“Have they recovered a computer yet?”

“As you saw, sir, none of the electronics were salvageable in the apartment.” He checked his notes. “Her work computer

was seized by another agency and the phone found at the airport trash bin was no use.”

Another agency? Clifton briefly wondered if the woman might have been handled for him if he'd let matters ride. Seemed her talent for making enemies hadn't diminished. Letting someone else take care of her might have been cleaner, but to make the move he'd been after, to put the finishing touch on his personal master plan, he needed to *know* she was out of the way—permanently.

No more tiptoeing around and calling in favors. No more tasking interns to search for her under the guise of testing new facial recognition programs. No more lingering stress of when a federal prosecutor might grow a pair and finally come after him.

Done with the report, he crossed the street to his government-issued black SUV and climbed into the driver's seat. He pulled out the phone and checked messages.

The first, that she'd been located on one of the back roads, had him praising the efficiency of working with money-motivated people. The second promised immediate, lethal action. He checked the time, smiling at the thought that she was probably dead by now.

His arrangement with the leader of the West Coast Dragons had been the smartest deal he'd ever made. Executing Chan, a relatively innocent bystander, hadn't been as traumatic as he'd anticipated, aside from the particularly annoying witness. Overall, the agreement had been mutually beneficial—once

the hierarchy had been established and understood by all parties. And in tight spots, he'd learned the biggest perk was having assets in the field to handle sticky situations like this.

Now the Dragons wanted to control a drug pipeline on the eastern seaboard. He'd been assisting by rounding up the competition based on leads from confidential informants—otherwise known as the Dragons themselves. Now they were going to eliminate his witness. Sometimes life was too perfect.

The burner cell rang again. “Go,” he answered, eager for verification that he could move on to the next stage of his life.

“Trouble,” said a wet, breathy voice.

The man was obviously wounded, but they were all replaceable. “Is she dead?”

“Unknown.” A roar of gunfire blotted out whatever the kid was trying to say. “...fighting back.”

“Location.” Clifton slammed the car into gear and started making his way to the interstate. “Location!” he repeated, but the caller had either passed out or died. He hoped they managed to kill the woman in the process of dying in whatever conflict they'd created.

“Better be dead,” Clifton muttered, tucking the phone back into his pocket. “Better damn well be dead.”

The one thing he hadn't counted on, the thing that could ruin his plans faster than the witness to the Chan execution, was a gang banger willing to trade information for less jail time. The vow of silence and gang-family code of honor crap was all

well and good until it was a man's own neck in the noose. Clifton had turned enough 'loyal' criminals to know it happened regularly.

He tuned the scanner to the local police frequency and listened for an alert or emergency where he expected the biker team had launched the attack. If he got there first, he had to believe in an outside chance of containment.

His mind clicked through his options and he breathed easier as each mile he traveled without hearing an official dispatch kept those options open. He changed lanes, slowing down for the exit when the scanner blared to life and broke his tenuous control.

Clifton swore as the voice declared three motorcyclists in custody, multiple firearms, one burned out car, and one witness—male.

He slammed his fist into the steering wheel and proceeded to the next exit. His only choice now was to circle around and check out the scene once the police had cleared out. With any luck, he would find something to prevent this fiasco from landing on him.

* * *

It was a dreadful test of Rick's willpower to watch the road and keep to the speed limit when he wanted to get Nicole to the doctor immediately.

They'd tucked her into the cab on her side, buckling her into place. When she twitched or moaned, he counted it a good

sign. Smoothing her hair back from her face, he rambled nonsense just to fill the silence.

For once, he was eager for Eva's voice to cut into his thoughts, but she didn't call. When a fire truck roared by, followed soon after by an ambulance, he hoped Bart's story held up long enough for them to get out of the area.

"That team of bikers was arrogant," he said, wishing for feedback and insight Nicole was in no position to share. "And trained enough to adapt." That was the piece that worried him. The triplets, to use Bart's term, weren't quite as stupid as they'd seemed. Sure, they didn't know he'd make a stand, but they dealt with it. "Why didn't they call for backup?"

Not that he'd wanted more of a challenge as he'd run out of ammunition, but still. Whoever sent the triplets must have had access to the traffic cameras that caught him leaving the interstate. It kept coming back to one conclusion: the agent determined to silence Nicole was well-connected or settled in a powerful position.

More likely both.

The navigation cued him as they neared Richmond and Nicole stirred. "Rick?"

Her voice, thready and weak, made him want to strangle Clifton and his biker crew. "Right here." He patted her shoulder.

"I can't move my head."

"That's just a precaution. We're almost to the doctor."

“No. No hospital.” She put up a struggle against the seat belts, her agitation increasing.

“*Shh*. Take it easy.” He rubbed her shoulder more firmly until she gave up the fight. “No hospital. Trust me.”

She relaxed and a moment later he assumed she’d dozed off.

He couldn’t quite identify why she got under his skin or why he was so determined to keep her safe.

Part of it was his individual code of conduct. He believed in doing what he could do to help people. Another part of it was the job. His boss sent him up here in part to verify Nicole’s safety. But Rick was no fool. He knew, without a doubt, part of his dedication to this woman was deeply personal.

He rubbed the back of his hand over his mouth, the memory of kissing her sending a bolt of desire through his edgy system. He felt like a jerk, the woman was passed out and injured. But the what-ifs kept dancing through his mind. They were quick flashes of what life could be—if he was a different man. If she managed to survive the current onslaught of her long-standing predicament.

“Rick?”

He jerked his hand away from her, as if she might know his thoughts just from his touch. “Right here.”

“I—” she hiccupped, her voice choked with tears. “I can’t see.”

“That’s temporary,” he assured her, hoping he was right. “We’ll get it straightened out.”

The speed limit dropped to twenty-five as they entered the town limits. Going so slow was excruciating when Nicole was in distress, but they didn't need the negative attention of local law enforcement if he ripped through town the way he wanted to.

“Almost there.”

“You always say that,” she said with a snuffle.

“Well, it's usually true.” Every step forward was a step closer to the goal. The concept had been ingrained during months of training and emphasized on every mission. When the going got tough, sometimes the only comfort was to keep on going.

“And we're here,” he said, pulling to a stop in front of a house that had to be a century old. “Bart recommended this guy.”

“Bart? When?”

He considered her questions a good sign. “I'll tell you later. For now, know that you're safe. Not even a camera on the one street light in this town.”

If they were lucky, the doc didn't watch the news. “I'll be right back.” He shut the truck door to protect her privacy and cut off any protest.

Walking to the door, he wondered if he looked worse than he felt. *Probably not possible*. He knew Nicole's blood streaked his jeans and stained his hands. His own blood was a hot and sticky mess glued to the wound on his back. Even without the

rear view mirror he could guess at the dirt and worry smeared across his face.

He reached for the bell, but the door swung open. Rick faced off with an older gentleman, tall and lean, with wire rimmed glasses sliding down his nose and a crown of thick white hair.

“The message said there were two of you.”

Sharp eyes raked over Rick from head to toe and back again. He appreciated the direct approach. “There are. She’s in the truck, possible neck or back injury.”

“Pull around back. I’ll meet you with a stretcher.”

Rick jogged back to the truck and drove around the house as instructed. The doctor grumbled about amateurs as they transferred Nicole, but when they were inside his bedside manner improved slightly. He did a quick evaluation of her vitals and questioned her before wheeling her deeper into the house.

“She says she can’t see,” Rick said from the doorway of what turned out to be an x-ray room.

“Are you married?”

“No,” Rick and Nicole answered in unison.

“Then be quiet,” he ordered with a hard glare for Rick.

“He’s right though,” Nicole said.

“First things first, young lady.” He barked orders at Rick as he prepared for x-ray. “Go clean up your truck. This will take some time. Supplies are in the closet by the back door.”

“Great idea,” Rick muttered when he was alone in the hallway. He hated letting Nicole out of his sight, but he had to trust Bart’s recommendation as the only viable solution for medical care. Hospitals were full of security cameras and personnel and he wouldn’t risk anyone recognizing her from the news reports.

He found the supplies and ignored the twinge of his wounded back as he cleaned the blood out of the seats.

Just as he was sending a text to update Eva, the doc called from the back door, “Get in here and be useful.”

“Yes, sir!” He hurried over, only to be stopped with a strong hand on his chest.

“Her neck isn’t broken. Her vision *is* gone. Temporarily, I believe, but she’s quite upset. She’s asked for you.” Clearly the doc didn’t care much for the idea. “Be positive in there or you’re out.”

“Yes, sir,” Rick repeated, smothering his temper at the doc and burying his concern for Nicole under battle-field confidence. It was standard to keep reactions to a minimum in a crisis. He knew the loss of her vision—even temporarily—must be scaring the hell out of a woman who cataloged her whole life in images.

* * *

Alone in the exam room, Nicole knew crying wouldn’t help a thing, but the tears kept rolling down her cheeks. Stupid, she thought, swiping at them with her fingers.

The doc told her it was likely a temporary condition, an opinion he'd emphasized when he explained the laceration and blunt force injury to the back of her head. He'd sounded calm and competent as he told her she just needed a bit of time.

Did they have time? She couldn't remember anything but her desperation to get out of the car.

Now she was face down on an exam table, waiting for the topical to kick in so Doc could stitch up the gash in her scalp. The world was different without her sight. Her ears picked up details of birds outside as well as the deeper exchange of male voices nearby. Doc was probably filling in Rick. What would he think, now that she was more of a hindrance than ever? She should tell him to leave and he should actually go this time. The thought brought more tears. All she'd wanted was to get away, to make her escape alone, but now... alone wasn't what she wanted at all.

To get her mind off that gloomy track, she took a physical inventory. The aches radiating up and down her body were mild compared to the pounding in her head. Doc said she had a concussion, and had promised her something for the pain after he stitched her up.

She heard footsteps in the hallway, surprising herself that she could discern Doc's stride from Rick's. Maybe she was just making it up, maybe he'd left already, maybe—

“Your friend is here, Ms. Livingston.”

“Thank you.” She couldn't suppress the gush of relief.

“You’re taking the guy thing a bit seriously with the hair. I really will have to call you Nick now.”

She felt the smile tilt her lips and reached her hand out in the direction of his voice. When his rough palm met hers, she felt the tension across her shoulders ease. “Doc said he didn’t have to shave that much.”

“Huh.”

“What?”

“You didn’t trust me that easily.”

“You didn’t mention a medical degree. And your bedside manner is lousy.” She gulped. This wasn’t the time to be thinking of Rick or beds. Or maybe it was. Her vivid memory of him at the hotel, sitting on the bed in only that towel...

“A little pressure, Ms. Livingston.”

The doctor’s voice was a welcome distraction, though she couldn’t say the same for the stitches.

“Hey,” Rick said, the smile clear in his voice, “At least we don’t have to worry about a potential death by countertop now.”

“You’re not funny,” she said, trying not to laugh. “I get a little woozy at the sight of my own blood,” she explained for the doc.

“Common condition.”

Grateful he made quick work of the process, she was surprised when he ordered them to switch places.

“Rick?” She clutched his hand. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing serious.”

He sounded like he meant it, but she knew he would downplay any injury. Sitting up, it was a struggle to get her bearings. She was grateful for the help as Rick and the doctor guided her from the exam table to a chair. The chair gave her body some context for her surroundings, but she let go of Rick’s hand reluctantly.

“Hold this for me, please?” She heard the sound of a zipper—his jacket—and accepted the warm, worn leather, her fingers exploring it for any clue to his injury. “Were you shot?”

“The jacket took the worst of it.”

And he’d ignored his own problem to take care of her because she’d been picky and wanted a better view during the confrontation. Like that turned out so well. “Doc, what’s wrong? How bad is it really?”

“Just a flesh wound, I believe. Off with your shirt.”

Another image flashed through her mind, this one of Rick’s muscled chest dusted with hair still damp from his shower. The memory was almost as good as the real thing. Who was she kidding? She wanted her eyesight back. She wanted to see for herself how bad this ‘flesh wound’ really was. “Does he need stitches?”

“Nah.”

“That’s *my* decision, young man,” the doctor corrected.

“Call me Rick.” He hissed a low breath. “A little warning next time.”

“Just the antiseptic. Doesn’t bother most people.”

Rick gave a disbelieving grunt.

“Can you tell me how Ms. Livingston was injured? She doesn’t seem to remember it at all.”

“And you need to know what not to talk about.”

“Something like that.”

“There was some trouble on the road. Let’s call it an excessive act of road rage.”

“Involving live ammunition?”

“Yes.” She heard Rick sigh. “Ms. Livingston was on the floor of our car, tucked under the dash. I was preoccupied so I can’t be sure when she left the vehicle, but I’m glad she did as it exploded toward the end of the conflict.”

Rick sounded so clinical, as if he’d read a news brief rather than survived a gun fight against three assailants.

“And the flesh wound here?”

“Turned my back at the wrong moment.”

My fault. Rick wouldn’t be in this situation, wouldn’t be injured, if not for her troubles. An apology on her lips, the doctor interrupted her.

“That’s good news. A little pressure, Mr. Dreyer.”

“He needs stitches too?” The guilt had her chewing a thumbnail, something she hadn’t done in ages.

“Not yet. Just cleaning things out.”

Why did that sound worse? She slumped back in the chair, feeling adrift and detached from Rick, the doctor, the whole world. Of course she’d taken her eyesight for granted. The simple acts of walking over to hold Rick’s hand and see his injury for herself were impossible. How strange to understand why she felt so vulnerable and have no viable solution but ‘time’.

“Is there a store nearby where I can pick up supplies and clean clothes before we head out?”

“I have scrubs here you can borrow.”

“All due respect, Doc—”

“Neither of you is going anywhere tonight. Ms. Livingston needs to be under observation for the concussion as well as the blindness.”

“Are you sure it’s temporary?” Nicole asked.

“As sure as I can be with the tools available here. But it would be foolish to go haring off in case your condition requires more extensive treatment.”

Rick cleared his throat. “I understand. But—”

Doc cut him off again. “Ms. Livingston must stay at least for tonight. You can go and do as you please.”

Nicole pressed her lips shut. There was no point in protesting. She hated being so out of control, so utterly useless. As if she hadn't been enough of a burden for him already.

“Then we'll need a room upstairs.”

“You can have one. There's a perfectly good observation room down here for Ms. Livingston.”

“We stay together.”

His words, the sheer certainty of the statement, sent a tremor through her system. She felt Rick's gaze on her as he thought it through. Blind, the stairs would be a hazard for her if they were found. Of course, blind meant she would hamper any escape if they had to run.

Blind also meant she couldn't help Rick look for the arsonist's signature in all those photos. Good grief, she couldn't get out of this room or change clothes without help. Blind meant she couldn't identify Clifton in a court room or a line up.

Her rabbiting thoughts skidded to a stop. Did that mean she was off the hook if her vision didn't return? It was the first happy thought she'd had since waking up 'in the dark'.

She'd planned to run, had meticulously prepared an escape route, but the end result had been elusive. The new life she'd envisioned had varied from beach side cottage to mountain hideaway.

The only consistency had been her camera.

Rick's masculine, woody scent—laced with antiseptic—wafted over her, and she felt his presence just before his big palms landed on her knees again. He squeezed gently, bringing a half smile to her lips.

“We'll get through it.”

“Right,” she whispered.

“I'm going to check the accommodations and then I'll help you change.”

She could only nod. His hands covered hers where she gripped his jacket.

“You'll be okay?”

“Of course.” She listened as he and the doctor left the exam room. Waiting a few seconds more to be sure she was alone, she lifted the jacket to her face and inhaled deeply.

Other odors—gasoline, the sharp tang of gun powder, and the copper of blood—altered it slightly, but overall the jacket smelled of Rick. It brought her more comfort than it should, but she refused to deny herself the small pleasure.

She lowered the jacket at the first sound of footsteps in the hall. Rick's boots, she was sure.

“Nicole?”

Turning toward his voice, she smiled. “Is the perimeter secure?”

“Only one comedian per relationship,” he said. “Isn't that the rule?”

Relationship? Butterflies whirled in a happy circle in her belly at the thought. “Hmm.” She did her best to match his light tone. He probably didn’t mean it quite the way her vulnerable, clingy heart wanted him to mean it. “Someone must have torn that page out of my rulebook.”

His warm hands covered hers where they rested on his jacket. “Think you can stand up?”

“Of course.” She pushed to her feet, but went too far and he caught her, steadied her until she had her balance.

“I could carry you.”

That sounded delightful. “I’m fine.” He maintained contact as he moved to her side. The support was welcome since her knees wanted to buckle. “Feels like the room is spinning.”

“Bet it does. I promise not to let it get away.” He tucked her hand around his arm. The heat of his skin and the strong muscles under her fingers made her breath catch, but his voice was all business. “We’re going forward about three paces and then we’ll turn right into the hallway.”

“Got it.” She shuffled her feet, wondering if she was really leaning to the right or if it only felt that way.

“Want Doc to find a wheelchair?”

“No.” She could manage this with a little dignity.

“Then relax. I won’t let you fall.”

She knew he wouldn’t, but her head and disjointed senses didn’t want to cooperate. It was a relief when he paused.

“We’re at the door. I haven’t counted this off yet, so try to walk normally until I say stop.”

He walked forward slowly and as her senses settled, she couldn’t help but notice the way they moved together. Her long legs were a close match to his natural stride. Stopping on his command, she felt the air change as he guided her through the doorway.

“Is it sunny in here?”

“Can you see something already?”

“No, but it feels warmer if that makes sense.”

“You’re right. There’s a big window and lots of afternoon light coming through.”

She laughed. “Oscar would be thrilled. He loved to bask in the afternoons.”

“Is that the iguana?”

“Yeah, sorry. Just had a mental image.”

“No problem.” She heard the door close. “I, ah, can help you change or grab Doc before he heads out.”

“Out?”

“Hospital rounds he said.”

“You can help if you don’t mind the hassle.” A little surge of anticipation pulsed through her bloodstream. “It’s nothing you haven’t seen already.” A study in casual, that was her. Not.

“All right.”

She tugged at the jeans, hearing the series of soft pops as the button fly fell open, hesitating when Rick cleared his throat. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” His hands gripped her upper arms. “Just back up a step. There. Feel the bed behind you?”

She nodded, her mouth dry as she pushed the jeans over her hips. Being blind, relying on her other senses only elevated her desire, giving her an acute awareness of every action and reaction inside and outside her body.

This wasn’t the time to be focused on her attraction to him, but she couldn’t shut off her feelings and she was afraid to try and ignore her other senses.

“I’ve seen this before.” He must have knelt in front of her as his voice sounded from a lower point. “The blindness I mean,” he added in a rush.

Her curiosity piqued, she asked him about it as he peeled off her socks and guided her feet into the scrub pants. “What happened?”

“Not much different from what happened to you. A hard impact to the back of the head and basically the brain goes on the defensive.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“When it happened to Bart, I got stuck hauling his enormous backside out of the action.” He paused when she laughed. “You shouldn’t worry. I’ve seen plenty of concussions too, which is why Doc left you in my capable hands.”

The image that evoked, of her body hot and pliant under his touch, made her glad for the support of the bed. “Thanks.”

“How are you feeling? Queasy or weak?”

She felt ridiculously weak, but it had nothing to do with her concussion. “I’m okay.” Reaching back, she explored the stitches on her scalp. “How many did he put in?”

“Seven by my count.”

“How many did he put in you? And where?”

“Upper shoulder. No stitches. Doc just cleaned it out and bandaged it up. The jacket took most of the damage.”

She pushed her hair behind her ears. “I must be a mess.”

“Not so bad.”

She snorted and heard his low chuckle in reply. “Clean scrubs and a nap will make you feel better. I’ve got the top ready for you.”

Her fingers toyed with the hem of the shirt. “I’m really supposed to take a nap?” That effort was doomed. Her thoughts were consumed with Rick, her working senses overwhelmed by his presence. The longer they were close like this, the easier it was to forget the inconvenience of her injuries.

“It’s standard procedure,” he said, taking the t-shirt she held out. “You’ve been through a rough, umm, couple of, ah, days.”

Oddly, despite the recent chaos—or maybe because of it—she didn’t feel remotely embarrassed standing in front of him

in her bra and baggy scrubs. When he put the clean top in her hands, she caught his fingers. Slowly, listening for any kind of reaction, she slid her palm upward over his strong forearm to caress his muscled biceps.

His breath hitched and she felt him tremble. She dared to hope he wasn't as clinical and all-business as he let on. The top drifted to the floor, forgotten, as both of her hands were occupied with mapping his arms. Unless he'd changed, the t-shirt he wore was gray and tucked into the faded denim of his jeans. Using his shoulders as a reference point, she took a tiny step closer.

On a sigh, his hands landed softly on her hips, his thumbs teasing her exposed skin. She leaned closer until she could feel the heat of his body as her own, feel his ragged breath against her cheek.

“Nicole.”

Unwilling to analyze what else she heard in his voice, she focused on the desire that matched her own. “Kiss me, Rick. Please?”

“Did Doc give you something?”

“Nothing too strong.” Smiling, she tipped her face up, hoping she didn't look like an idiot, and laced her fingers loosely behind his neck. She wanted to get closer, but his hands held firm. She wondered if he realized how his thumbs were caressing and teasing her. Could he see how even that small contact melted her?

“Kiss me like you did for the camera at the airport.” She needed to know that hadn’t all been an act.

“Later. You’re hurt and need some rest.”

“Not feeling anything but you right now.”

He groaned. “This is the adrenaline.”

“No,” She shook her head slowly. As long as his thumbs kept stroking her, she knew she had a chance to take what she wanted in this moment. He could leave, Clifton could catch her. This opportunity might be her last. “This is all me, wanting you.” She moistened her lips with her tongue. “Don’t you want me?”

His mouth crushed hers in a searing kiss and his big hands slid over her hips, pulling her close enough to feel the real answer to her question straining against his fly.

She gasped, delighted to discover his desperation equaled hers. The kiss at the airport had been cautious compared to this. It was heady, exhilarating. He lit a fire through her system as he stroked the shell of her ear and pressed kisses along her neck. She rolled her hips, needing more.

He bent her back and drew her bra straps off her shoulders with his teeth, making her laugh even as he closed his mouth over one aching nipple.

Her head spun as he turned suddenly to sit on the edge of the bed. She let him guide her until she straddled his lap. Tracing his face with her fingertips, she moaned as he suckled her

finger into the heat of his mouth. Reaching down, she tugged his shirt free, pushing it up and over his head.

The warm skin and rough hair were a shock to her sensitized palms. It seemed every nerve in her body was tuned to him. She let her memory fill in the details of his broad chest that her damaged vision couldn't provide.

Yet.

He stroked her back, making her arch and giving him easy access to her breasts. His hands and mouth were cruising across her skin. Though they were touching, her lack of sight kept her on edge, never quite knowing what to expect.

More thrilling than it should be, she reveled in it, learning to judge his movements with her other senses. The way his muscles braced when he shifted, the sound of his breath, the feel of it on her skin. If they didn't slow down, she'd climax before they were even undressed.

She dipped her head, following her hands to the rough stubble of his jaw, and seized his mouth with another hungry kiss. Reluctantly, she broke away and slid off his lap. Her knees felt like jelly as she slowly undid the tie of the scrubs and pushed them down.

She was too edgy to trust her instincts. It felt like he was watching intently, but she couldn't be sure she just didn't *want* him to be watching her.

“You're beautiful.”

The admiration, his deep voice rough with desire, sent a bolt of heat straight to her core. She heard his boots fall with a thud, then a zipper and the rustle of denim.

“Come here.”

She knew he was giving her the choice to continue or retreat. Noble of him, but she'd started this and she wasn't about to back down now.

She melted against him as he kissed her, slower now. They seemed to be of one mind, lingering over every touch, drawing pleasure from every breath.

Chapter 10

Rick stared up at the ceiling while Nicole dozed on his chest. His breath shaky, his legs tangled with hers, he closed his eyes and waited for the inevitable guilt.

Sex hadn't been comfortable since he'd lost his wife. Well, to be fair, the discomfort was always after and it always rode in on the memory of his father-in-law's self-righteous voice. Still, it happened and in this instance he was more than due.

He should have been stronger than the persistent lust that had been haunting him since he'd started tailing Nicole. Should have given her enough space to let the adrenaline bleed off in a less intimate manner. Hell, he should have done a lot of things differently, but it was too late now.

He stroked Nicole's hand where it lay over his heart, waiting for the inevitable. If he had to go through it, he willed the guilty moment to hurry up and be done already so he could move on.

Logically, he knew he didn't have anything to feel guilty about. They were healthy adults—barring their injuries—and the heat and passion had been phenomenal. Beyond scratching a common itch, their connection had been deeper than an adrenaline reaction. He had to hope Nicole felt the same way. He didn't want to compound his normal guilt trip by reading more into this encounter than she did.

Rick waited, but the typical guilt he felt for betraying his wife with another woman didn't come this time. Eyes open, he stared up at the ceiling, trying to sort it out. He felt content. Maybe, like Nicole's damaged eyesight, purging the guilt was just an issue of time.

Or the right woman.

He should run away from such a dangerous thought, but instead, in the quiet with nothing better to do, he let it play out. Grief had been a hard road, one he dodged with work as often as possible, but he'd never been involved with anyone on his assignments before.

Would Nicole believe that of him? Would she even want to? The woman was on a mission to reclaim her life and live it on her terms. Was there any room for him? Did he really want there to be?

At ease. His wife had used that phrase whenever he'd retreat into himself to mull over a problem. She'd been his light, balancing his serious nature and countering the dark intensity of his career. No matter what her family thought, he'd loved her with everything he had.

As Nicole burrowed closer with a little sigh, Rick pressed a kiss to her hair and wrapped his arms around her. He experienced a jolt, realizing what he felt wasn't an echo of a lost love, but rather the start of something new.

What the hell was he going to do about that?

* * *

“Hey there.” Something nudged her shoulder. “Wake up.”

Nicole rolled away from the deep voice. She wanted to stay in the warm cocoon of sleep. Her muscles felt soft and loose as if she'd spent hours under the care of a Swiss masseuse. It was divine.

“Wake up. Just for a second. What's your name?”

She snuggled deeper into the blanket. “Kara Reynolds.” Something about that sounded wrong, but she was too sleepy to care.

“What day is it?”

What could that matter? “Dunno.”

Someone swore and a big hand yanked the blanket back. “Wake up.” The air was cool across her skin. Skin? She was naked?

Oh, no. It came back to her in a rush. She'd thrown herself at Rick. Granted it was the best sex she'd ever had, but still. Blind and hurting, she'd jumped him when he'd been trying to help her dress.

“What's your name?”

She rubbed her eyes, wondering if those really were shadows in front of her or just wishful thinking. “Nicole. Nicole Livingston,” she said, reaching for the blanket.

“What’s my name?”

That was easy. She recognized his voice, his scent, and the feel of his hands on her. “Rick Dreyer.”

“What day is it?”

This was the concussion protocol. “Rick, I’m fine.” She reached out toward the dip he made in the mattress. Intending to wave him away, she smacked his side instead. “Whoops. Sorry. I don’t think I’d know what day it was even if I hadn’t tried to fell a tree with my head.”

“Fair enough.” He kissed her forehead. “Go back to sleep.”

“No, I’m good.” She pushed her hair back from her face, wincing when she hit the bruise. “Is there an ice pack around?”

“I’ll find one if you’re determined to stay awake.”

“Please.” Blinking to be sure her eyes were open, she tried to follow his movements when the bed shifted as he got up. The room seemed shrouded in a thick, dark fog, but she was pretty sure she was actually seeing something.

She brought her hand up to her face and spread her fingers wide, determined to see all five digits. They were there, sort of. Being a visual person with a vivid imagination, she quelled her enthusiasm. It was entirely possible this was just another trick of her brain.

She tucked her hand by her side as Rick entered the room.

“Here you go.” The mattress sagged as he settled beside her. “Lean on me,” he said, scooting behind her a little more.

He shifted her until her back rested against his bare chest and her legs were caged by his. The contrasting sensation of his cotton scrubs against her skin was surprisingly sexy. He lifted her hair and gently eased her head down onto the ice pack.

“Isn’t that cold for you?”

“I won’t get frostbite that easy.”

She smiled at his humor and his tenderness. His arms came around her and she linked her hands with his at her waist. This kind of intimacy had eluded her, or rather she’d actively avoided it. She should be avoiding it now. No matter what they’d survived so far, the biker attack confirmed her struggle was far from over. “Is there a light on?”

“There can be.” He reached away from her and she heard the click of a lamp switch.

“Wow.”

“You can see?” His arms gave her a squeeze.

“Sort of. Instead of a dark fog, it’s sort of a thick gray haze with the light on.” He went very still behind her and doubt washed over her. “Unless I’m making it all up.”

His hands trailed up and down her arms. “No. Whatever you’re seeing is real. It’s after midnight.”

Thinking of the concussion protocol, she worried about him. “If you’ve been up every few hours, you’re probably exhausted.”

He chuckled, the low rumble giving her a delicious little thrill. “I learned how to make my hours in a bed count.”

“I’ll say.” She clapped a hand to her mouth. There was no graceful way around that sort of faux pas. “I mean—”

“*Shh*. Let me take it as a compliment.”

“Please do. It was great sex.” She didn’t have a wealth of experience with the post-coital tenderness thing as she was usually busy leaving in order to avoid attachments that gave way to slip ups that led to questions.

“Who’s Kara Reynolds?”

Questions like that. It was difficult to push an answer past the lump in her throat. “Where’d you hear that name?” There were only two options. Either she’d said something stupid in her sleep, or Eva had uncovered the truth. It was the first time in her life she prayed for ‘stupid’.

“When I woke you earlier, you gave me that name.”

“Couldn’t you just assume I had brain damage?”

“No.” His lips brushed her temple. “Want to talk about it?”

“Did you already search the name?”

“No.”

No? “Why not?”

“Because no one has a perfect past. I’m only interested in yours so I know how to protect you.” His voice, so gentle and sure, offered more comfort and warmth than the blanket. “I’d like you to tell me rather than read a sterile report. Assuming it’s even available.”

“It’s probably wrong anyway.” She swallowed. “Kara Reynolds is the name I was born with. It’s the name we were all supposed to forget. I wished never to hear it again after that name killed my mom and sister when I was in college.”

“I’m sorry.”

“He killed them. Clifton.” She hated knowing his name because now she had to speak it. “But it was my fault.”

“You can’t blame yourself for someone else’s actions. Especially not a criminal determined to cover his tracks.”

“This is on me. I made a deliberate choice to enter some of my older pictures in an art show and used my home address.” She shifted and the ice pack slid down her back, but the shiver that coursed through her was connected to the terrible cold of those dark memories. “I went away to school so they would be that much safer. I never intended to go to that home again. What kind of criminal tracks art shows?”

“He went to the address listed with the contest?”

“Yes,” she breathed.

“WITSEC didn’t move them?”

“They didn’t know to move them. Officially they died because of a home invasion, but I know he killed them to get

me to show myself.”

“But he didn’t find you again until now?”

She shifted. “I’m well aware how paranoid this must sound. Witness protection teaches you not to talk about it, but honestly, who would believe anyone who did talk?”

He stroked a hand through her hair. “I believe you.”

She tried to resist his touch, but it melted her. “My college record shows I was awarded a special internship in Switzerland.”

“Nice. Were you really there?”

“No. I was in a research lab in Maine. It kept me off his radar though.”

“What kind of research?”

“Lobsters, tides, and ocean temperatures. It was interesting, but I would have preferred being out there with my camera.”

“He didn’t come after you when you got back to school?”

“No. I insisted on going back to finish my degree and they arranged for security to shadow me for a while.” She pleated the blanket between her fingers. “But everything was quiet until now. WITSEC checks in at regular intervals and it’s been situation normal.”

“In my experience that isn’t exactly cause for celebration.”

“Meaning what?”

“He either got caught with his hand in something else and was under close scrutiny or they had him working on a case

that demanded 110 percent and distracted him from you.”

“Too bad he couldn’t stay distracted.”

“Uh-huh.”

Rick was thinking. About what, she couldn’t fathom. He’d proven himself a good strategist and must have been a real asset in the field. She was thinking it was past time to move out of his arms and give herself the physical distance that might ease the heartache that was obviously on the horizon.

She’d done some stupid things with long-reaching consequences, but falling for the man holding her now would top the list. He had a life and a team, and she knew he wouldn’t just walk away from that, no matter what threat Clifton posed.

There was a dignity, an honor about Rick she admired and knew she’d never be able to emulate. She’d been running too long. As much as she wanted to make a stand, she didn’t know how to live through such an effort.

“When have you been around gangs lately?”

“I haven’t. I really don’t spend any time where gang bangers hang out.”

“But they were at the fire.”

“You’re thinking about the kid with the knife.”

“There were some others in the parking lot.”

She sat up, taking the sheet with her, and ignoring the dizziness that accompanied the swift movement. “I thought

you made that up for the investigators poking around the scene.”

“You didn’t see them?”

“I was looking for suits and badges, not hats, tattoos, or colors.”

“Understandable.” He laid his hand over hers, stilling her nervous pleating of the blanket. “But I don’t believe you.”

“That’s insulting.”

“With your eye for composition and detail, I don’t believe you miss many details whether you’re looking for them or not.”

Caught, she sighed. “Fine. I did see some familiar colors.”

“Familiar how?”

“People sport similar colors sometimes near the high-risk community clinics. But I’ve never met any of them personally.”

“Were you on the packaging team for the new drug coming to market?”

“No. What does that have to do with anything?”

“Eva copied me on an email she sent to Allie. Photo arrays of gang bangers.”

“Why?”

“Allie was attacked—she’s fine,” he assured her when she gasped. “The fingerprints taken from the perps matched known gang bangers in the Virginia area.”

“That’s insane. Allie doesn’t have any gang—oh.” She clapped a hand over her mouth.

“What?”

“It has to be the charity thing we did at the clinic. I went with her to take the publicity shots. It’s a new program that donates essential meds to communities in need.”

“Two gangs.”

He was moving too fast for her. “Two gangs,” she repeated dumbly.

“I’d bet a month’s salary the apartment building fire is related to Allie’s case and has nothing to do with your past.” He rolled out of the bed and she watched the big shadow of him cross to the chair and rummage around.

“Why burn down my apartment? What did I do?”

“Your job is all it would take. You knew where Allie was going. Whoever is setting Allie up was trying to eliminate loose ends.”

“Like the instant messaging record on my laptop.” She didn’t like it, but she could see the logic.

“Yup. I have your camera. Tell me what the arsonist’s signature looks like.”

“There’s always a delete sign near the ignition point. You know the circle with a line through it? If this was one of his fires, the signature will be in the apartment where the fire started. I doubt I got any useful shots from our vantage point.”

A mental review of the angles and views she'd taken confirmed her conclusion. "Unless he started the fire outside the building and I didn't catch it."

"No. That fire clearly started in your apartment." She heard him sigh and felt exactly the same frustration. "Why doesn't the signature get burned away in the fire?"

"I don't know a lot about arson, but way back when, experts said it was in the way he directs the initial burn away from the mark."

She heard him zip her camera bag closed. Then his hands softly drummed a rhythmic pattern against his thighs.

"Arsonists have favorite materials, right?"

"Yes. That summer you practically made yourself a suspect if you purchased lighter fluid for a barbeque."

"No one mentioned lighter fluid at your apartment. And the control valve for the sprinklers had been shut off."

The whole thing made her sick to her stomach. "You think the gang from the neighborhood clinic set my apartment on fire?"

"Yes. Probably hired by Allie's boss. He had to make sure any photos you had on your computer or anywhere else were destroyed."

"And Clifton just happened to see my face on the news and take advantage?"

“I think Clifton has known your location and he’s just been waiting for the right moment to strike.”

It made a certain sick sense. She’d been doing the same thing, biding her time and waiting for the right moment to flee. “We should go back and check the gang house for the signature.”

“No way in hell.”

“But if we can tie that fire to the fires when I was a kid maybe they’ll tie that arsonist to Clifton. He’s got to be in the area. Won’t that push the prosecution to take action?”

He wrapped her in a strong, soothing hug and tucked her head under his chin. “I know you want out from under this. No one deserves it more. But you said it yourself. They took the pictures. All the evidence is in a box in an evidence locker somewhere—”

“Not all the evidence.”

His whole body stilled for a long moment and then he stepped back, holding her at arm’s length. “What do you mean?”

Without his touch, she felt cold and alone again. It took a moment to get her voice to cooperate. “My friends and I went out together to find the arsonist. I wasn’t the only one with a camera, but I was the only one who saw what Clifton did. The only one who was seen by him.”

“Which means what? Be specific.”

“You have to understand, I was just a kid.”

“I get that.”

“The police confiscated my film and my camera when Clifton accused me, but it wasn’t the only film I had from those days. I’d been going through a roll of film almost every day. When I got home that day, relieved and terrified, I swapped out that day’s film for the roll I’d shot the day before.”

“Which was?”

“A series of previous fire sites showing the delete signature.”

“You and your friends had been crawling through arson sites.”

She nodded, hating the censure in his tone.

“You were insane. Where were your parents?”

“We weren’t insane. We were kids wanting to be heroes. Up until that summer nothing dangerous or exciting happened in our community. And my friend, who shall forever remain nameless, crawled out my bedroom window with that last roll of film when the police came knocking on my door with a search warrant. I didn’t even try to process that roll of film until after we were relocated the second time.”

“What did you find?”

She swallowed. It had been years since she let herself think about that image. “The last pictures on that roll were overexposed of course. I don’t think I realized at the time that I was still working the shutter and the film advanced.”

“Nicole, tell me.”

“I have the negatives.” She gulped air and tried to get the rest of it out. “Negatives of Clifton shooting my neighbor,” she finished on a hoarse whisper.

He was so quiet she knew he must be judging her for a coward—or worse—for not handing over such damning evidence when she discovered it. She wished her sight would hurry up and repair itself. She needed to see his face, to read the expression and emotions in his eyes. To know if there was any hope.

She knew before she jumped him that this ‘relationship’ would end sooner rather than later. Knew anything other than a flash and burn was a pipe dream. But she never thought she’d have to walk away with him thinking the worst of her.

“What was I supposed to say? Even with the pictures, I was just a kid and a potential arson suspect. Maybe if I’d understood more of the legal process I would have done things differently. But it just seemed like sharing that picture meant we’d have to move again. My sister already hated me.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

“Spoken like an only child.”

“I’ve had plenty of brothers in the Army. And don’t forget Eva.”

“But who do you go home to for holidays?” She regretted the words the moment they were out. “I’m sorry.” She didn’t need to see his expression to know she’d hurt him. “Rick—”

“Don’t apologize. You have a point,” he said, his voice steady. “Special Forces and dark ops are a different world and require a different outlook. Even now you’d say the recovery team is my family.”

He’d gone clinical, becoming the consummate professional again. A train whistle sounded in the distance, low and lonely, a perfect echo of the empty feeling inside her. “Where are the negatives, Nicole?”

Shivering, feeling over-exposed, she wished for the armor of real clothing rather than the sheet redolent with sex and bad judgment.

“At the beach.”

“There are several of those along the major train route.”

“South,” she said before he could ask again. “Myrtle Beach.”

* * *

At last, he had a destination. He felt like a jerk for prying it out of her that way, but she’d just handed him a solution and he meant to use it to her advantage. “Then we’ll be on our way as soon as Doc releases you.”

“What about my vision?”

“You said it was improving.”

She nodded, a small tight motion that said more about her emotional state than any words possibly could. “Pull on the scrubs and get some rest. We’ll see how you are in the

morning. No one will find us here. Do you want another ice pack?"

"No, thanks."

"All right. I'll be right outside the door."

He walked toward the kitchen to return the ice pack to the freezer, telling himself it was relief, not disappointment he felt that she turned down another round of ice. Holding her again was a dumb idea that would only hurt them both. His professional life was more stable since he'd joined Cypress Security, but he was on the job and that meant resolving Nicole's problem had to be his primary focus.

Just the way he was wired.

She was a case, if not an official client, and he refused to listen to the voice in his head that shouted otherwise. They might have crossed the line a few hours ago and he might have slept better beside her than he had slept alone in years, but that didn't mean they couldn't regain some professionalism.

She'd been upset about her injury. He'd been wired from the adrenaline. Sex happened.

He rubbed a hand over his chest, unable to convince himself that the sex hadn't meant anything. That she didn't mean anything. Cursing his conscience for a fool, he parked himself in the hallway outside her door and pulled out his phone.

Sliding the device back and forth through his fingers he reviewed everything he knew about her case so far. He had her real name. He had the name of the rogue agent hunting her. If

she really had the evidence she claimed – and he believed she did – it was time to take action.

Knowing he should sleep, he started scanning headlines on his phone instead. News agencies weren't reporting anything earth shattering about Nicole and he couldn't find anything about three bikers fighting it out with guns on a rural route.

He wasn't sure if that was good news or bad. Halfway through dialing Bart's number, he stopped. More than one agency kept close tabs on the man's truck stop and his friend knew how to avoid sticky situations.

Besides, the gang attack felt desperate. Inconvenient and frustrating, but desperate. He replayed the whole thing from the first biker blowing by the car to swapping weapons and vehicles with Bart.

There was no doubt in his mind if Nicole had been alone, she'd be dead. Those three had been bent on lethal action and whoever gave the order had high-level access. The only logical answer, the only reasonable assumption was the DEA agent. Even well-connected gangs didn't have immediate access to traffic cameras and the ability to get inside fire investigations. Typically, they didn't care.

His gut said the biker gang was secondary and no active threat to Nicole. She hadn't said anything that indicated she'd wronged anyone in that world. The bikers must have been tools sent by Clifton. He had to find a way to push the rogue agent, to make the man panic and trip up publicly.

Rick had been involved with taking down warlords in various ugly corners of the world and none of them relinquished power without a fight. Everything he knew so far made Clifton look like a bully who believed he was above the law. Rick had zero tolerance for bullies and looked forward to serving up a little vengeance.

He sent an email to Eva, including Nicole's real name and telling her he was taking Nicole back to the marshals' office until he isolated the threat. If he was lucky, Eva would forgive him for lying because if his misdirection made her look stupid, she'd be hell bent on getting even.

But that was the kind of problem he'd look forward to once he solved Nicole's situation. He knew Clifton wouldn't go down easy. Wanting to give Cypress Security 'plausible deniability' if things turned ugly, he decided it was best if he went 'offline' from this point forward. Taking the battery out of his phone, he put the pieces in separate pockets and waited for morning.

Chapter 11

A few hours later, he heard Doc's footsteps creak on the stairs and turn down the hallway.

"You should be in a bed," he scolded.

"Morning, Doc." Rick scrubbed at his face and enjoyed a big yawn. "If she checks out, we'll be out of your way within the hour." He wanted to see those negatives as soon as possible.

The doctor grunted. "And if she doesn't?"

"Guess you'll be stuck with us." Rick laced his fingers and stretched his arms over his head. "She passed the concussion questions each time and claimed she was seeing shadows when she woke up around midnight."

"Good. Looks like you're moving well enough."

"Yes, sir."

"Pull off your shirt and let me see."

Rick obeyed, turning around. The doc prodded the wound a bit before grumbling a general approval. "Keep it clean and

give it time to mend.”

“Sure thing, Doc.”

“*Hmph.*” The doctor turned and rapped softly on the door. “Good morning,” he said as he pushed the door open and stepped inside, Rick on his heels.

Nicole wore the scrubs and was propped up in bed, the camera in her lap. “Ah, you look refreshed today.” He nodded at the camera. “Should I assume your eyesight is restored?”

“Things are still blurry, but much better.”

“Good, good.” He shined a light in her eyes and made her track his finger. “What’s your name?”

“Nicole Livingston.”

Rick breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

“And his name?” The doctor jerked a thumb over his shoulder at Rick.

“Rick Dreyer,” she replied, but she didn’t meet his eyes. “Will my eyesight return to one hundred percent?”

“I expect so.” The doctor replied. “As the swelling eases, things should continue to improve. Let me look at those stitches.”

Nicole turned around and Rick watched the doc examine her. “Hmm. If you’re in this area next week you can check back with me and I’ll take those out or you can have your regular physician handle it and verify your vision is stable.”

Or, Rick thought, he would take them out if she was still in danger and putting up with him next week.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Come back to the kitchen and have a good breakfast before you two head out.”

“Sounds good. We’ll be right behind you,” Rick said.

“It’s your bacon going cold,” the doctor replied as he left the room.

“How are you feeling?”

“Much better. I slept well.”

“Good to know. Are you really able to see?” And if the answer was yes, could she tell how much he wanted to kiss her? More importantly, had she discovered anything telling in the pictures of her charred apartment building?

“The close up details are still a challenge, but I can sort out most big things.”

Like clothing, obviously. “I did the wash, but Kyle’s clothes are pretty much toast. Do you want me to pick up clothes or do you want to travel in those scrubs?”

“You did the wash?”

“Someone had to,” he said with a wink, wondering if she caught it. “And I figured your sorting skills weren’t up to par.”

“Did you sleep at all? Because I don’t think my driving skills are up to par either and I don’t want you falling asleep at the wheel.”

“I’m good.” Sleep was over-rated. The rest he’d had with her in his arms? That had been ten times more restorative. “Let’s go eat.”

“A doctor who serves bacon. Does that seem right to you?” she whispered as they walked down the hall.

He smiled, resisting the urge to tug her close to his side. She seemed determined to keep her distance this morning, only touching his arm lightly for guidance. “He’s my kind of doc.”

It was almost a relief when she retaliated with a friendly elbow to his ribs. He worried something was seriously off balance, but she seemed steadier, chatting with him and the doctor over bacon and eggs and two cups of coffee.

When they were on the road, he caught her squinting and shading her eyes against the morning sun streaming through the windshield. “Are you sure you’re okay? We could have waited.”

“You wanted to get on the road.”

“True. But not at the risk to your health.”

She snorted. “Do you really believe my health won’t be at more risk with whatever you have planned?”

He swallowed. “What do you think I have planned?”

“You’ve always got something percolating in your head.” She flicked a hand in the general direction. “Don’t sugarcoat it, just tell me. It’s my life after all.”

A cold dread settled in the pit of his stomach. This wasn't at all how he saw things going and he couldn't peg where it had changed. It *was* her life. Naturally he respected her independence, but he was determined to protect her from the dangers of the past and he'd already started envisioning how he wanted to fit into her future. If she'd have him.

Rubbing the heel of his hand against the dull ache in his chest, he shot her a look. He was being stupid. He'd been dealing with her troubles for a few days, she'd been dealing with them for nearly half her life. She'd survived a fire, been chased across town, shot at, blown into a tree, and temporarily blinded. He didn't need to add to her stress with his emotions and insecurities. When they got through this, when Clifton was answering for his crimes, there would be plenty of time to share his personal intentions.

“Okay. Without sugarcoating it, my plan is something along the lines of you show me the evidence and we call the marshals to hand the evidence over.” Clifton had to have some access within that office, though he couldn't imagine how or why. Yet.

“And hand me over to them too?”

He gritted his teeth. “If that's what you want.”

She went silent, but he could feel the temper simmering. “There's more you're not saying.”

A lot more. “You've known me for a couple of days, how can you say that?”

“Please. You have the hero face on.”

“The what?”

“Hero face. You put it on the first time when my face was plastered all over the news. You were wearing it yesterday when you left the interstate. And I might not have been able to actually see it, but it was in your voice when Doc stitched me up.”

“Huh.” He tried to grin, but whatever happened on his face, it only made her laugh. Still, laughter beat analysis every time in his book.

“So, hero. What’s the other thing you’re calculating?”

He might as well tell her and let her decide. “We choose a place and bring Clifton to you.”

“How? Should I send him an engraved invitation to tea?”

“You could. I was thinking we’d put some information out in the world and make him panic.”

“So he’ll make a mistake that will land him behind bars.”

Or dead. But he kept his preferred outcome to himself. “Do you know anything about the neighbor who was killed?”

“No.” She sighed, shifting restlessly as if she couldn’t get comfortable. “Well, not really. Is it normal to feel worse the day after being blown into a tree?”

“Always.”

“Goody.” Scooting around, she finally drew up her long legs and propped them on the dash. He could just imagine what

Bart would say, but he wasn't about to tell her no and interrupt a potential breakthrough.

“What do you remember about your neighbor?”

“About all I know is Mr. Chan was a nice guy. My friend mowed his front lawn, just because Mr. Chan knew he needed the job. He had one of those elaborate oriental gardens in the back yard. He gave out the good candy at Halloween. Full size candy bars. His huge tabby cat sat in the front window and watched us go to and from school every day.”

It was hard to imagine a man with that sort of neighborhood reputation crossing paths with Clifton, much less participating in criminal activity worthy of an execution. Of course, perception and reality often differed. “He lived alone? No wife or kids?”

“It was just him and the cat. He walked to and from work every day.”

“Wow. Where was work?”

“A little interior design shop in the village.”

He could almost hear the click of a real connection in his head. “Let me guess. He had some valuable antiques along with oriental rugs and more affordable pieces.”

“How could you know that?”

He chuckled. “It fits with the name and description you gave. An older man with experience in art and all that.”

“He wouldn't do anything illegal,” she protested.

“Hey, ease up. I’m not accusing him of anything. There are a dozen scenarios that end with him at the wrong end of Clifton’s gun. We just have to figure out what you saw and what led up to it.”

Nicole fisted her hands on her knees and pounded lightly. “It would be nice if I could figure out what I’m seeing now.”

“Nothing to see but miles of trees separated by the road. We’ve got a long ways to go.”

She turned, staring at him, slack-jawed.

“What?”

“You always say ‘almost there’.”

“Huh. Never noticed. But considering I don’t know exactly where ‘there’ is...” he trailed off, hoping she’d volunteer an address. At least something more specific than Myrtle Beach.

“I’ll fill you in on the details when we’re closer.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve never been to this place?”

“Of course I have, but not as Nicole Livingston. No one involved with WITSEC or my original life knows about it. Not even my current friends or coworkers.”

He had to hope she was right and no one—specifically Clifton—had made the connection.

On a sigh, she dropped her feet back to the floor boards. “The night of the fire wasn’t my best effort, obviously. I’ve been meticulously working on an escape route for years. The

fire seemed like good cover at the time, but in hindsight, I should have waited until I was less frazzled to run.”

“Blood loss probably didn’t help,” he teased.

“Talk like that sure doesn’t.”

“Right,” but he couldn’t quell the grin. “Getting back on point, if your Mr. Chan wasn’t a bad guy, what do you think happened?”

“How should I know?”

“You can’t tell me you haven’t created a theory or two along the way.”

“Maybe. But when you’re the only one thinking about stuff, when there’s no one to talk to about it, the ideas start to sound outrageous after a while.”

“What kind of stuff?”

“The fire patterns mainly.”

“You mean the delete sign signature?”

“Well, that too.” She went quiet and he knew she was reliving it. “I saw the DEA jacket,” she murmured. “Saw the shooter’s face. Clifton’s face. I— I think Mr. Chan’s last words were telling me to run.”

Sounded like a decent thing to do, Rick thought. But he didn’t see how that memory tied to the fire patterns. “You said the fires were mostly small?”

“Yes,” She gave a little shudder. “And obviously someone was sending a message by leaving the bold signature.”

“Right. But what pattern popped out to you?”

“The fires were mostly small and contained quickly. Not like the blaze at the apartment. It’s hard to explain and you’ll probably think I’m nuts.”

“Try me.”

“When I think back, I think all those fires were places that bought things from Mr. Chan’s shop.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” he said.

“Told you.” She sighed. “I know it’s a dumb theory and a weird connection. But still. He was a pillar in the community and most of the business owners in the area supported one another.”

“At this point every theory is worth exploring.” He stretched an arm across the cab and patted her knee, wishing she was closer. “My thought is if Chan had sold something that was valuable to Clifton—purposely or not—why would Clifton’s arsonist try and torch it? Why not steal it back?”

“Exactly.” Perked up, she surged against the seat belt. “Unless the fires were a message or a threat.”

“What kind of message? And how do you hurt a man with no family?”

“Put him out of business, I guess.” She shrugged a shoulder. “He was devoted to that shop and the community.”

“So not only the business, but to really get under his skin, you let him know his community is suffering because of him.”

“Sounds like psychology 101. But that still doesn’t explain the why of it. I’ll never believe Mr. Chan was into anything illegal.”

He wasn’t about to challenge her belief. Not until he saw the pictures. Assuming there was anything that would shed light on this twisted mess. The gang was Asian, the victim was Asian. It was entirely possible the illegal activity had occurred overseas.

“Did Mr. Chan ever travel much for work or fun?”

“My sister and I sometimes took care of his cat when he went on buying trips, but those were short, always less than a week, and usually to New York or Chicago. He never talked about going all the way back to China.”

“Didn’t mean that wasn’t where he went.”

“True.”

“Did you and your sister cat sit for him anytime that summer?”

“Just the week of spring break.” She lapsed into silence and he let her, his mind turning over the possibilities. Really, none of it mattered if the evidence she’d been hiding wasn’t enough to force Clifton into making a mistake.

He couldn’t be sure how the marshals or a federal prosecutor would react to an old photo. There had to be ways to verify it as genuine, but he didn’t know what those methods were, or how to make it happen. He was getting ahead of himself again.

First they had to safely reach Myrtle Beach and then they could figure out the next step.

* * *

Agitated, Clifton paced his hotel room, determined to find his target. The photos he'd taken at the scene were cycling through in a slide show on his laptop. Skid marks and scorched trees and blood smears. And no record of a woman being there at all.

He'd arrived at the scene as the sedan was being loaded onto a wrecker. Too late to plant any damaging evidence. It was the same model and the same license plate as the sedan Livingston had used to evade his agents at the apartment. Clifton had been forced to leak a new theory about the rural route battle through a hungry television reporter who'd shown up while he was still walking the scene.

Based on what his agents had given him so far on Bartholomew that theory wouldn't distract anyone for long.

Catastrophic failure didn't begin to cover this fiasco.

He threw a punch at the wall, pulling back at the last second. He'd save that—and more—for the man helping her.

With no valid reason to be there, he'd had to avoid the pre-op interrogations of the two surviving bikers. Since he was still in his hotel rather than a jail cell, he had to assume they hadn't given him up. Yet.

But he could hear the clock ticking like a bomb in his head. He knew how his agency worked. It was just as likely the

authorities running the case were trying to verify any wild claims made by the bikers. With one brief phone call he used the shame of failure to adjust the terms of his agreement with the Dragons. The injured bikers would soon die from complications while under guard at the hospital.

He knew he could leave the country tonight and to hell with his reputation. The money would buy him all the respect he needed in Abu Dhabi. But he would know he'd been out maneuvered by a little girl.

There had to be a play, a way to finish this on his terms. He just had to think.

His computer chimed with an email update. The agent had provided a full report, including the detailed record the DEA maintained on Bartholomew, his businesses, and his associations. Clifton swore at the obvious regard the local office held for Bartholomew. Seemed the man had been helpful in chasing down drugs and money over the years.

How convenient that he'd called his own wrecker company to tow the sedan to the evidence lot. According to the email, the other vehicles were accounted for as well. But Bartholomew hadn't walked up on the scene and the lead biker had reported the woman was in the sedan before he'd attacked.

Where was Livingston?

Clifton combed through Bartholomew's resume, quickly finding the medical discharge from the Army. A veteran. A vet had started that investigation company in South Carolina too. The company that held the registration on the sedan.

He sat back, tapping his fountain pen to the notepad. It was worth a shot. He shut down his computer and slid it into the pocket of his overnight case. Grabbing his keys and cell phones, he prepared for another road trip.

No better place to start than a fill up at the busiest truck stop on Interstate 95.

* * *

Nicole came awake as the sound of the truck engine changed. She glanced around, amazed that the haze and blurriness had disappeared.

“Oh! Rick! I can see. Everything is clear at last.”

Rick glanced her way and smiled. “You’re not even squinting. Guess I should have stopped for gas sooner.”

“I didn’t mean to doze off.”

“No problem.”

She glanced at the clock on the dash, but had no idea how long she’d been out. “Where are we?”

“Just entered South Carolina.”

She’d slept for hours. “You must be tired too,” she said as he pulled into a gas station and stopped at the pump furthest from the store. “Want me to drive from here?”

He made a show of pocketing the keys. “No thanks.”

She watched him walk away to pre-pay with cash. Better than risking a trace on a credit or debit charges, she supposed.

Digging some money out of her purse, she hopped out of the truck and rushed to catch up.

He glanced around, reminding her to look for cameras. “Do I need to buy another hat?”

“How close are we?”

“Maybe another hour, two at most.”

“Then don’t worry about it.” He opened the door and motioned her through. “Even if they pick us up here,” he said under his breath, “they don’t know where we’re going. There’s a case to be made that I’m taking you to the Cypress Security office.”

Her resulting questions had to wait as he headed for the counter and she headed toward the coolers in the back. Grabbing two bottles of soda, she headed for the counter.

Instinctively, she kept her gaze down, but the chattering anchor on the television behind the cashier caught her attention.

“Police still aren’t clear as to why the bikers attacked the driver of the sedan, but the assumption is a drug exchange gone bad.”

Clifton.

She barely contained the burst of profanity burning on her tongue as she paid for the sodas and a couple of candy bars she’d added on impulse. The slimy bastard was trying to smear Bart’s reputation. Talk about predictable!

Thanking the cashier, she tossed a brittle smile up at the security camera over the door and rolled her shoulders back. Let Clifton find her. She'd be ready this time and armed with evidence he couldn't possibly twist out of.

She rushed back to where Rick was coaxing the aging gas pump to cooperate.

“What's wrong?”

“Clifton is trying to smear Bart's rep in another media mismanagement.” She jerked a thumb over her shoulder toward the store. “It was on the television. The reporter is calling the incident with the bikers a drug exchange gone bad.”

Rick laughed. “That'll be an epic fail.”

“You're sure?”

“Oh, yeah.”

His easy confidence gave her a boost. “I hoped so. But well... I really appreciate you.”

His smile faded and his eyes narrowed. “You appreciate me?”

“Definitely.” The gas pump chimed as it reached the pre-paid limit. She hurried around to the other side, suddenly eager to get to the beach and get on with Rick's plan.

It was an exhilarating thought that Rick might be able to liberate her from this limbo in a legal way. A way that let her have a real life. She wasn't particularly eager to return to a name and life she'd left behind, but it would be such a relief to

live without hyper-analyzing every moment for a potential threat.

The giddy sensation buzzing in her blood made her realize the true price of living with an axe hanging over her head. It was always there in the back of her mind, the constant wondering when she'd be found again—or worse, caught—by the bad guy.

But now the vicious bad guy who'd killed Mr. Chan had a name. She smiled as she thought about it. Not for Clifton and definitely not for what he cost her. No, the smile was all for Rick, who'd given her that first step toward real freedom.

“You look pleased with yourself,” he said when she settled back into the passenger seat.

“Not with myself. With you. Well, maybe with both of us.”

“Pardon?”

She knew what he must be thinking. “I know the happy is a turnaround. You don't have to look so shocked.”

He kept his eyes on the road as they continued toward the beach. “I figured it's either the bump on your head or ah, maybe last night.”

“Hmm.” She pretended to think about it. “Probably the bump.”

He shook his head.

“Seriously, I wouldn't even have Clifton's name without you. I wouldn't have this new hope that this nightmare might

really be over soon without your—”

“Interference?”

“Dedication.” He was one of the good guys who’d seen a woman in trouble and decided to stick around rather than walk away.

“I hope you’re not lumping last night into that definition,” he grumbled.

Her face went hot and she raised the cold plastic soda bottle to her cheek. Last night proved dedication of a completely different variety. “I didn’t mean to force that, umm...” her voice trailed off at his thunderous glare.

“What I mean is—” That look tripped her up, made it hard to know quite what she meant or how to find the right words to explain it. She took a long drink of the soda, hoping the carbonation would clear a path through her suddenly parched throat. “I’m attracted to you, obviously. And it, umm, seemed mutual, but I don’t expect anything,” she finished in a rush.

“Maybe you should.”

What did that mean? And why did thinking about Rick and expectations in the same sentence cause an unprecedented flutter low in her belly? She’d heard girls talk about this feeling, but it had never happened to her.

Because you always kept your distance. Until now.

She couldn’t really let herself expect anything from Rick. Could she? The idea took root in her heart before she could stop it. Meeting him was a chance encounter. He helped her

because his company was helping Allie. The sex, well that had been an amazing culmination of consenting adults reacting to mutual attraction and surviving a deadly attack.

She slid a glance his way, noting the tension in his shoulders, the tic in his jaw, and his intense focus on the road in front of them.

In his line of work he must have faced countless threats to his life. He'd been married, so he couldn't have turned to mindless sex to get over all of them, could he?

“Let's just get back on point,” he said, his voice heavy with disappointment.

In her?

“Right.” Her giddy confidence long gone, she organized her thoughts on Clifton, drawing connections between past and present behavior. “You don't think he'll manage to hurt Bart, do you? Not even personally?” She worried for Kyle.

“Not a chance. Bart knows all the major players in the local game and Clifton's not one of them. I don't care what title or power he thinks he has, his tactics won't convince anyone who does know Bart.”

“Good.”

“It is good. Trying to discredit Bart only proves Clifton doesn't know everything.”

“I'd just hate to have—”

“Your mess hurt others,” he finished for her. “I get it.” He started to reach across the cab, then deliberately put his hand back on the steering wheel.

She didn’t care for the feeling that she was missing out on something precious. It put her back on the defensive. A position she thought she was done with where he was concerned. “It’s true. My decisions have been ruining lives for too many years now.”

“Every decision has ripple effects on the people around us, Nicole. You don’t have a monopoly on that.”

Comments like that made her want to ask about his wife and why he still felt so much guilt over her death. They both knew some ripples were bigger than others. It might be nice to know more about what he did or how he usually went about doing it. “So where is the Cypress Security office?”

“Columbia.” He shot her a look. “You want a tour?”

She ignored that. “If they figured out your real identity and matched the car that got attacked with your office where does that leave us?”

“Can’t say for sure.” He flexed his hands on the steering wheel. “Seems like Clifton has remarkable reach and sources and I can only hope his determination to silence you will lead him into a trap he can’t escape.”

“You want him to have your information so he can track us?”

“It’s the only way to be sure he has enough rope to hang himself.”

If Rick had a plan for using the evidence she'd stashed to make the noose, she might feel as if her family could be avenged.

Catching the scent of saltwater, she rolled down her window, inhaling deeply. "Nothing like the coast," she said, hoping to get back to more comfortable territory for both of them. Traffic was minimal this time of year and as they rolled down the main street, Myrtle Beach felt more like a ghost town than tourist hub.

"Where are we headed?"

"My place is on South Kings Highway, just keep heading south."

"Okay."

"Let me plug the address into your phone."

"Just use the navigation thing there," he said, nodding at the GPS device on the truck's dash.

He'd turned gruff and quiet and didn't show any indication of perking up. What was his problem? Where had the easygoing charm gone? She thought it was usually the female who got all goofy or moody after sex.

Not that she hadn't felt plenty of things she didn't expect to feel after their encounter, but still. He was the one who'd planted kisses on her just for show. Kisses that sparked reactions she wanted to recreate and explore. He'd seemed more than willing last night.

She let her thoughts wander as the navigation device calculated the route and guided Rick toward Oceanside Campground.

The security guard at the gate waved him on toward the check in station. He parked and followed her inside. She handled the details and secured a pass for the truck while he hovered near the stand of tourism brochures near the door.

He stared at her for a long minute when they were back in the truck. “You bought a beach house.”

“Sue me. I missed the ocean. East coast surfing isn’t quite what I grew up with, but it gives me the fix I’m after.”

“You surf?”

“Not so uncommon for a southern California native. WITSEC made me give it up.”

“And they don’t know about this place?”

“Nope. Bought it years ago under a different name. Private sale.”

He stared at her as if she’d lost her mind. “Wow.”

She didn’t think he sounded as much impressed as doubtful. “There had to be some place for me to be myself. A place where all of the pieces of my life felt like they were in order.”

He reached out again, this time catching her hand in his. An inexplicable sense of comfort radiated from that one point of contact, easing the knots in her shoulders and neck.

She let the navigation guide him around lakes and through acres of mobile homes, campers, and cottages.

“This place is huge.”

“I know. It was such a great discovery.” She’d done the same thing, peeking down streets and aisles of campers, mobile homes, and pre-fab cottages. “I started with a little camper they stored for me and eventually upgraded to my own cottage.” She took in the changes since her last visit as they approached her wooded lot. “Part of the appeal was the size of the campground.”

“Anonymity in numbers?”

“Absolutely. Along with lots of traffic year-round and twenty-four-seven security. The storage option made life so simple. Whenever I needed to get away, I just called and they pulled it into a space on the beach side campground. No towing or the hassles that went with it.”

“No big signals about your destination. You thought it through.”

“I told you I’m not always as flaky as the night of the fire. Park right here.” She pointed to a patch of sandy grass as the navigation voice announced their arrival.

“We should have stopped for groceries on the way in,” she mused.

“Let’s see the evidence first.”

Her tension ramped up again in response to his stern, waste-no-time approach. She breathed slowly, telling herself he just

wanted this over as much as she did. For different reasons, but ‘over’ seemed his top priority. Making advances—who was she kidding with *that* politically correct phrase—jumping him had been a mistake. It had changed the dynamic and she didn’t understand the new rules. Were there any? She felt unsteady, like walking on the shore as the tide sucked away the sand from under her feet.

“Of course.” She wrestled her purse out of the bookbag and started to dig for the cottage key. Rarely used, it always wound up underneath everything else. She was grateful for Kyle’s bookbag, but she planned to be a girl all the time from this point forward. No more hiding. No more ducking from anyone. It was amazing how empowered she felt, how ready to make a stand just because Rick was beside her.

“Cute place,” he said.

She didn’t have to watch him to know he was taking in all the variables with a quick, casual look around. “It does the trick. The last renters left two weeks ago.”

“Hang on? You rent out this place?”

She suspended her key search, looking up into his eyes this time. The hard expression matched his voice. “Sure. It’s financially smart.”

He slung his backpack down to the step and turned her to face him, his palms heavy on her shoulders. “You rent out a space where you keep vital evidence stored?”

She pitched her voice low to match his. “Who’s going to look here? No one who knows me now or knew me way back then can connect me to this place.”

“Good lord, Nicole!”

“Hush.” It was her turn to look around, but they were alone. She squirmed out from under his grip. “Come on in and you’ll see.”

Chapter 12

Rick told himself to shut up. Bottom line, it had been her problem and her business for years and she'd apparently done a good job of protecting the evidence so far. He was new to the situation and shouldn't criticize the choices she'd made. Still, her cavalier attitude about such damning proof bothered him. The negatives were probably stashed in the bottom of a cookie jar or wrapped up in the back of the freezer. Why would she risk a stranger tripping over something that could end her ordeal?

Assuming she had what she thought she had.

In his gut, he knew she did. Worse, he believed Clifton suspected the same thing.

He followed her up the steps of the cottage, his gaze roaming the neighboring properties and layout while she fiddled with the lock. The area was quiet enough he could hear the surf meeting the nearby beach. "Is the beach public access?"

“Not on this end. There’s a stretch of a little more than a mile that’s reserved for owners.”

Score one for campground security. “Nice perk.”

“One of many.” The door swung open and she walked inside. “Home sweet home.”

“Uh-huh.” The layout was roomier than first glance from outside, and it was clean and bright inside. Neutral colors on the furnishings and décor, with the requisite coastal prints on the walls. Except for one panoramic sunrise in the place of honor over the loveseat.

He walked closer, knowing the truth. “You took this one.” It was in the composition, the way she used the light and seemed to catch the life of one individual swell.

She stepped up beside him. “It was a good day.”

“You thought it might be your last day here.”

She paled, and pushed a hand through her hair. “That’s silly.” Her protest only confirmed his theory. “I own the place and come here at least once a year.”

That was another concern about her plan. Alias or not, if she traveled here frequently, her handlers at WITSEC had probably figured it out. At this point, he might count it in the positive column. Based on Clifton’s long reach, he and Nicole would need some back up. “You really were planning to run away.”

“Eventually.” She shrugged. “If they wouldn’t bring the case to trial, well... no one likes to wait forever.”

“Have you already moved the evidence out of here?”

“No.” Her eyes went wide at his sharp accusation and he coached himself to ease up. “I’ve always had a reserve file. In case one or the other gets compromised by nosy renters.”

He ignored that. “What’s your end game, Nicole? Tell me right now.” He caught her wrist when she started to back away. “Have you already put something in motion?”

“How would I do that?” She tugged, but he held fast. “I didn’t even know who to bait. My end game, as you put it, was simply to regain control of my future.”

She wasn’t lying, but he didn’t think it was all of the truth. His gaze shifted between the framed photo and the brave woman who’d taken it. “Fine.” He released her, guilt digging at him as she rubbed her wrist. “Sorry.” There wasn’t anything else to say, no explanation he could offer that would make sense to her. She called to something deep inside of him. More than the job, stronger than simple chemistry. She stirred up feelings and hopes that felt bigger and more vital than what he’d felt with his wife. How was that even possible?

He looked away from her big brown eyes and scrubbed at the stubble on his jaw. A long shower and a close shave might have him feeling and acting more civilized. Unfortunately that only put him in mind of sharing that shower with her.

“Do you know your neighbors?”

“Only vaguely. Those I’ve met know me as Olivia, but this place is pretty quiet at this time of year.”

“Good.” The last thing he wanted was collateral damage if Clifton found them here. “Where are the negatives?”

“Why don’t you drive on back to the market and pick up dinner and whatever else you need. Put it on the account.”

“Trying to get rid of me?”

“No, I’ve learned that lesson. You’re starving.” She pointed at him, making a circle in the air with her finger. “It’s all over your face. If you want me to come along, I will.”

He didn’t want her out of his sight, despite the relative safety and anonymity of the campground. “I’d feel better if we stuck together.”

Her easy smile flowed over him, lightening the load. No denying it, not that he wanted to. It wasn’t a smart or timely move, but he’d managed to go from zero to love in less than forty-eight hours. Damn.

A stronger man might give that some analysis, but, like sleep, he felt it was overrated. Rick’s first priority was freeing her from the looming threat of Clifton. She wanted control of her future and he intended to see that she got what she wanted.

If he was lucky, she’d want him too.

* * *

Nicole couldn’t believe the difference a meal could make. She’d kept it simple: salsa chicken and a salad, but Rick seemed to relax exponentially with every bite.

And every minute that Clifton didn't barge through the cottage door was a relief to her.

Trekking through the market together had felt almost routine as they gathered food and supplies to get them through the next few days. While he hadn't held her close to his side like their first emergency excursion, she'd felt just as tethered to him as they filled the shopping cart.

They'd gone over two hours so far without mentioning Clifton, the negatives, or anything related to her situation. The cottage had a television, but by some unspoken agreement, they hadn't turned it on.

She assumed the marshals were still searching for her and that she was still wanted for questioning in Virginia for the accusations Clifton had dumped on her head. For now, she was fine with only the desperate hope that her enemy and his biker wannabe assassins were in custody.

Better that fleeting hope than confirmation to the contrary.

When Rick insisted on doing the dishes, she excused herself and retreated to the bedroom. Sleeping arrangements would be interesting. They hadn't discussed it yet, but her body hummed with the anticipation of returning to Rick's warm embrace. She wouldn't assume he wanted to share the bed or go for an encore performance of last night's passion.

Mentally, she crossed her fingers but she vowed not to make the first move. Somewhere during the day, she'd made a mistake or said the wrong thing and she couldn't get a clear read on what he wanted from her.

In a perfect world, a world where she wasn't alternately a witness and a fugitive, they would be here for a lover's getaway. They'd walk the beach holding hands, search for shells, share late dinners and intimate early mornings.

Her gut twisted. Until now, she hadn't realized how deeply she wanted that romantic slice of life. She hadn't held much hope of finding a man who knew—and cared for—the real woman buried under the false names and dark history. But she longed for that kind of relationship. She wanted someone to lean on in good times and bad. Tears stung her eyes. Oh, how she wanted to create some good times.

With Rick.

Years of emotional distance from people gave her a certain self-awareness. She innately understood this fantasy had never been a whisper in her mind because she'd never met *him*. If he got her out of this, out from under Clifton, could she convince him to spend more time with her?

She distracted herself from the emotional dilemma by nudging aside the bed and area rug to access the floor safe underneath. Tipping the loose piece of flooring freed the bigger panel and revealed the combination dial on the flat gray box.

“Hey, would you like to go for a walk?”

Startled by Rick's question, she botched the combination and had to start again. “You can be very stealthy,” she accused.

“It's an acquired skill.”

She snorted. “I imagine you’ve had lots of cause to practice.”

“You imagine correctly.”

Her pulse kicked with the idea that her most recent imagining might come to pass, but that was for later. “Here you go.” With her most professional voice, she withdrew a plain white letter-sized envelope from the safe. Taking out the only other memento of her first life, she sat back and closed the safe, covering it with the flooring.

“How many renters do you think look under the bed for a missing sandal in any given summer?”

“Tens of thousands I’m sure.” She laughed at his dark scowl. “Forgive me,” she managed. “Lost sandals or not, no one’s disturbed the safe yet.”

“What if—”

Perching on the foot of the bed, she cut off his next protest with a raised hand. “When my mother and sister were killed, I stopped asking that question. I did my best with the information I had and kept moving forward.”

She traced the edges of the envelope with her fingertip, knowing she couldn’t put it off any longer. Handing it to him, she said, “See for yourself. My first year of college, I developed two prints from the negatives and eventually stored them in separate locations.” She felt a swell of pride that she got all that out in a rock-steady voice. “Go ahead. Take a look.”

He studied her for what felt like an eternity before slowly lifting the flap. The shock on his face relieved any lingering worry about the validity of the horrific image she'd caught that day.

"It's enough, isn't it?"

"Yes," he whispered.

She stroked the jade figurine in her hand. It was the male of a Chinese Fu dog set. Mr. Chan had given it to her along with a hefty tip for cat sitting that last spring break. Her sister had received the matching female. He'd told them the legend and the symbolism of the protective guardians and they'd placed the statues on either side of the tall bookcase they'd shared.

Rick lifted the negatives to the light and she watched his expression transform into the implacable mask she'd come to know meant he was planning something. Whatever his idea, she'd go along with it; she trusted him that much.

"Do you have a computer here?"

"No."

"All right. We can use my iPad."

"There's a small business center at the commons if you want a regular computer."

"I saw it. We might do that later," he said, holding the envelope out to her. "Put this away and let's take a walk."

"Pardon me?" How could he possibly want to blow this off? "Won't this put the nail in Clifton's coffin?" And shouldn't

they do that as soon as possible?

He hooked his thumbs into the back pockets of his jeans. “Definitely.” The slow curve of his lips was absolutely predatory. She felt ridiculously better in an instant.

“We could fax this to the authorities tonight. Or scan it and send an email.”

“It’s within the realm of possibility, sure. But it’s a gorgeous evening. Seems a shame to waste it hanging around indoors waiting for those authorities to take action.”

He had her there. She didn’t want to believe their time was limited, but that was the reality and she wanted to make the most of it. She stowed the envelope once more, but set the Fu dog on the dresser as they left the bedroom.

When they were outside and the cottage locked behind them, he caught her hand. It felt like the most natural thing in the world to walk with him this way on a crisp fall evening with the ocean on the breeze.

Her new flip flops slapped against her feet as they followed the trail toward the sound of the surf. “Are we out here just so you can reconnoiter or whatever it’s called?”

“That’s just a bonus.” He made an exaggerated show of looking around in all directions, including up at the twilight sky. “I’m out here because I haven’t been to the beach with a beautiful woman in ages.”

She rolled her eyes, but only as a small defense against the sweet tenderness of holding his hand. “I almost offered this

place to Allie when things fell apart for her.”

“That would’ve been interesting.”

“How so?”

“Ross was frustrated enough by the complexities of tailing her in Haleswood. He’d have had conniptions trying to go unnoticed around here.”

“Ross?”

“My boss, owner of Cypress Security.”

“Not Ross Carpenter?” She scolded herself for not putting that together sooner. To be fair, she’d had enough of her own crap to deal with these past days.

“The same,” Rick confirmed, steadying her through the deep, loose sand of the dunes that edged the beach. “Why?”

Nicole chuckled as she slipped out of her flip flops. “I can’t wait to hear how that reunion goes.”

“Hang on. What do you know that I don’t?”

“I’m not so sure a girl ever really gets over her first love.” She snickered when he just stared at her, mouth agape. “Come on. You didn’t know they had a history?”

“The boss keeps his private life private.”

“Men,” she muttered. Clearly Rick was rehashing some of his old memories while they wandered down the beach. She wished she’d brought her camera along. Even in the low light, his square jaw stood out like sculptured marble.

She wanted to touch him, to trace those strong angles with her finger and feel the rough whiskers against her skin. The intensity of her attraction scared her and she forced her gaze to a raucous flock of seagulls partying in a puddle left by the outgoing tide.

“What about your first love?”

Nicole ignored the question as long as possible, but lifted her gaze to his when he squeezed her hand. She suspected she was staring up into the eyes of her first love and her previous comment would prove as true for her as it had for her friend. Rick wasn't a man she'd forget.

“Clifton interrupted that.” She kept her voice light. “I had a crush on a guy that summer, but he didn't see past my camera. Then I got swept away by WITSEC and making friends seemed like a risky proposition, forget about boyfriends.”

“Then who did you think about when you were posing as Nick?”

“Just because I haven't been in love,” *until now*, she amended silently, “doesn't mean I wasn't infatuated with the unattainable guys in school.”

“Who would've been out of your league?”

She popped him lightly in the shoulder. “Stop it. Flattery isn't necessary.”

“I'm serious. I bet all the boys were terrified of you.”

“You've got a rich fantasy life.”

“Well, that’s true too, but don’t change the subject.”

She blushed at the unspoken promise in his words and felt the heat rush all the way from her ears to her toes.

She was saved from a response by a big golden retriever racing into the flock of seagulls and sending them skyward in a comical symphony of barking and raucous calling. “The owner’s dog,” she explained to Rick. “He’s an absolute love.”

“Loves to cause riots at least.”

She smiled as the dog detoured toward them. “Only out here and only when it’s not crowded.” Kneeling, she exchanged kisses with the big guy. “It’s amazing that he remembers me.”

“Maybe you’re his first love,” Rick said, rubbing the dog’s ears.

“You’re not nearly as funny as you think.” They waved as the dog turned at the owner’s call and raced back down the beach.

Rick was staring at the sky. “When I was in high school, we used to get together for a bonfire at the beach after the last home football game of the season.”

“I bet the girls were all over you.”

“Oh?”

“The jaw, the serious eyes.” The shoulders too, but she kept that to herself. “Don’t tell me the girls didn’t follow you around like lost puppies.”

“Maybe. But I only had eyes for one.”

“Did she return your affections or do you pine for her still?”
Nicole teased, clutching her clasped hands over her heart.

“Both. I suppose. I married her.”

Before the words left his mouth, she knew she’d crossed a line. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to dredge up old pains.”

“You didn’t. Truth is, it doesn’t hurt so much anymore.”

The intensity in his eyes stole her breath. The message was up for interpretation, but she got the impression he meant his feelings were different because of her. Maybe that’s just what she wanted to believe. Unsure what to say, uncertain she could form a reply, she waited for him to elaborate.

“Don’t get me wrong. I loved her with everything I had. Still love what we had when we had it. But my job kept us apart more than any newlyweds should be.”

Her heart ached for him.

He turned to the horizon and raised a finger toward the bright point of a star. “Will you make a wish?”

Only for him. “Maybe.”

“I dare you.” There was a spark in his gaze and his eyes crinkled at the corners when he grinned.

“How will you know? I can’t tell you or it won’t come true.”

“That’s only for birthday candle wishes.”

“It’s for all wishes,” she said.

“Is not.”

“Is so.” She’d never had such a silly debate in her life. At least not since before WITSEC. It was gloriously normal. Immediately, she gazed up at the star and wished for a lifetime of nights like this one. “Did you make a wish?”

His eyes locked with hers, then drifted down to her lips. “I did.”

She shivered and he wrapped his arm around her shoulders, turning back toward the campground.

“Thank you. This was a good idea.”

“I have them occasionally.”

“Hmm. That sounds like a clear invitation to ask about your ideas for trapping Clifton.”

“We don’t have to get into it right now,” he said as they crossed the sand dunes again. “I don’t imagine he’ll find us before tomorrow.”

“I haven’t told anyone where we are, or where we were headed. Have you?”

“Of course not. I actually told Eva I was taking you back to the marshals.”

“Wow.”

“Still, the license plate on the truck is registered to Bart and Clifton knows about Bart. And my phone’s in pieces, just in case someone circumnavigated Eva’s firewalls at the office.”

She had no idea what to say to that revelation. It was a smart move considering Clifton had proven terrifyingly resourceful

in the past.

“So... we’re alone?” Nerves and doubts reared up. Rick had training and skills. She had an eye for composition and couldn’t see how she’d be much help to him.

He stopped her in a puddle of shadows between streetlights that glowed periodically along the path. “No. We’re together.”

Her doubts faded under his conviction and her body came to life as he embraced her. Pulse jumping, she tipped up her face for his kiss.

* * *

Rick gazed down at her full lips and took his time meeting them. She embodied his every temptation, but he wanted more than the flash and heat this time. He wanted her to feel what he felt, to treasure their connection like he did.

Her lips parted and his tongue swept over hers and tenderness gave way to need. Hours might have passed, he was so lost in her, heedless of time and place, and he wanted to string this out indefinitely.

Taking the kiss deeper, he drew her closer, molding her body to his, and letting her feel his intense reaction. Her soft moan nearly undid him.

The wind gusted and a pine branch creaked overhead. His instincts pricked, he broke the kiss. “We should get inside.” Though he didn’t feel any imminent threat, simple logic demanded that he remember what brought them here. A dangerous man wanted her dead.

The cool night did nothing to mute his need for her, but when they were safely in the cottage, she grew skittish and retreated to the small kitchen.

“Would you like a beer?”

“No, thanks.” He thought he’d made it clear he wanted her. “What’s the matter, Nicole?”

She fidgeted with the bottle opener she didn’t need. “We, umm, didn’t discuss sleeping arrangements.”

In his mind they could work out who preferred which side of the bed later, but he had no intention of letting her sleep alone. “You’re tired?” He closed the distance and trapped her in the corner, his arms braced on the counter top on either side of her hips.

“No. Not particularly.”

“Neither am I.” He placed a kiss on the soft skin of her slender throat. “Want me to leave you alone?”

“Shouldn’t we talk about your plan?” Her head fell back, giving him better access and he took full advantage until her arms came around his waist.

“Tomorrow’s soon enough. Let’s take tonight for us.” He boosted her into his arms and carried her back to the bedroom. They could work out the sleeping part later.

Chapter 13

Nicole wasn't sure she'd ever breathe normally again. Her heart still pounded and, barring an emergency, she didn't think she'd be able to move anytime soon. She'd kept her vow not to make the first move and discovered Rick had some seriously persuasive and delicious moves in his arsenal.

What they'd just shared defied a definition. Last night had been more than spontaneous combustion, she recognized that, but tonight had carried her further into the unknown.

She'd felt romanced, adored, and oh-so-thoroughly satisfied.

He'd given her the moments she'd been longing for. As if he'd read her diary, a habit she'd never started. No, it went deeper than that. She didn't believe he'd really read her mind, but on some level he understood her. Possibly better than she understood herself.

"You didn't have to feel obligated to umm, you know," she said, hating the insecurity in her voice.

He chuckled, the raspy sound confirming he was a little breathless himself. “If you thought that was obligation, sweetheart, then I was doing something wrong.” His arms banded around her as he nuzzled her ear. “Give me a few minutes and I’ll be happy to redeem myself.”

His warm fingers trailed over her breast, and across her belly to settle on her hip.

She twitched under the soft, teasing touch of his thumb tracing circles over her skin, letting the moment sink in. He cared—not just about doing his job or giving an outstanding sexual performance—but about her specifically.

She could feel it simmering between them, beyond the obvious desire and passion.

She had no idea how or why she deserved this—*him*—but she thought it was probably best to appreciate her good fortune while it lasted. They might have been strangers days ago, but she knew his true character by his actions.

He’d leapt to her assistance repeatedly, though she didn’t trust him or value his efforts early on. Rick was one of those people who did the right thing on principle, because anything less was unacceptable.

It was crazy and stupid to let her heart into the mix, but recognizing the happiness fluttering in her pulse, she knew it was already too late.

Assuming the best, that Rick would ensure they both survived Clifton’s retaliation and she didn’t end up doing time

for evading the marshals or withholding evidence, she wondered again if there was any chance for them to be together when her life was no longer chaotic.

On a logical level, she'd long ago accepted her life was incomplete, that holding back—by necessity—meant it would always be so. To share this wide-open passion with Rick, to give all of herself physically and let herself experience the full range of emotion was terrifying and glorious. She stroked the hot, slick skin of his shoulders, tracing his carved biceps and let herself imagine that every night could be this perfect.

When his lips seared a delightful path along her throat, wondering and thinking became impossible as he rose over her once more and she gave herself up to the beauty of the moment.

* * *

Rick reluctantly eased away from Nicole's warm body and out of the bed as the first rays of sunlight put a glow behind the pleated window shade. He tugged the blanket up over her shoulder and smiled, thinking they'd managed the sleeping arrangements just fine.

Showered, shaved, and dressed in normal clothes again, he sat down at the small breakfast table with a mug of coffee and his iPad. Information was critical to making the right choice about whom to approach and with what evidence.

He'd given up on using anything about Chan to get under Clifton's skin. Aside from the photographic evidence of

Clifton putting the bullet in Chan's temple, the case was too old and too cold.

There were several emails from Eva. None of them very helpful or encouraging. He skimmed the photo arrays of gang bangers, but he didn't recognize anyone. She was furious with him for shutting down his phone—which interrupted the GPS trace she kept on investigators in the field—and there was a lively tirade about Bart being on the payroll that made him laugh.

“Good news at last?” Nicole walked in wearing a thin, short robe that hugged her body, still damp from the shower. The view made him want to forget everything else and take her back to bed.

He cleared his throat. “Not if you're Eva. Apparently, Bart's officially on the payroll.”

“Don't they get along?” She poured a cup of coffee and leaned back against the counter. When she raised the cup to her lips, the hem of her robe crept up her long, lovely thighs. He looked away in self-preservation.

“They do. They just love to hassle each other.” He was about to say more when the email about the second fire Nicole supposedly set seized his attention. “Come here.”

He opened it and when she pulled a chair around to sit beside him, they read it together. Eva had been busy. She listed dates and places of arson events with a delete signature, most of which coincided with Clifton's various assignments going back to that fateful summer that changed Nicole's life.

She'd also copied and pasted an official report of the gang house fire, stating Nicole was a person of interest based on symbols found at the fire and the items she'd escaped with: two kilos of cocaine and several firearms.

Rick seethed, recognizing the gang name and reputation. "Clifton wasn't screwing around. He painted a nasty target on your back. We're lucky we got out of the immediate area when we did."

"But I wasn't there," she whispered. "The gang has to know I wasn't there."

"Let's just see what symbols they found." He opened the attachment and experienced a rush of instant gratification. "Is that the signature?"

She nodded, her fingers pressed to lips gone white with fear old and new. "What's going to happen now?"

"Now, we spring the trap." But she was frozen in place, staring at the screen. Rick returned the screen to a view of the email. "Nicole. Do you really think the gang filed a police report or were even there when the fire department showed up?"

"Pardon me?"

"This is a hard-core group known for running guns through Maryland and Virginia. They aren't the sort to document a robbery or voluntarily testify about anything."

She stared at him, her brown eyes full of worry. "You're about to tell me they're the sort to take matters into their own

hands.”

“Exactly.”

“You’re not making it better.”

He gathered her icy hands in his, rubbing them lightly. “Clifton tipped his hand by blaming you and falsifying this report. Look at the weapons listed.”

She peered at the screen. “What’s an M-10?”

“The guns the bikers used when they attacked us on the road.” He stood up, eager to shout the facts to every three-lettered agency in the country. Maybe the world. “Clifton couldn’t know you’d have me. His plan might have worked, but I’m your rock-solid alibi for the time of the fire.” He cradled her face and dropped a kiss on her nose. “And no one anticipated Bart riding in to help us with the bikers.” Picking up the iPad, he started to draft an email.

“I’m trying to get excited, but I’m still confused.”

“The signature is one more connection. Clifton arranged that fire—or set it himself—and stole the drugs and guns. Most likely, he gave those guns to his biker pals to take you out and plant with your corpse. The drugs were just gravy. You wind up dead from gang violence and no one connects it to him.”

He was pleased to see that put some color in her cheeks. “On top of all that, Bart knows all the local law enforcement. Whoever responded after we left, he would have made sure the evidence was handled properly.”

“That report I heard at the gas station mentioned a drug bust gone bad.”

“But Eva’s rant about Bart doesn’t mention the cocaine. Trust me, those bikers weren’t toting anything but ammunition. I’m betting Clifton meant to add the cocaine to the scene when the bikers were done with us.”

“Then Clifton still has the drugs.”

“Yup.”

“Who do we call? Can I watch the bust?”

He nearly declared his love for her right there, seeing the gorgeous battle-gleam in her eyes. There wasn’t a scenario that he didn’t find her beautiful, but with her temper high and ready to make a stand, she rivaled any goddess.

The risks were still all too real. There was a very good chance he could wind up sacrificing the woman he loved in the name of justice. But it was her justice. Somehow it didn’t make him feel better.

“I’m convinced Clifton wants you to have a front row seat to what he thinks will be a victory,” he said at last.

“Bring it on.”

“He will.” He took a breath. “The smart thing is to cut his losses and run, but I don’t think he will. You should be prepared. I can teach you to shoot.”

“No.” She shook her head, sending her dark hair slipping over the silky robe covering her shoulder. “Give me a different

job.”

“If you’re sure.”

“I am.”

“Then go get the pictures.”

She dashed away and he heard the floor creak as she pushed the bed out of the way to reach her safe. There were countless things that could—and likely would—go wrong in this escapade. The authorities he planned to contact might choose to ignore the email. Clifton could be closing in already. Myrtle Beach didn’t have enough crowds at this time of year to provide effective cover. That would hamper both sides of this showdown.

“Here!” She held the envelope aloft like a prized trophy. He removed the pictures first and scanned them. Then he carefully laid out the negatives and did the same thing.

“Rick, that won’t work.”

“I want them to know we have them.”

“Oh. Got it.” When he finished, he handed her the device. “Go ahead and log into your email and send this to your handlers.”

“What should I say?”

“Whatever you want. It’s your party. Just be sure to include your current location.”

She gave a good impersonation of an evil laugh and set to the task with a wicked grin. “You’re going down, Clifton,” she

said with a fist pump when she was done.

“It could get ugly.” His stomach pitched. He was using her as bait. “I’d like to promise you it will work out without a hitch, but I can’t.”

This time she came to comfort him, her palms warm and soft on his cheeks. “We’re together.” She pressed up on her toes to brush the softest kiss against his lips. “That’s all I need.”

As she went to the kitchen to prepare what she called a breakfast for ‘her champion’ he said a prayer that she’d feel the same way about him when it was over. He wrote two more emails, studying the incriminating pictures closely before he sent them.

Later, after too much French toast and fresh coffee, he studied the jade figurine on the dresser while she returned the evidence to her safe.

“Why did you keep the Fu dog?”

“Mr. Chan said they were guardians and offered protection and good luck. My sister has the female of the set. Had,” she corrected as her brow furrowed.

“Protection.” Rick considered it a stretch that Chan might have put something incriminating in or on the dog, but he was looking for anything else that would stick to Clifton. “May I take a closer look at it?”

The little jade figure didn’t look like much, though it had some heft as it sat up in his palm. “What’s the difference between the statues?”

“The male has the world under his right paw and the female has a cub under her left paw.”

“A thoughtful gift.”

“I always thought we blew it when we separated the pair.”

The despair on her face said it all. “When you left for college.” He gathered her close when she nodded, her eyes full of unshed tears. “Clifton is a determined bastard. None of this is your fault.”

“The facts according to the head don’t always add up the same way from the heart’s point of view.”

“True.” He understood that all too well, was struggling with the concept right now. “You’ve never mentioned what happened to your dad.”

“Oh, more happiness. Not. He was killed by a drunk driver right after my sister’s first birthday.”

“I’m sorry.”

“The three of us were very close. My witnessing a murder drove a wedge between us for a long time.” She swiped away a tear. “The relationship was just one more casualty, I guess. Until he finalized it.”

Rick wanted to fix it, needed to fix some part of this for her. He could hardly go back in time and return her family, but he could take out the monster who’d ruined her life. He knew he was reaching a perilous stage, the point where he was less inclined to see Clifton behind bars and more inclined to give him a one way ticket to a coffin.

In his experience, letting in that kind of emotion was a dangerous way to think. Revenge blurred logic and often gave a cool-headed opponent the advantage.

“We may never know exactly why Clifton killed Chan, but your pictures will be enough to make him act rashly.”

“But you don’t believe sending the photo to the marshals is enough to have him arrested?”

“I believe it’s a start, but they have to find him first.”

“Yeah.” She sighed. “You’re thinking about the way he’s slipped through the system and managed to avoid prosecution for all these years.”

Rick shifted the Fu dog from hand to hand, wishing he could tell her it wasn’t true. He’d sent an email to Bart, hoping his friend had managed to send the tip about the cocaine in Clifton’s possession to the right department. Maybe the bastard would get busted before he ever made it to Myrtle Beach.

“Why don’t we head out to the boardwalk for a while and go over the options.” If his suspicions were correct, their time together was running short. She needed to know what he planned, how he expected Clifton to react, and what actions to take when that reaction happened.

“It’s a date.”

* * *

Nicole walked into the kitchen, on an emotional high so delightful her feet barely touched the ground. Humming a little

tune, she gathered eggs, milk, and berries from the refrigerator. It seemed the perfect morning for blueberry pancakes. In bed.

It had been the best two days of her life, despite the sensation that the axe could drop anytime. They'd gone out, they'd stayed in, and Clifton had stayed away. She'd taken oodles of pictures of both scenery and people, but none of Rick. He'd proven oddly camera shy.

About a thousand times a day, she started to ask him if he believed Clifton had done the smart thing and disappeared, but she held her tongue. Talking about it would ruin the perfection of this special interlude with Rick.

Selfish? Definitely. But she couldn't be sure how much time they had left. If she said anything, she should tell him how she felt. Except those three little words kept getting stuck in her throat. And really what did she expect? That they'd put a citizen's arrest on Clifton and live happily ever after?

He had a job and a team to get back to and she had... That was the problem, she didn't know what she had when this was over. The world would be her oyster when Clifton was contained and she didn't have any idea what kind of pearl she wanted to find.

Her happy mood muted, she turned to put the griddle on the stove and dropped it as panic seized her. A garish red delete sign marred the ceramic stovetop. Icy dread tickled her nape.

Clifton was here. Sure, it was the plan, but the reality shook her. He must have painted this sometime in the night while she and Rick... her stomach rolled. He was *here*.

“Give me the evidence, Miss Reynolds, or he dies.”

She swiveled on her heel to find Clifton in the main room of the cottage, surrounded by breezy coastal scenes, with Rick on his knees at the business end of a gun. It was a terrifying re-enactment of the scene she’d witnessed once before.

“What, no hysterical tears or screaming? My, how you’ve matured.”

“I wish I could say it’s good to see you.”

“Ah, but isn’t this what you wanted?” He pressed the barrel into Rick’s temple. “You invited me after all.”

“No.” She struggled to breathe normally. Passing out wasn’t in the plan. “I told the marshals I had pictures.”

“Of course. You put such trust in your ever-present camera.” He leaned forward. “The evidence. Now!”

She jumped, startled by the sudden change from gracious conversationalist to roaring mad man. Nicole knew, regardless of her cooperation, Clifton would kill them both and walk away, free to do as he pleased. This was precisely the moment she and Rick had discussed.

He’d walked into their trap. It was time to spring it. All she had to do was reach into the new cookie jar—Rick claimed it was a hiding place Clifton would believe—and pull out the envelope with the prints and negatives. When she handed the evidence to Clifton, Rick would make his move.

Instead, she stared at the man who’d ruined her life. Her legs had gone numb and her gaze was locked on the place where

the ugly black barrel of the weapon pressed to Rick's temple.

Caught. She was frozen in a nightmare of déjà vu, only this time she wouldn't have a camera lens to hide behind as the life drained out of the man she loved. Her fingers twitched, but her hands were empty.

No matter what Rick said about plans and fail safes, she shouldn't have let her fear of guns impede her empowerment. She closed her eyes and imagined putting a bullet into Clifton's crippled, black heart.

“The evidence!”

Her eyes flew open, her vengeful fantasy shattered. “I turned the evidence over to the authorities already.” She ignored Rick's pleading eyes. It was all too clear that their plan was doomed to fail. This man had taken everything else in her life, she refused to let him take Rick too. If they had any chance, she had to create a diversion or bluff her way out of this.

“You're lying. You've only sent emails containing altered images in a pathetic effort to mislead the investigators. I'm sure you'll soon be charged with obstruction of justice along with arson.”

“Wow.” She tilted her head and forced her lips into what she hoped looked like a smile of admiration. “You are well-connected.”

“I am also out of patience, young lady.” He fired the gun into the floor.

“No!” Tears blurred her vision.

“Ah, that’s more like old times. Now, be a good girl and fetch the evidence or the next one goes in his head.”

“It’s right here.” She backed up a step. “In the kitchen.”

“Hurry.”

She obeyed, reaching into the cookie jar. Her fingers closed around the envelope but rather than pull it out, she carried the whole jar out to him. He couldn’t manage both the gun and the cookie jar. He’d have to make a choice and Rick would have an opening.

“There. The last evidence proving you executed Mr. Chan is inside.”

He scowled at her, but the gun didn’t budge from Rick’s temple. “Show me.”

She calculated and prayed this worked. His eyes tracked her hand as she withdrew the envelope.

“What the hell is that?”

“Proof you executed Mr. Chan.”

“Old news.” He knocked the envelope to the floor. “No one cares about that whiny old man.”

“I cared.” She did. If she only had moments left to live, she wanted the truth. She wanted some valid reason her life had been wrecked. “Tell me why you killed him.”

Clifton’s hand trembled, his face white with fury. “Where is the Fu dog?”

Afraid for Rick's life, Nicole didn't answer. She held the jar by the lip and swung it like a kettle bell toward Clifton's jaw. It collided with a sickening thud, knocking him back.

Rick threw himself into Clifton's knees and prayed the gun fell clear without hurting Nicole. He heard heavy boots storming through the door, but he ignored the shouting as he rolled on top of Clifton and slammed his head into the floor repeatedly.

Heavy hands hauled him up and away from his assault, holding him back when he tried to get back to Clifton.

"Settle down," Bart ordered.

"Where's Nicole?" He couldn't see her anywhere.

"They've got her outside already. She's safe. Where's the dog thing he's talking about?"

"Kitchen cupboard." Resigned, he turned the figurine over to Bart. "Did Clifton have the female?"

"Yup. They seized it along with the rest of his possessions at his apartment in Los Angeles. Once they match the pair, that'll tie him to the deaths of Nicole's sister and mom. The bastard sure likes nice things."

The Fu dog was dwarfed in Bart's massive palm. "They've got him cold on three murders thanks to your girl, her pictures, and this little trophy. Eva added her research to the mounting evidence, putting him in the vicinity of the arson events sporting that signature." He glanced at the stovetop. "You'd

think being a DEA agent would be enough adrenaline for one man. He's got serious issues."

"Did the bugs work?"

Bart cleared his throat, color creeping into his face. "Like a charm. Alone, it's not enough, but added to the rest..."

The intimate moments could hardly be tuned out in a place this small, but a chance to catch Clifton bragging had been worth the risk. "Wish we'd pulled a real confession." Rick pushed his hand through his hair. It was over. Clifton was in custody now, that's what mattered. "Has anyone figured out why he murdered Chan?"

"Not yet," Bart said, shaking his head. "Eva's still digging into it."

If there were answers after all these years, Eva would find them for Nicole. "What about the bikers and the drugs from the Virginia gang house?"

"The dead leader of the stupid triplets had a phone that only called one number, but Clifton must have dumped that along the way. The drugs, however, are tucked in cozy with the spare tire in his government-issued vehicle." Bart smiled, clearly pleased. "Not an evidence bag in sight."

One more felony to tack onto a long prison sentence. It was a solid resolution, but it wouldn't bring back Nicole's family or her stolen childhood. He wanted to give her more, but he suddenly wasn't sure she'd trust him after he kept Bart, the bugs, and the backup plan a secret from her.

“Is anyone else pursuing her?” He figured the gangs had bigger worries, but he needed to know.

“No one but you.” Bart said with a wink, clapping him on the back. “Go on. You should be the one to tell her justice is finally served.”

Both men jerked as gunfire erupted outside. Rick was through the door first and his heart stopped when he spotted Nicole crumpled on the ground behind a black SUV. Once more Bart tried to hold him back, but Rick threw him off and rushed to her side.

He gathered her close, relieved beyond measure when she responded immediately, clinging to him. “Are you hurt?”

“No. For the first time, I’m fine.” She made a noise somewhere between a sob and a laugh. “Just don’t let go.”

“Not a chance.” Rick blocked her view as a team of marshals checked a body for a pulse. He recognized the eel skin shoes, having had the misfortune of staring at them for the past twenty minutes. “Clifton’s dead.”

“Good.”

A cold chill gripped him. “Did you—”

“No.” She burst out with another sobbing hiccup. “Not me.” She burrowed closer to him. “He raised a gun at me and they mowed him down.”

“He opted for suicide by cop,” he muttered. Clifton wasn’t the sort to do the hard time coming his way. “At least it’s over.”

“It is. It really is.” She peered up at him. “Thank you.”

Chapter 14

Nicole raised her camera, eager to catch the clouds whispering across the horizon. The sunrise was glorious this morning and not just because Rick was by her side, two mugs of coffee on the blanket between them.

His new cell phone chimed with an incoming text. “Eva says your Fu dogs should be back to you by the New Year.”

“America’s or China’s?”

“Good question. Want me to ask?”

“No.” She zoomed in on what might be dolphins playing in the distant surf. “It doesn’t really matter.”

A few minutes later his phone chimed again. “Eva says the Fu dogs have been in Chan’s family for generations, handed down from grandfather to the eldest grandson, but in Chan’s case that kid was tied up with the Dragons. He’d been stirring up trouble, trying to get him out of the gang when Clifton shot him.”

“I never saw any family come to his house.” Her heart ached with sympathy for her old neighbor. “Is the grandson still alive?”

“Don’t know.” Rick shrugged. “Eva believes Chan’s execution sealed a deal between Clifton and the gang leader.”

“Does the woman ever quit?”

“Not that I’ve seen,” he muttered. “Kind of like someone else I know.”

She snapped a quick candid of his profile. Before he launched a complaint, she lowered her camera and planted a kiss on him that took them both under for a long, delicious moment. She really should tell him how she felt, what she wanted.

“They want us in Haleswood for Thanksgiving.”

“*Mmm.*” Nicole pretended to consider as she watched the waves drift into the beach.

“Allie’s aunt has some big dinner deal every year,” he said. “Sounds like she feeds half the town.”

“Allie always said the woman was amazing.” Nicole bit her lip, holding back a smile and wondering what else he might say to convince her. The wind blew cold against her cheeks, but with Rick holding her hand, she had plenty of warmth. She didn’t want to be anywhere he wasn’t ever again. But how to present that in a way that wouldn’t scare him off?

He’d been so cautious, so respectful of her and her ‘restored life’. It was starting to annoy her that he wouldn’t just say

what *he* wanted.

“We don’t have to go, ah, together. It’s just that everyone at the office thinks we’re a couple.”

What a bonus, so did she.

“I know it’s not what you’d planned,” he continued.

“That was when I was planning for me.” She squeezed his hand. “How could I have planned for *you*? For a miracle like us?” Facing him, she tucked her windblown hair behind her ears. She didn’t want anything marring the view of his reaction to what she was about to say. “I love you, Rick Dreyer.” She traced his jaw with her finger, her heart expanding as his lips curved up in a slow smile.

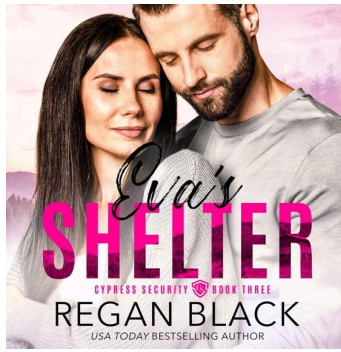
“You are loved, Nicole Livingston.” He laid her back on the blanket and kissed her until there was no doubt.

“Haleswood for Thanksgiving sounds like heaven,” she said when he let her up for air.

“Truly?”

She nodded. “Think we can find a way to stay for Christmas too?”

While Rick and Nicole are making plans for their first holiday together, Eva finds herself targeted by a deadly threat—and under the protection of a man who will do anything to keep her alive.



Enjoy this sneak peek of Cypress Security book 3, Eva's Shelter!

Prologue

“We 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 brow. “Years ago she worked a hostage 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 down 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?"

“I expect you to treat this like undercover work, but you just 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.”

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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 currently enjoy the empty-nest life in the South Carolina Lowcountry where the rich blend of legend, romance, and history fuels her imagination.

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