

Edge of Danger: A Deadly Ops Novel

By Katie Reus

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The new Deadly Ops novel from the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Shattered Duty*—in the series that delivers "fast-paced romantic suspense that will keep you on the edge of your seat!"*

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Editorial Review

Review
"My immersion in the book was certainly enhanced by Ms. Eastlake's pacing and her characterisations." --- AudioGals

About the Author
Katie Reus is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of sexy romantic suspense and dark paranormal romance, including the Red Stone Security series, the Moon Shifter novels, and the Deadly Ops series. She has a degree in psychology and lives near Biloxi, Mississippi, with her husband.

An avid reader her whole life, Sophie Eastlake happily extends her love of books to her passion for narrating. Sophie lives in New York, where she survives the subway grind with a book in her hand and drops in on every literary reading she can find.

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Also by Katie Reus

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Excerpt from A Covert Affair

Chapter 1

Unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV): aka drone, an aircraft without a human pilot physically aboard. Controlled by computers or a pilot at another location.

Rayford Osborn strode down the brick sidewalk of the quiet Georgetown neighborhood, trying to keep his walk natural. Not easy when a wild energy hummed through him. It was a little after ten and this area of the city was relatively quiet. As a sedan drove by, he automatically pulled his hoodie down a fraction to hide his face. A fucking hoodie.

His chosen adolescent attire grated against everything in him, but it was necessary for tonight's meeting. Things were about to change; he felt it deep in his bones. His country needed to be on a different path, and if that happened to make him richer, he wasn't going to complain. People who thought money was the root of all evil were fools. He and his wife did well for themselves, but more was always better. More money meant more power. And power was everything.

As the car continued past him without slowing a fraction, he let out a breath he wasn't aware he'd been holding. This cloak-and-dagger business wasn't for him. Since college and beyond he'd been so careful about his image, both in public and in private. No affairs, no drinking to excess, no drugs—nothing that could come back to bite him in the ass later on. So many of his peers had screwed that up in college, but not him.

Now what he was doing could get him sent to jail for the rest of his life, or more likely tried for treason and

given the death penalty. Only if he and his like-minded allies got caught, of course.

Which they wouldn't. They were too good and had been flying under everyone's radar for too long. And now the time for talk was over. It was time to strike.

When he reached his destination, a high-priced townhome—they all were in Georgetown—the front door opened before he'd ascended the short set of stone stairs.

Thad Hillenbrand stood in the doorway, his icy blue eyes glinting as he frowned at him. "You're late," he growled as Rayford moved past him into the dimly lit foyer. "Everyone else is here."

Rayford shoved his hoodie back and loosened his plain black scarf from around his neck. "I walked from the Metro."

Hillenbrand's shoulders relaxed at that. "Which station?"

"Dupont Circle. And before you ask, I was careful of the cameras." The truth was, it was impossible to stay off all the CCTVs, but there was no connection between him and Hillenbrand. At least not an electronic or physical one. And Rayford already had a reason for being in the Georgetown area tonight if he was ever questioned. Once he'd left the Metro station, avoiding cameras had been a piece of cake. "I'm the last one here?" he asked, even though Hillenbrand had just stated he was.

The older man nodded once then gave a sharp jerk of his head that Rayford should follow. He'd only been in the townhome once before, for a covert meeting just like this one. He knew that Hillenbrand used the exclusive property to bring escorts to. It was the man's one vice and something Rayford had thought he could use against him at one point.

But Hillenbrand wasn't in politics—not directly—and made enough money on his own that he didn't need his wealthy wife's money if she decided to leave him. Not to mention the man treated his whores well so Rayford couldn't even blackmail him on allegations of abuse. It appeared he only brought his women here because it was convenient. Plus, his wife was cheating on him too, so she likely knew of his affairs.

Rayford might work with the man because they shared common goals, but he didn't like being involved with someone he had no dirt on. In his world, having leverage was king.

They only walked a few feet, bypassing the stairs, Hillenbrand instead opening the door that led to the basement.

Rayford went first on Hillenbrand's insistence. The man didn't like to have anyone at his back, and Rayford knew it was more or less a power play. But he didn't care. If things went well, soon he'd be the top aide to the most powerful man in the country.

A low hum of voices grew louder as he turned the corner at the end of the stairs and walked down the last three steps. Eight men in all were there, ten total including him and Hillenbrand. There was only one man Rayford didn't recognize. Something about the guy's face tickled his memory bank, but he couldn't place it. Blond hair, in shape, an almost forgettable appearance, but he knew he'd seen the man somewhere before.

Soon he'd find out, but he didn't bother asking Hillenbrand. The man was more cautious than any of them, and he wouldn't have allowed someone to come to this meeting he wasn't one hundred percent sure of.

"We need to fight a war we can win," Wagner, one of the men, said, stating something everyone in this room believed in. Mainly because he liked to hear his own voice.

So many of these men did. It annoyed Rayford, but he was used to the type. Hell, he worked for one. Men who couldn't stand not to be the center of attention. Rayford had no problem living in the background.

"But is *this* the way?" Padilla, a dark-haired man in his late forties, rubbed a hand down his face, his tension clear.

"If you have doubts, you're free to leave," Hillenbrand said, his edgy tone making the room go silent.

Because everyone knew his words were a lie. Padilla could leave if he wanted, but if he did he'd be dead within twenty-four hours, likely less. They all knew what they'd signed up for when they began their cause, when Hillenbrand contacted them and brought them together. They all knew what was at stake and what the cost for backing out would be. It was like the mob. The only way out was in a body bag.

Padilla straightened against the brown Chesterfield where he sat next to Wagner, his gaze narrowing on Hillenbrand. "I don't have doubts, but I do have an opinion, which I'm free to voice, yes?"

Coming to stand next to Rayford, Hillenbrand crossed his arms over his chest as he faced down Padilla. "We're all welcome to our opinions, but in the end we know what has to be done, so these discussions are pointless and tiring. The current administration needs to be proven inept beyond a shadow of a doubt. We must pave the way for a new leader for the next election. Once we have our chosen man inside, we'll be even closer to our end goal. And we'll all be richer in the end."

There was a low murmur of agreement throughout the room. Rayford inwardly groaned. Just like the others in the room, Hillenbrand liked to speak simply to hear his own voice. Rayford hoped the man wasn't going to get long-winded on them now. He'd managed to break away from dinner at his wife's parents' house stating a work emergency, but he didn't have time to waste.

"The time for talking is over. Now's the time for action." Striding to the minibar, Hillenbrand picked up a small black remote. "If you will all direct your attention to the screen," he said, motioning toward the mini movie theater screen that took up one of the walls.

Hillenbrand used this as an entertainment room and occasionally let his college-aged boys use the place too. But he knew they weren't going to be watching a movie in it.

"About a month ago a U.S.–owned drone was stolen from a military base," Hillenbrand continued.

It wasn't public knowledge, but Rayford knew of the incident. His own boss was sitting on the information, waiting on the right time to release it for the best of their political gain.

"Now you all are going to see why." As Hillenbrand pressed a button on the remote, the lights in the room dimmed and a feed popped up on-screen that looked like an eagle eye from a plane.

"Is this live?" Rayford asked quietly, realizing it was a view from the drone.

Hillenbrand gave him a hard look and nodded before focusing on the screen once again. "Unfortunately I don't have audio, but we don't need it."

Though it was dark, the dash was clear enough with the night-vision capabilities. Not that it mattered because if this was a view from the drone, it would be controlled remotely and no one would actually be in the aerial device. Which raised the question—who was controlling it? This was the first Hillenbrand had told any of them about this.

“Go ahead,” Hillenbrand murmured quietly, and Rayford realized he must have a small earpiece in.

Annoyance hummed through him at being left in the dark about who this other contact was, but he kept his emotions in check.

A long moment later a bright burst of light illuminated the screen, quickly followed by another. Those were *missiles*. Who was the target? This was a very dangerous weapon and he wasn’t sure Hillenbrand was the right man to be in control of it. Rayford’s anger and annoyance intensified as he watched a bright orange ball of flame light up the darker screen as the missiles detonated their target. The feed was in black and white, but the infrared showed the heat signature clearly, so he knew it was fire.

Before he could say anything, the ground shook just the slightest bit and his stomach lurched. Hillenbrand had attacked somewhere in Washington, D.C.

The screen went blank and the lights brightened as Hillenbrand smiled broadly. He’d just ordered the killing of Americans here in the capital and didn’t give a damn. “There’s no going back now for any of us. That was just the beginning. Unfortunately we’ll have some hard choices to make in the coming weeks, but I have no doubt we’re all up to the job. And I know you’re wondering who the target was. The Nelson fund-raiser was just hit, eliminating our only real competition for the upcoming primaries.”

Rayford’s mouth filled with cotton as he struggled to find his voice. They’d been talking and planning for so long, but he’d never imagined Hillenbrand would go after someone in their *own* political party. And never like this. He understood it, the need to eliminate everyone who posed a threat to the candidate they needed in office if change was ever going to take place, but . . . it seemed so violent. So unforgiveable.

Luckily he didn’t have to talk because the room erupted in voices, everyone talking over one another. Some were excited; others were angry he’d made the decision without asking any of them. Now they were all trapped. No matter what happened, they’d all been part of this. Avoiding Hillenbrand’s gaze, he made his way to the minibar and poured himself a scotch, his hand trembling ever so slightly. As he did, he realized where he’d seen the only man in the room he hadn’t recognized when he’d entered. On the news.

The man worked for the DEA. Which meant Hillenbrand had brought him in because of who he worked for. Unless Hillenbrand had no idea who he was. If that was the case, they were going to have more blood on their hands because they couldn’t allow anyone outside this room to know what they’d done.

Chapter 2

Wet work: expression for murdering or assassinating someone (wet alluding to the spilling of blood).

One week later

Tucker Pankov ran a hand over his buzz cut, the dampness from his shower already drying. He’d be glad to grow his hair out again and spend at least a week at his place in solitude. He lived in a three-bedroom home in the Virginia countryside. He’d chosen to have acres and acres of space between him and his neighbors over a larger house in a suburb. He was rarely here and when he did get downtime, he craved the quiet.

For his last undercover job, as a psychopathic thug, he’d shaved his head, making himself look more the part of drug-peddling scum. He’d kept his same alias from the job he’d worked before that one with a true psychopath, Tasev, and it was a relief to shed that persona.

It was also a fucking relief that bastard was dead, even if the DEA hadn't been the ones to officially bring him down. He was still surprised that his boss, Deputy Director Max Southers, hadn't been upset when the NSA brought down Tasev and his entire operation instead of his elite undercover DEA team, but in the end, Tucker didn't care who'd done it. He didn't care about the accolades, just the result.

As he stepped into his bedroom, he turned on the television. Headlines from last week's attack on a political fund-raiser dominated everything.

Tucker should probably have been surprised by the attack, but little could shock him anymore. The drone that had carried out the attack should never have been stolen in the first place. Heads were already rolling over that "oversight" in security, and while he cared about the massive loss of life, it had nothing to do with the DEA. At least not at the moment.

On the screen, Clarence Cochran, a politician who'd just announced his intention to seek the next presidential nomination for his party, was talking about the avoidable loss of life of a man who would have been running against him. Acting as if he cared.

Tucker rolled his eyes. For the most part politicians in Washington only cared about themselves. He actually belonged to the same political party as Cochran, but the guy was too much of an extremist. That was dangerous no matter what side of the political aisle a man stood on. For the next election he'd be voting against the party line if that moron made a play for the presidency. Tucker was reaching for the remote to turn it off when a breaking report flashed on the screen.

Max Southers, Deputy Director of the Drug Enforcement Administration, murdered in violent carjacking.

He blinked, ice invading his veins as he stared numbly at the screen, before he turned up the volume. Max was dead? No fucking way. He'd just talked to him a couple of hours ago. Someone would have alerted him.

"You need a break, son, and I'm ordering it. Take a week off and just relax." The corners of Max's dark blue eyes had crinkled in concern as he watched Tucker from across his desk.

Max called everyone in their team "son." It should have annoyed Tucker, since he had a father, but he loved the man. They all did. They'd all spent countless dinners at the man's house during their off time. Swallowing hard, he sat on the edge of his bed and listened as a somber-looking reporter talked about Max's murder, basically saying nothing at all. The police had no leads. They didn't know if this was random or related to one of his cases.

Fuck.

Standing, he grabbed his phone from his nightstand. He needed to call the rest of the team and Mary, Max's wife. Hell, he needed to verify that this was even true. If they'd reported this without telling her first . . . hell no. He immediately rejected that. The DEA wouldn't have allowed that to happen. Unless the local PD had fucked it up and there'd been a leak. Because why had no one called the team first?

As he started to call Cole, his phone buzzed, his teammate's name appearing on-screen. Still numb, he answered, "You see the news?"

"Yeah." Cole's voice was grim. "Anyone contact you about it first?"

"No."

"I tried Mary and she's not answering."

Tucker's throat tightened as he stared blindly at the muted television. "You believe he's dead?"

"I . . . don't know. I can't imagine them running with the story unless they were positive."

"I'll call in a bit. We'll take care of her if it is." Mary and Max had been together thirty years. She'd been with Max since his Navy days, enduring long deployments and raising their two kids basically by herself for months on end. Max had been ready to retire in the next two years, to travel with his wife the way he deserved. Tucker's free hand curled into a fist. "And we're going to find out whoever did this."

"Fuck yeah." Cole's voice was raspy, the edge in the normally laid-back man's voice razor-sharp. "What the . . . are you watching the news still?"

"Yeah, hold on." He unmuted it, frowning as he listened to the reporter's words. Neither he nor Cole spoke for the next few minutes as he digested everything the man on the news was saying. The news station had received an anonymous tip that a Shia terrorist group was responsible for the murder of Max, that it wasn't a carjacking at all.

What. The. Hell.

"It doesn't seem possible," Tucker muttered. "Have you heard from the Leopard recently?" Leopard was their code word for Ali Nazari, an agent they had embedded in a high-profile Shia terrorist organization. Almost no one knew of his undercover role—just Max, Tucker, Cole, and two other teammates. It was too dangerous otherwise.

"No. We need to make sure the Leopard's files—"

"Max had a fail-safe in place in case something happened to him. I'll tell you about it, but not now." Never over the phone, even if their cells were encrypted. He'd drawn in a breath to continue when the power suddenly went off, his television and the steady hum of his heater going silent. Dawn was breaking, so he could see well enough without the lamp on his nightstand, but he didn't often lose power and there wasn't a storm raging. Maybe a breaker had flipped. "Let me call you back in a sec."

"All right."

As they disconnected, he pulled on a pair of jogging pants and grabbed his sidearm from his nightstand. Even though he knew it was loaded, he checked the magazine out of habit. Full. Exiting his room, he moved on silent feet down the hallway that led to the living room and kitchen. As he made his way, he passed the keypad for his alarm system, and a shot of adrenaline punched through him.

It was off.

The system was wireless and not linked to his power system, and it never went off-line. Not even when he lost power. He traveled most of the year and wanted his house secure even when he was gone, which was why he'd opted for this specific system. No way had it gone off without help. This was intentional.

His heart rate kicked up a fraction. Ducking into the closest room, his office, he quickly swept it. Empty. He moved to the window and had started to pull back the curtains when he heard a creak.

It was quiet, almost imperceptible, but he knew every sound his house made. It had been built in the forties and had real wood floors he'd had refurbished. And Tucker knew exactly where that creak had come from. A board at the beginning of the hallway, right where the kitchen opened up. It had a very distinctive sound.

Weapon in hand, he moved away from the window and crept to the doorway, giving himself enough room to have his pistol out and drawn without the worry of it being taken from him if someone attacked. If someone made a move, they wouldn't be able to make it to him before he fired a few rounds.

Whoever was in his home had to know Tucker was aware of his presence. Or at least guess. The house was too silent. Which took away a little of his advantage.

As he waited, everything around him sharpened, his senses going into straight battle mode. Someone could be here to rob him, but his gut told him otherwise.

He lived far enough out that his place wasn't easy to find, and disabling his security system would have taken time and an expertise far beyond your average thief.

Another creak. This one closer.

Tucker tensed, his finger on the trigger. He wasn't just going to blindly shoot, but he was ready.

Another creak. That one next to the guest bathroom door.

Which meant the intruder would be in his path in three, two, *one*.

"Drop your weapon! Put your hands in the air!" Tucker shouted as the hooded man came into view, his own weapon—with a fucking suppressor—drawn. "Now, or I drop you where you stand." His voice was quieter now, his intent clear in each word. All it would take was a bullet to the head.

It was hard to read his facial expression because of the hood, but the man stood right around six feet, had a solid build. Wearing all black, including rubber-soled boots that made almost no sound, the intruder looked like a pro.

The silenced weapon clattered to the floor, the sound overpronounced in the quiet of his home, before the man put his hands in the air. When he moved, Tucker could see the bulky outline of a vest. If he had to take a killing shot, it would be to the head.

"Kick it away."

The man did as Tucker said.

"On your knees."

Silently the man started to kneel down but at the last second leaped forward.

Training kicked in automatically. Tucker fired, hitting the man in his calf as he tried to dive out of the way.

The hooded man cried out as Tucker swept into the hallway, conscious of his six as he trained his weapon on the guy.

He'd grabbed his fallen weapon.

Shit.

Tucker fired, two shots to the middle of the forehead. Normally he'd take a center mass shot, but there was no point with the guy wearing a vest.

The man stilled, dropping back with a thud as his weapon hand fell loudly against the wooden floor of the hallway. Tucker moved carefully, kicking it away before he checked the man's pulse and took off the hood. By the time he'd pulled it off, there was a slight blue tinge around his eyes, nose, and mouth.

Certain he was dead, Tucker checked his person for any identifiers and found none before he moved on to the rest of his house. Next he cleared his garage, then the shed. Before moving on he turned his power back on and reconnected the alarm. Resetting it so no one could infiltrate his house while he was gone, he swept his property. He found a four-door car with mud smeared on the license plate hidden off the side of the road about a mile away. Unfortunately there weren't any identifying papers inside. He memorized the plate, then raced back to his place.

Careful to avoid the blood pooling in the hallway, he grabbed his cell and found two missed calls. Both from Cole. As he pulled out his fingerprint kit, he called his friend back. He was going to call the police, but he was taking the guy's prints first. It wasn't that he didn't trust the locals, but the DEA had more resources and this was clearly personal.

Which meant the chances of this being linked to one of his cases was high. He had to know what and who he was dealing with, and he'd get answers faster than the local PD.

"Someone just tried to kill me," Cole said by way of greeting. "Can't identify him, but he was a professional."

Well, hell. "Me too. You called the cops yet?"

"No. Someone also went after Brooks. This isn't fucking random," he snarled.

"Anyone contacted Kane?" The last member of their elite group.

"Can't get ahold of him."

Tucker reined in a curse. "Get the prints of your guy. Then pack a bag. Can you dispose of the body?"

"Yeah."

"Do it. Then we rendezvous at location bravo." Their team had five backup places to meet if the shit ever hit the fan. They were all random and none had ties to any of them. Tucker picked the second location because it was the first that popped into his mind.

"You sure no cops?"

"You want to alert whoever sent these guys after us that they failed?" Because the moment they did that, they'd become sitting targets. No, they needed to ghost out while whoever was gunning for them thought they were dead or about to be. Then they'd regroup and figure this thing out.

"I know. Just feels like we're crossing a line."

Tucker snorted. He'd cross whatever line necessary to keep his men alive. "Bring all your weapons, ammo, passports—real and aliases—any burner phones and all your electronics if you're sure they're not traceable. We need to figure out who's after us."

"On it. I'll keep trying Kane."

“Me too.” After they disconnected, Tucker packed everything he needed, then took care of the body and blood, storing the dead man in the trunk of the car he’d abandoned on the side of the road. It wasn’t the first time he’d had to dispose of a body, not with the jobs he’d been assigned to, but it was the first time he’d removed one from his own home and wasn’t telling anyone else about it. He cleaned up the blood the best he could, but if pros came in here with luminol they’d find the evidence.

But if anyone else came out here looking for him, he’d be long gone before they got here.

He needed to stay alive. Because whoever had come after his men had made the biggest mistake of his life.

Chapter 3

Six: in military and law enforcement slang, “six” means “back.” Phrases like “watch your six” or “I’ve got your six” mean to “watch your back” or “I’ve got your back.” In warfare, your six is the most vulnerable position.

“I don’t like this.” Cole rubbed a hand over his newly cut blond hair. For the Tasev infiltration he’d kept it shaggy, playing the part of a mindless soldier. Now he looked like his usual deadly self.

“What the fuck else are we gonna do?” Kane demanded from the front passenger seat of the SUV he, Tucker, Cole, and Brooks were in.

Tucker shifted against his seat in the back. He didn’t like this plan any more than Cole, but they had to do *something*. Their places were all under surveillance—by whom, they hadn’t figured out yet—and they couldn’t go into work because it was the first place their enemy would expect them. Plus, they didn’t know if someone in the DEA had set them up. Their top-security clearances had been revoked in the system at work, which was a huge red flag. *None* of them could log in to anything past a basic level online. With such limited access, they were pretty much working blind. Could be a glitch, but likely not, since it had happened to all four of them.

It wasn’t as if a replacement had been named for Max yet, so they had no one to turn to. No one they trusted anyway. Because of their undercover jobs, they were insulated from the majority of the people in the office for their safety and everyone else’s. In short, they were fucked right now with no way to know if they’d been set up or even if they’d be arrested if they attempted to head into the office. “It’s been two days since Max died,” Tucker said quietly.

“And Ali guarantees it’s not the Shias,” Brooks said from the front, never looking back at them as he surveyed the quiet park.

It was before dawn and everything but the sidewalks was covered in a light dusting of snow. The street sweepers had been out about an hour ago to clear and salt everything. This was a well-used park in a nice part of Baltimore where crime was pretty much unheard-of.

Until now.

“Burkhart’s not returning my e-mails.” Tucker hated every bit of what they were about to do, but they needed an ally. Of course, what they were about to do was just as likely to make them enemies and put them on another hit list. They had nothing to lose at this point. “This will get his attention.”

Cole snorted. “And it’ll get us bullets in the head.”

Maybe. Tucker shook his head. “Max trusted him.” Hell, Burkhart was part of Ali’s fail-safe plan if the agent ever got hung out to dry or Max died during the middle of an op. He wasn’t even with the DEA, but as the deputy director of the NSA and a lifelong friend of their former boss, Burkhart was a man Max had clearly thought had integrity.

Tucker hoped he was right.

“We’re running out of time and we need help.” Kane’s voice was determined, mirroring Tucker’s feelings.

“I see a female runner,” Brooks said from the front, his voice grim. “Could be her.”

“It’s go time. Apparently,” Cole tacked on, making his agitation clear.

But in the end, they were a team and no matter what, they’d act as one cohesive unit. They trusted one another in the field and they’d support one another in this. Even though Cole was pissed, Tucker knew he’d have his back no matter what.

He just hoped this plan didn’t turn around and blow their lives apart. Moving quietly with Cole, Tucker slid out of the vehicle and made his way to a cluster of trees that lined the park. He hated this plan, but forced his doubts away because he didn’t see any other option. They had to do this.

• • •

Karen Stafford loosened her scarf around her neck as her sneakers pounded against the pavement. Despite the chilly January weather, she’d been jogging for thirty minutes and had started to sweat a while ago under all her layers.

Inhaling the crisp air, she savored the quiet of the neighborhood as she made her way to her favorite park. This early she didn’t run through the park, just around it where she was still visible along main roads. She also didn’t run with an MP3 player because she liked the time to be alone with her own thoughts without any outside noise. She rarely got that with her high-pressure job at the NSA. Even if she didn’t have the job she did, she still wouldn’t run with noise pumping in her ears. She liked to be aware of her surroundings at all times.

She carried bear spray with her—because no mugger or would-be rapist was going to be able to withstand that kind of pain—and a switchblade. A gift from her brother, Clint, who’d died in Afghanistan seven years ago. Whenever he’d come home he always brought her gifts. Usually weapons because he’d been determined that she be able to protect herself since he couldn’t be here. As if he could have watched out for her twenty-four/seven if he’d been here anyway, which was a ridiculous concept. But he’d always been so protective. He’d been more like a parent to her than their own useless father had ever been. Even though she missed Clint every day, she knew she was lucky that she’d had someone who cared about her, who would have done anything for her. Still, some days were harder than others and she wished she had someone in her life. Not just anyone, though, because she’d never settle. She’d seen friends do that and it was depressing.

Shaking those thoughts away, Karen increased her pace, enjoying the way her muscles burned and stretched. She ran every day no matter what. If it rained, she used the treadmill in her condo’s gym, but she much preferred being outdoors, even in the cold.

When she came up to a four-way intersection, she slowed and jogged in place and looked both ways before crossing. There weren’t *any* cars or people out this morning, which was a little creepy. Feeling paranoid, she unhooked her bear spray from her hip holster and held it loosely in her hand. Her friends made fun of her for

the precautions she took, but she'd seen too much bloodshed in her job to take safety lightly.

As she reached the sidewalk that stretched along the park's small strip of a dozen parking spots, she slowed. A dark SUV with tinted windows sat in one of the spots, the engine running. The exhaust from the tailpipe was visible, and in the quiet she could hear the distinct hum of the engine. Glancing around, she didn't see anyone else.

Not caring if she was being paranoid, she slowed and turned back around to avoid going past the vehicle. She'd just take a different route today that didn't involve the park.

At the sound of an engine revving, she glanced over her shoulder. The SUV was pulling out of the spot and heading in her direction. Her heart rate kicked up. She knew she was probably acting crazy but didn't care. Veering off the sidewalk, she raced through the park where vehicles couldn't go. As she cleared a cluster of trees without the sound of running feet coming after her, she let out a shaky breath and kept up her pace.

Risking a glance over her shoulder, she nearly stumbled when she saw a man dressed in all black step out from the trees.

That face.

Holy shit. Recognition slammed into her with the intensity of a battering ram. Since he wore a scarf around his neck and a knit cap on his head, she couldn't spot one of the distinguishing features she'd seen in the file she had on him. But she knew he had a jagged scar around his neck and tended to favor shaving his head.

She knew it was him from his icy blue eyes.

Grisha. A murdering psychopath.

Fear took hold, its unforgiving grip squeezing around her chest like a vise, colder than the winter-morning air.

Though she wanted to run, she stopped and spun around on the sidewalk, raising her bear spray with a steady hand. No one could withstand this if she shot it in their face, and she just wanted the chance to get away. She certainly wasn't going to take the guy on in hand-to-hand combat. "Get back!" she shouted, her finger steady on the trigger. She was glad she wasn't outwardly shaking. She needed to paint a picture of calm even if she was trembling inside.

To her surprise, he held up his hands and almost looked apologetic as he watched her. "I don't want to hurt you, Karen."

Holy hell, he knew her name. So this definitely wasn't random. Because why would this guy be in Baltimore of all places, in the same park she ran by almost every day? Did he know who she worked for? God, he probably wanted to torture her for information. She wasn't going to stand around and ask him a bunch of questions. The facts that he knew her name and was a violent criminal were enough for her to run for her life.

Whirling around, she raced down the sidewalk, her heart beating out of control, the sound of her blood rushing in her ears so loud she couldn't tell how close he was behind her.

She wanted to pull out her phone, but she'd strapped it around her ankle so it would be out of her way. She couldn't risk slowing down. If she could just get somewhere public, maybe she could flag someone for help.

As she moved deeper into the park, she cursed herself for coming this way, but he'd been blocking her exit.

As she risked another glance over her shoulder, full-blown panic exploded inside her like fireworks. He was about twenty feet behind her and closing. He moved fast for such a big man, and she knew he wouldn't stop. The range on her spray was thirty feet, so she could take him. She'd only get one shot at this, so she had to do it right.

His expression was grim and he said something to her, but she couldn't hear anything above the blood rushing in her ears.

She could keep running, but he was going to reach her soon. And she knew without a doubt she'd lose against him in any sort of physical altercation. She'd seen pictures of what he'd done to someone who'd crossed him. This might be her only chance to get away or at least get help. Drawing in a deep breath, she let out a bloodcurdling scream, hoping someone would hear her as she stopped and turned to spray him.

Still screaming, she had started to press the trigger when a blur of motion out of the corner of her eye made her stumble backward.

A man in similar attire burst from the trees lining the sidewalk. There were two of them!

Pressing the trigger, she started spraying wildly as the newcomer tackled her. She flew back against the sidewalk, her head slamming against it as she lost her grip on the bear spray.

"Don't hurt her!" Grisha shouted.

But that couldn't be right. Unless he wanted to be the one to inflict pain. She tried to struggle, but the other man was on top of her and had her in a tight grip. She couldn't stop gasping, her chest terrifyingly tight. She couldn't breathe through the panic pressing in on her. Every horrible photo and crime scene she'd ever seen at work crashed in on her at once. She didn't want to be a fucking statistic! She blinked as everything around her became fuzzy. *Stay awake,* she ordered herself as the edges of her vision started to fade.

No, no, *no*. She couldn't be unconscious around these monsters. But she couldn't control her breathing. It was too fast, too panicked. Pins and needles erupted in her hands and feet. Her eyeballs felt as if they were bulging. The edges of her vision closed in. Her body refused to listen as darkness swept her under.

• • •

Wesley glanced at Selene as they neared their destination. The private plane was about ten minutes from its final descent, and he hated that the reason they were returning was that one of his oldest, closest friends had been murdered.

The whole situation didn't sit right with Wesley, and even though it wasn't the NSA's jurisdiction, he'd be looking at all the files to make sure the investigation was handled properly. He owed Max that much. Hell, he owed the man his life.

"You all right?" Selene asked softly from her seat next to the window. Her white blond hair was pulled back from the sharp planes of her face and braided tight against her head.

As if she were his own daughter, the computer genius rarely missed anything when it came to him. She was one of the few people who could read his moods. He could have said he was fine, but there was no reason to lie to her and she'd have known anyway. "No."

"We'll find out who killed him." Her expression turned fierce and determined.

His throat tight, all he could do was nod and stare blindly at his open laptop. Wesley had called Mary Southers before boarding the plane in Berlin and she'd sounded as if she was hanging in there. The woman was a rock, the type who could weather any storm. But losing Max . . . hell, it was just unfair.

Which was a stupid thing to say considering the shit he saw day in and day out. Wesley knew how fragile life was, how bad things happened to good people all the damn time. For some reason he'd just never thought he'd lose his oldest friend.

Max didn't even work in the field anymore. And that bullshit about a Shia terrorist group gunning for him was just that—bullshit—so putrid it stank. It didn't even make sense with the intel they'd gathered so far. Not to mention that the news stations had received that tip way too fast. Faster than the DEA, NSA, or CIA had. And *that* simply didn't happen. The DEA had done damage control and was currently denying those allegations, but the charges were out there for the public to dissect and conspiracy theorists to latch onto.

Now Wesley had to focus on the attack in the capital more than anything. He'd been in Germany working with their premier intelligence agency on something highly sensitive when a stolen, U.S.–owned drone unleashed hell on a political fund-raiser.

And no one could find the damn thing. Not even his best team of analysts. Whoever was manning it was good, because they'd covered their digital tracks well enough that they hadn't even left a bread-crumb trail.

Pulling up his e-mail, Wesley started scanning the most important ones first, trying to sift his way through the mess of them. Karen often went through his messages and alerted him of priorities if he was off-line for a job, but this was his most private e-mail account. No one had access to it but him.

When he saw one from an unknown address, he opened it and frowned. It was rare he got spam at this address.

Remember the tip you got on Tasev in Miami? It was from me. I made the call from a pay phone on Bayside Drive and I'm willing to bet you tried to track me even after Max told you the tip was anonymous. We need to talk about Max's murder. Contact me at this number.

Wesley quickly memorized the phone number. No name, but Wesley didn't need it.

There was only one man who would know all those details. One of Max's undercover agents. A man known only as Grisha, though Wesley knew it was just an alias. He actually had a file on the alleged criminal and all his supposed past exploits. He'd had Karen look into the man because he'd wanted to team up with Max on another case. That wouldn't be happening now.

Wesley checked the time stamp and cursed when he realized the message had been sent two damn days ago.

He pulled out his sat phone and called the number. Then cursed again when it went to an automated voice mail simply saying to leave a message. He tried it again with the same results. He shot off an e-mail to Karen asking her to get a trace on the number, then finished dealing with more correspondence that couldn't wait. Nothing in his damn job could ever seem to wait.

"What's that look?" Selene asked after he'd tried calling Grisha again.

"Remember the undercover agents from the Tasev case?"

Selene's pale blue eyes widened just the slightest fraction. "Yeah."

“I think one of them contacted me. Wants to talk about Max’s murder.”

“That’s interesting.”

He nodded. It was very interesting. The DEA and the local PD were handling the case, yet someone who’d worked with Max wanted to talk to him, an outsider.

And in his experience, that simply never happened.

Chapter 4

Legend: an agent’s alleged background and personal history, usually supported by documents and memorized details.

Karen tried to steady her breathing and gain her bearings. It was difficult when she was hooded, but she knew she was sitting in the back of a vehicle—not the original SUV, because they’d switched vehicles in a parking garage, though she’d feigned being passed out—and there were four men in the rows in front of her. She knew how many there were because of their distinctive voices. Unfortunately they were all speaking Russian. She didn’t speak it, but she understood a handful of words and phrases. Her hands were flex-cuffed in front of her, which was better than behind her but still sucked. She couldn’t stop her heart from racing out of control or her body’s elevated temperature.

She was so not prepared for something like this. Sure, she’d taken some classes—in a well-lit classroom with trained instructors—but no in-the-field training for being kidnapped. She was just an analyst. She was good with computers and thinking outside the box, but she wasn’t physically strong. Definitely not strong enough to fend off one of the men she’d seen, let alone four. And her imagination was going insane, thinking of all the things these monsters planned to do to her. Rape or torture. Probably both. Worse, she knew that most people cracked under torture.

One of the men she worked with, Ortiz, had told her just that during a conversation they’d had over morning coffee and bagels at the office. It had been in context with a case they’d been working on. He’d said that it was just a matter of time but it was simply human nature before pretty much everyone broke. If you couldn’t channel the pain, whether psychological or physical, you cracked. And if for some reason you held out, one of two things happened. Death, or they found something else to use against you. Meaning someone who mattered to you. It was conceivable that even the bravest patriot would give up secrets because of a threat to a significant other or child.

That was human nature to its core.

“Burkhart . . . ,” one of the men murmured in the midst of their conversation.

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