

BLANK SLATE

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Tiffany Snow



This book is dedicated to Eleni and the phone
call that changed everything.

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EPISODE ONE

CHAPTER ONE

It had begun to snow. Special Agent Erik Langston sighed in frustration, his breath fogging up the glass inside the SUV. He hated the cold, and he hated snow, which was why he was particularly irritated that he was stuck in both at the moment. Colorado was a place he might actually enjoy visiting, when the temperature wasn't hovering about ten degrees above zero.

It was getting late, the darkness outside the car windows broken only by the amber glow filtering from the windows on the villa nestled in the side of the mountain. The trees surrounding the luxury residence lent to its artistry. Picking up his high-powered binoculars, Erik could see through the floor-to-ceiling windows to the party going on inside. Women dressed in long gowns spun elegantly on the arms of tuxedoed men, their jewels glistening in the light of the chandeliers.

No doubt just one of those gowns cost three months' salary, he thought wryly. But he hadn't picked this profession for the money; he'd chosen it to put bad guys behind bars, and one of those bad guys was inside that villa.

The cell phone lying on the empty passenger seat began to buzz. Erik picked it up.

"Langston," he answered.

"Still chasing your tail in the middle of nowhere?"

Erik bit back a sharp retort, the jibe from his colleague and erstwhile partner grating on his nerves more than usual.

“What do you want, Kaminski?”

“Just checking up on you. Not everyone chooses to spend New Year’s Eve stalking thieves with a track record of outrunning and outsmarting the FBI.”

Judging by the slurring of his words and the sounds of revelry in the background, Erik thought it was safe to assume Kaminski was drunk.

“What I choose to do in my time off is none of your business,” Erik retorted, though the fact that he was bothering to argue with a drunken asshole gave proof to the fact that he’d gone too

long without any interaction with another person. Obviously, communing with nature wasn’t his thing.

“Dude, I’m just saying, you’re obsessed. Lay off the work and get a life. You won’t make an arrest tonight, not alone. And how long has it been since you’ve been laid?”

“Fuck off.” Erik hung up.

Before the call he’d been bored and cold. Now he was bored, cold, and pissed off.

It wasn’t like he didn’t get offers. Women tended to find him attractive, more so once they realized what he did for a living, but Erik chalked that up to too much television. Usually, he gave them a pass. It wasn’t worth the hassle. Invariably he’d get hooked into the scenario of a woman relentlessly calling him, unable to take the hint when he didn’t call them back. Then he’d feel guilty, once or twice allowing himself to be coerced into dinner with sex for dessert, and then he was in even deeper than before.

No thanks.

So he worked. And worked. This case in particular had been a thorn in his side for the better part of a year.

He’d been following the trail a thief who specialized in hacking the computers and bank accounts of some of the wealthiest people in the world. In an usual twist, those same people usually had some sort of link to organized crime. A vigilante masquerading as Robin Hood? Or just a talented thief with a taste for the absurd?

Erik had been tracking the hacker and their targets for months, always one step behind. Tonight, he’d hoped to turn that around. An anonymous tip had led him to this desolate spot in the Colorado mountains, where he’d been stuck watching the villa for the past two nights; that’s how desperate he was to nail this case.

Muttering a curse, Erik climbed out of the SUV, pocketing his keys and holstering his gun. The snow crunched underneath his feet as he set off toward the villa. Crashing a New Year’s Eve party wasn’t usually his thing, but damned if he was going to be outsmarted again, and he was tired of waiting.

A few minutes later, he was knocking on the front door. A butler opened it, and with a flash of his badge and an admonition to alert no one to his presence, he was inside.

Jeans and a sweater may have passed muster at the office, but were decidedly lowbrow for this party, not that Erik cared. The guests had been dining, drinking, and dancing for hours. No one even gave him a second look.

She was here. His gut told him so, and he always listened to his gut.

Snagging an hors d'oeuvre off a passing waitress's tray, Erik popped it in his mouth, his practiced gaze scanning the crowd.

Clarissa O'Connell kept moving, though she'd spotted the cop immediately. Damn. How'd he find her?

It didn't matter. By the time he realized what was going on, she would be long gone.

She gave him one more look, since he certainly deserved it. Tall and broad-shouldered, his hair a deep mahogany, he stood out from the crowd, and not just because of his clothing. He carried himself with a confidence bordering on arrogance. In another lifetime, Clarissa might have tried her luck with him. But not tonight.

Hurrying back to the kitchen, Clarissa discarded the tray of food from which the cop had plucked his morsel. Loitering by the servants' staircase, she waited, patiently watching for the moment when no one was noticing her. When that time came, she soundlessly climbed the darkened steps to the upper floors, pulling on a pair of latex gloves as she did so.

If she did this right, she'd finally be free.

The information she'd been given was accurate, and several minutes later she was standing in front of a computer monitor, waiting for the program she'd uploaded from her flash drive to go to work.

"Solomon said you'd show up tonight."

Clarissa's hand went for the gun strapped to her thigh.

"Ah, ah, ah," cautioned the man now standing directly behind her. He'd blended with the shadows and not made a sound. Now the cold metal of his gun pressed against her bare neck. "I wouldn't do that if I were you. Hand it over."

Moving slowly and deliberately, Clarissa gave him her gun, turning so she faced him.

"I see why Solomon chose you," he said with a snort. "Not exactly a looker. I bet you blend in real well."

Clarissa ignored his insult, thinking furiously, her palms damp with sweat. "Solomon told you about me?"

"Yep. Looks like your boss thinks you've outlived your usefulness. I'm here to tie up loose ends."

"That's not what I was promised."

"Deals change, sweetheart."

Clarissa's smile was sweet as molasses as her fingers closed over the heavy, silver letter opener lying on the desk at her back. "So they do."

Quick as a snake, she struck, shoving the arm holding the gun as she buried the letter opener to the hilt in his side.

He grunted in pain, snarling curses as they struggled. Her knee came up, nailing him in the crotch. The gun dropped to the floor as he dropped to his knees. An elbow to the back of the neck and he was out cold at her feet.

She retrieved her gun then reached over, typed a few commands into the computer, and waited impatiently for the files to be copied. When it was finished, she snatched the flash drive out of its slot. If Solomon wanted those files, he'd have to pay dearly for them, the lying bastard.

A few keystrokes later, information began to upload to her remote server, not that anyone would notice if they sat down in front of the computer. The program was both silent and invisible to all but the savviest of technicians, and even then nearly impossible to get rid of unless the drive was wiped clean.

Clarissa felt the usual thrill of satisfaction from seeing her work in action. Software was easy, logical; the rules it followed never wavered or changed. Unlike people. People lied to you, betrayed you, used you. The only way to stay alive was to never trust anyone, ever. That lesson had saved her life more than once.

And now it was past time to leave.

Clarissa hurried to the door, checking to make sure the hallway was clear. A shadow in the corridor made her whisk back inside, out of sight.

She never heard the gunshot, just a searing pain ripping through her. Reacting automatically, she spun, took quick aim, and pulled the trigger. Her would-be assassin fell back to the floor and didn't get up again.

The wound in her side was bleeding. If she hadn't moved at the last moment, she'd be dead. It wasn't that bad, though it hurt like hell. The blood mated with the black fabric of her uniform, darkening it, but thankfully not standing out. No one looked, really looked, at the waitstaff. She'd just slip out the back door with no one the wiser.

Pressing her hand tightly to her side, Clarissa eased into the hallway. The gunshot had gone unnoticed, it seemed, possibly not heard over the revelry of the midnight celebrations below. The New Year had arrived at a very opportune moment.

At least, it seemed that way until she rounded the corner and ran right into the cop.

Erik's hands shot out, grabbing the waitress's upper arms before she fell backward from their collision. A little thing, her arms seemed fragile enough for him to break with his bare hands. He eased his hold, not wanting to hurt her.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She didn't answer, the surprise on her face somewhat comical. He repeated his question.

"No hablo Inglés," the girl stammered, her eyes wide.

Erik frowned, releasing her. He watched as she hurried down the hall, glancing back at him once before disappearing down a set of stairs. Dismissing her with a shake of his head, he turned back to the empty hallway. He could have sworn he'd heard a gunshot from up here. If he'd been downstairs, he would've missed it, with the party in full swing. But he'd been exploring the upper floors when the unmistakable sound had rung out.

Opening yet another door, Erik saw the faint blue glow of a computer monitor reflecting off the large picture window behind a desk. Casually flipping on the light, he froze when he saw the body on the floor.

Erik raced forward, crouching to turn the man onto his back. A gun with a silencer attached lay beside the body, the wound in his chest deadly accurate. His eyes stared straight ahead, sightless, while something protruded from his side. Grasping it, Erik pulled out a silver letter opener.

The waitress. Shit!

Jumping to his feet, Erik peered out the window to the grounds below. Sure enough, he saw her, hurrying away from the villa toward the bank of cars parked for the guests. Clutching awkwardly at her side, she disappeared among the steel maze.

Erik ran down the hall, racing down the stairs toward the front door, gun in hand.

A woman spotted him, saw the gun, and screamed, pointing, "He has a gun!"

Cries of alarm spread through the guests as Erik pushed his way through them. Dammit! This was taking too long. She was going to be long gone if he had to stop to explain who he was and what was happening.

The butler who'd let him in earlier now stood uncertainly in front of the doorway, blocking Erik's path.

Erik pointed his gun at him as he ran. "Open it!" he ordered.

The butler blanched, then scurried to do his bidding, flinging open the door just in time for Erik to launch himself through the opening and out into the frigid night.

Panting for air, Erik skidded to a halt, scanning the cars through the thickening snow falling from the sky.

There. A sedan was pulling out of the lot on the far side. Erik's smile was one of satisfaction. That car was a bad choice on a night like tonight in a place like this. He ran to his SUV.

Clarissa blinked hard, trying to clear her vision. The damn wound in her side hurt more than she'd bargained for, the loss of blood making her slightly dizzy. Damn Solomon and his double-crossing ways! This job should've been a piece of cake; had been, until the hired gun had showed up. She'd even slipped past the cop.

Lights in the rearview mirror caught Clarissa's eye. Someone was chasing her, and catching up fast. Alarmed, she stepped on the gas, the sedan's wheels spinning on the fresh snow as it picked up speed.

Clarissa had memorized the map of roads for the area, though some of them barely deserved the name, being little more than clearings just wide enough for one car to pass through. Forcing herself to concentrate, she put both

hands on the frigid wheel, hoping the uniform she wore was tight enough to keep the bleeding down. Consulting her memory, she suddenly stepped hard on the brakes, spun the wheel, and hit the gas again. The car fishtailed at the abrupt turn before the wheels found purchase and she shot down the road.

Snow lay on the evergreens overhead, their laden branches hanging low and brushing the car as she flew past. The snowfall was heavy, the flakes coming down thick and fast. Glancing in her mirror, Clarissa saw the lights still behind her, the pursuer taking the sudden turn in stride and eating up the ground between them.

Clarissa cursed her decision to take the sedan rather than searching the lot for a more appropriate vehicle. At the time, expediency had seemed to be the wisest course, but she hadn't known she'd have someone chasing her. Someone who appeared quite relentless.

Consulting the map in her head yet again, Clarissa wavered in indecision. She thought she could make the turn ahead, but that road was filled with dangerous switchbacks. One more glance in the mirror and her lips thinned into a tight line. There really wasn't a choice, not if she wanted to lose the guy behind her.

A brief thought flashed through her mind—she hoped it wasn't the cop. He was doing his job and didn't deserve to be killed for it. She just really didn't have time to be arrested, even by a cop as mouth-wateringly gorgeous as that one.

Sending up a quick prayer to anyone who might be listening, Clarissa took a deep breath, then slammed on the brakes, spinning the wheel as fast as she dared before stomping on the gas again. The sudden, sharp movement

caused a flash of pain in her side, but she gritted her teeth, tightly gripped the wheel, and ignored it.

The car fishtailed again, the wheels spinning, and the back of the sedan slammed into a tree. Clarissa jerked in her seat at the impact but didn't let up on the gas. Bouncing off the tree, the wheels caught and she was racing down the road. She let out the breath she'd been holding. That had been close.

Watching in the mirror, she saw the SUV skid and slow, then back up to make the turn.

Clarissa cursed under her breath, jerking her attention back to the road. It was rougher, the beams from the headlights dancing crazily as the car bounced and dipped over the uneven patches.

A sharp curve loomed ahead, and Clarissa's hands tightened until her knuckles were white. Fear lapped at her, but she fought it. There wasn't any time to be scared.

Bracing herself, she slowed the car. The empty space beyond the bend in the road made her blood turn to ice. If she didn't make it, it was a long way down. She turned the wheel.

The car slid past the edge of the road, and Clarissa choked back a cry. But luck or an angel was with her because just when she felt sure her next breath would be her last, the car shot forward again.

Her heart pounded in her chest, while her palms were damp and slick on the steering wheel. Watching in the mirror, Clarissa held her breath while the SUV easily made the turn.

Damn! How was she going to lose him?

Looking back at the road, Clarissa screamed, instinctively jerking the wheel and slamming on the brakes to avoid hitting the deer standing directly in her path.

The car swerved with a sickening lurch, spinning 180 degrees before sliding off the road and down a steep embankment. Slamming into trees, it broke branches before flipping once end over end.

Clarissa's heart was in her throat, the world upside down and righting itself around her. The sound of wrenching metal was loud in her ears as she was flung against the steering wheel, her head slamming against something so hard the pain caused instant nausea.

Her last terrified thought was that she was going to die.

Erik stomped on the brakes, bringing the SUV to a skidding halt. Vaulting from the seat, he watched as the sedan came to a shuddering stop at the bottom of the embankment. The metal was twisted and dented, a telling path of destruction left in its wake.

His feet slid in the snow as he made his way down to the car, gun in hand. The last thing he wanted was the girl getting the drop on him, though he'd be very surprised if the crash hadn't done permanent damage to her.

"FBI!" he shouted, the words immediately muffled by the falling snow. "Put your hands where I can see them!"

No response. Steam rolled from underneath the hood, the engine exuding a quiet hiss as escaping liquid touched the hot metal. The woods were quite still now, the idling of the SUV a distant purr as Erik cautiously approached the car. Snow squeaked and crunched under his boots as he walked. He never took his eyes from the windows and saw nothing move inside.

The twin glow of the SUV's headlights cut through the darkness, the falling snow grabbing the light and reflected it into the night. Erik was close enough now to see the glass

had shattered in the driver's side window. Acutely aware that this woman had just shot a man less than fifteen minutes ago, Erik held his gun steady.

"FBI," he repeated loudly. Still nothing. Cautiously, he bent to peer into the car.

The woman was crumpled in the driver's seat, her head lolling forward on her neck, forehead nearly touching the pristine steering wheel.

The steering wheel. Completely intact, with no limp airbag hanging from its center.

Erik pressed two fingers to her neck, underneath her jaw, hoping she wasn't dead. It would be just his luck to have his hunt for her end with her dead from a car crash. A steady pulse beat under his fingers.

Making what he hoped wouldn't be his last decision, Erik swiftly holstered his gun before reaching for the door handle. Though he pulled, it refused to open. Muttering a few choice curses, he put his back into it, but still the mangled steel wouldn't budge. Well, that really left only one option.

He reached through the window, feeling his way through the dark to where the seat belt latched, holding the woman firmly in place. As he pressed the button, the seat belt relaxed, retracting as the woman slumped forward against the steering wheel and Erik's arm.

Hoping nothing vital had been broken, and not caring overly much if it had, Erik maneuvered until he had grasped her beneath her arms. He pulled her through the window. The fact that she wasn't wearing a coat helped to get her through the small space. Erik glanced up at the hill he'd just climbed down. Nice. Getting back up to the

SUV while carrying her was going to be a complete pain in the ass.

Hoisting her in his arms, he began the climb. Thankfully, she was a little thing and didn't weigh much. Still, Erik slipped and slid up the hill, losing his footing and going down to his knees a couple of times. The falling snowflakes coated his lashes, and he blinked them away, keeping his gaze on the ground in front of him.

He struggled on, the woman in his arms oblivious to the difficulties she was inflicting on him. His foot slipped again, and Erik cursed as his hand shot out to grab a tree to keep himself upright. Clarissa moaned, the sound quiet and pained, as he lost his grip on her legs.

Erik's lips pressed into a grim line as he carefully readjusted her in his arms. He was almost there; he just had to be more careful. No more falls.

As he neared the vehicle, he could see her a bit clearer, the headlights cutting through the shadows. Her hair obscured part of her face, but Erik though he could see the dark trail of blood. Unconsciously, his steps quickened.

Finally, he reached the SUV. Sweat coated his skin underneath his thick coat and sweater, the frigid air he sucked in burning its way down his throat and lungs. He opened the back door, easing her onto the seat. Standing back, he took a moment to catch his breath, his back aching from the climb. Looking at her, he frowned. She was wearing that little black uniform, her legs encased in nylons, while her arms were bare against the cold.

By all rights, he should let her freeze her ass off. That's what Erik kept telling himself as he dug in the back of the

SUV, pulling out the emergency blanket he'd put there, just in case. He tossed it over her still form, giving it a rough tuck under her legs, protecting them from the cold leather seats.

He slammed the door shut, reminding himself that she could very well be playing him, just waiting for the chance when his back was turned to attack. Just because she was little didn't mean she was any less dangerous.

Another trip down the hill to the car and Erik retrieved the two bags he found inside, stowing them in the back of the SUV. His muscles burned from the exertion as he finally climbed into the driver's seat and shifted the car into drive. His hand stuck slightly to the gearshift. Curious, Erik glanced at his palm.

It was smeared with blood. Her blood.

Shit.

The nearest hospital was two hours away, probably more in this weather. Erik grabbed his cell, only to see that the storm had eroded what slight service he'd had: the display showed no bars. His only choice was to take his chances and try to get her to the hospital as quickly as he could.

Erik drove, retracing his path through the woods as best he could, though the snow and darkness made it slow and difficult. The switchbacks appeared as if from nowhere, their dangerous curves threatening to send the SUV plummeting to unseen depths. The road grew uneven, the tires dipping into gouges covered in snow. After hitting a particularly rough patch, Erik heard a soft whimper from the backseat. He glanced in the rearview mirror, but the girl hadn't moved. His hands tightened on the steering wheel.

After driving for another forty-five minutes, Erik was forced to admit that he was lost. The chase she'd led him on had turned him around, his sense of direction utterly screwed by the snowstorm, the map and cell phone lying on the seat next to him utterly useless.

Each minute that ticked by seemed to mock Erik. The sticky blood on his hand as he gripped the steering wheel reminding him that he had a responsibility to the girl, even if she was a criminal and cold-blooded killer.

Up ahead, the beam from the headlights glinted off something metallic. Squinting through the snow, Erik realized it was a mailbox. Wondering how in the hell anyone got mail out here—and his respect for postmen inching upward a notch—Erik aimed the SUV toward it, turning in to the tiny drive that led deeper into the thick woods.

A few minutes and several rough bounces later, a log cabin came into view. No cheery lights burned from the windows, but it was shelter.

He pulled to a stop in front of the cabin, noticing no other vehicles or tire tracks. The snow had piled up, and it came to Erik's shins when he cut the engine and climbed out of the SUV. Deciding to leave the girl in the car while he checked out the place, he grabbed a flashlight from the trunk and headed to the front door.

The slam of the car door penetrated the girl's consciousness, her eyes slitting open as the fog slowly lifted from her mind.

Where was she?

It was dark, and cold, though she had a blanket over her. She sat up, then gasped at the sharp stabs of pain the movement produced. Her side felt like it was on fire; her

head ached as though she'd drunk a gallon of Guinness last night.

Lightly touching her forehead, she winced, and her fingers came away wet. What happened? Why was she in this condition? Her hair felt funny, and with a quick tug, she pulled off a wig, tossing it aside.

She seemed to be alone. Whoever had driven the car was no longer there. Had they left her behind?

Opening the car door was more difficult than it should have been, the pain in her side knifing through her until she was breathless. She kept at it until she stood shivering in the knee-deep snow. Her mind spun in confusion as the icy snow landed gently on her face and arms, the tiny pin-pricks of cold unrelenting. Where was she? What should she do? Fear made her breath come faster as she clutched her side, struggling to see through the pitch-black woods. A cabin stood not far from the vehicle, a lone lamp burning in a near window.

A light suddenly danced across the snow. Someone was coming. The flashlight arced across her face, momentarily blinding her, before coming back in an abrupt jerk. She raised her hand to shield her eyes.

"Hey! Don't move!"

The shout broke the silence of the woods, startling her. The light was coming quicker now, the beam erratic as its owner struggled through the drifts.

Panic hit hard, and the cold rush of adrenaline flooded her veins, temporarily numbing the pain in her side and head. Turning, she ran.

Erik cursed as he saw her disappear into the darkness. She was an idiot if she thought she was going to escape

him. In this weather, clad as she was and obviously hurt, she'd die.

That thought galvanized him, and he picked up speed, thinking of what he'd like to do to her for making him run through the damn snow after carrying her ass up that embankment.

He followed where he'd seen her disappear, his foul mood turning more disagreeable with each passing moment. Icy water dripped from his wet hair down under the collar of his sweater, his legs practically numb from the knees down as the stiff, cold denim of his jeans abraded his skin. The boots that had seemed impenetrable in the store proved even they couldn't withstand a Colorado snowstorm, and his feet squished inside their damp socks.

"I am not chasing you through the damn woods in the middle of the night!" he called out. No answer. He played his flashlight through the trees, grudgingly admiring how quickly she'd hidden herself, though it had been a stupid move. "Come out," he demanded. "You'll die out there otherwise." Not that he cared overly much at this particular moment. His toes were numb now.

Erik waited. Still no answer. He tried again. "I'll give you to the count of five to come out. I know you're hurt. You won't make it far, and there's nothing and no one for miles." Silence.

"One...two..."

Nothing. The flashlight illuminated no movement among the silent trees.

"Three...four..."

The thought occurred to him that maybe she was unconscious again, unable to come out because she was even now

collapsed in the freezing snow. That image had him moving forward again.

“I’m here.”

Erik spun around, wondering how the hell she’d gotten behind him, only to see something dark hurtling through the night. He dropped the flashlight, but was still too late to stop the heavy tree branch from landing hard in his gut, knocking the breath from his lungs.

The branch fell to the ground as Erik’s temper ignited. The girl turned to run, and he launched himself at her, tackling her to the ground. He rolled as they fell so he wouldn’t land on top of her, but didn’t ease the tight hold he had on her arms.

She struggled in his grip, managing to get one arm free and scramble to her knees in the snow. Erik latched his arm around her waist, yanking her back down.

A strangled cry of pain made him freeze. The girl didn’t move now, curled on her side with her knees drawn up, her eyes squeezed tightly shut. Her breath came hard and fast, the puffs of cold air visible in the night.

Erik’s anger drained away, and he got to his feet, grabbing the flashlight and slipping it into his pocket. His eyes adjusted to the ambient glow from the snow as he bent, pulling her unresisting body into his arms. She shook like a leaf, her skin like ice and her clothes wet through.

Without a word, Erik carried her into the log cabin.

CHAPTER TWO

The inside of the cabin was cold, but not like it had been outside. Erik turned on a lamp and put the girl down on the couch in front of the fireplace. She didn’t speak or open her eyes, her lips pressed tightly together, and Erik got the impression she was trying to not make a sound, though she had to be in pain.

He shut and locked the front door before shedding his wet coat. The absent owner had thoughtfully left a stack of wood in the corner, and Erik spent the next several minutes building a fire in the grate. Once that was done, he searched through the bathroom cupboards, turning up some rudimentary medical supplies, and grabbed a blanket from the nearby bedroom before returning to the huddled form on the couch. She hadn’t moved.

Now he could see her properly and realized he’d been right about her injury. She had a nasty cut on her forehead and a livid red mark that was already darkening into a bruise. Dried blood crusted the wound and trailed down her starkly white face. Erik saw he’d been wrong about her hair; she must have been wearing a wig earlier, because the brunette locks were gone, replaced with deep, rich, red strands pulled back into a haphazard bun.

Erik reached down and pulled off her shoes. Her eyes flew open, the brilliant green of her gaze pinning him.

“What are you doing?” she asked. He could hear a touch of fear and panic in her voice.

“You’re hurt and soaked. The wet clothes have to come off so you can get warm and I can see your injury,” Erik answered.

It scared her, the matter-of-fact way in which the unknown man spoke about undressing her. Did she know him? She struggled to remember, but drew a blank.

“Who are you?” she asked, scooting away from him as he grabbed some scissors from the nearby table and started cutting the hem of the dress she wore.

“Special Agent Erik Langston,” the man replied, ignoring her attempts to get away from him as he cut through the thick fabric.

“Special Agent?”

He looked up then, his eyes a clear, pale blue. “FBI.”

Her eyes widened. FBI. That sounded ominous. What did he want with her? And he was still cutting. “Stop that,” she ordered, pushing his hands away. The movement pulled at the wound in her side, and she sucked in a breath at the stab of pain. She was so cold. Part of her really wanted to get the icy dress off, but she didn’t want to do it with this man watching.

The self-proclaimed FBI agent wasn’t a little guy. The sweater he wore couldn’t conceal his bulk. The thickness of his biceps was apparent even through the fabric. The muscles in his thighs pulled the denim of his jeans taut as he sat beside her on the couch, her nylon-encased legs pressed against the back cushions. She felt uncomfortably small next to him.

“Despite the fact that you hit me with a tree trunk,” Agent Langston said wryly, “I’m trying to help you.”

“It was a branch, not a tree trunk,” she corrected him, warily watching as he handed her the blanket.

He gave her a look, then resumed cutting. She pulled the blanket to her chest, trying to get warm. Shivers were making her hands shake.

“You were chasing me,” she accused. “What was I supposed to do?”

The cold metal of the scissors slid against the skin of her hip as he cut the formfitting uniform.

“If you weren’t a criminal, I wouldn’t be chasing you,” he responded.

The girl stared at him in shock before finally finding her tongue. “Are you crazy? I’m not—”

A cry of pain left her lips as he parted the cut uniform, the fabric pulling at the bloody wound. The skin was torn, and blood still oozed sluggishly from the gouge in her side. She couldn’t tear her eyes away, even as the image swam and blurred.

Erik’s lips twisted in a grimace as the girl passed out. Some deadly villain she was, fainting at the sight of blood.

She had collapsed against the cushions, her eyes rolling upward, and Erik took the opportunity to get the wet fabric off her. His movements quick and efficient, she was soon divested of her wet uniform and mangled nylons. After a brief hesitation, he left intact the scraps of black satin and lace that preserved her modesty.

Erik examined the wound, which looked like a bullet had caused it. The girl was extremely lucky. It had just grazed her and taken a chunk of flesh from her side. He cleaned and tightly bandaged the wound, though without stitches it would leave a nasty scar on her soft, perfect skin.

Erik shut down the trail those thoughts led to, uncomfortably aware of her nakedness. Petite though she was, her body was perfectly formed to please a man. Slim ankles led to curved calves, indenting sweetly at her knees. Her thighs were smooth, flaring to hips that would fit nicely in his hands, before yielding to the deep dip of her waist. A soft, flat abdomen begged to be touched, and her breasts made his mouth water.

Abruptly jerking the blanket, he covered her, feeling like a sick voyeur, ogling her while she was unconscious.

Not to mention that she was wanted by the FBI, he reminded himself.

Getting a washcloth, Erik gently cleaned the blood from her face. She wasn't classically pretty so much as she had an interesting face. Her eyes had been clear, intelligence shining from their green depths. Her nose, small and tipped up at the end, was covered with a smattering of freckles. A strong, square jaw led to a pointed chin that seemed to advertise a stubborn nature.

Telling himself he was only making her more comfortable and not trying to ease his own curiosity, Erik reached over, removing the pins holding her hair until it framed her face in a fiery tangle.

Her picture hadn't done her justice.

After bandaging the cut on her forehead, Erik decided he'd had enough of wet clothes. He heaved a tired sigh as he got up. Taking his keys and gun with him, no sense leaving temptation within her reach, he took a shower in the master bath. The hot water went a long way to easing his mood.

Searching the closet, he was able to find a pair of jeans that fit him, but the shirts were too small. The closest he

found was a T-shirt that was still tighter than he usually wore, the material stretched to its limits to cover his shoulders and upper arms. It would do while his clothes dried.

It appeared the owner lived alone, as there were no clothes for a woman anywhere to be had. Erik grabbed another T-shirt for her to wear and a pair of flannel pants that would likely swallow her. It didn't matter. At least she'd be covered.

The warmth from the fire had chased away the chill when he returned, though the girl still appeared to be asleep. He searched the kitchen, unearthing a few bottles of liquor. Choosing one filled with whiskey, Erik poured himself a healthy shot and tossed it back. The liquid burned a welcome trail of fire down his throat.

"Can I get some of that?"

Erik turned, surprised to see she had awakened and managed to sit up. Grabbing the bottle and a second glass, he took them into the living room and sank down onto the couch, careful to avoid her legs. Although he noticed she'd pulled the blanket to her chin to cover herself, he didn't say anything. He poured her a shot and handed her the glass.

She took it and drank it quickly down, then handed it back for a refill. He eyed her but poured more into the glass. Hopefully, the pain-numbing effects of whiskey hadn't been exaggerated, she thought, drinking the second helping down.

"You should take it easy," Agent Langston said. "You probably have a concussion."

She silently handed him her empty glass, raising an eyebrow until he poured more.

“What happened?” she asked, sipping more slowly at the liquid now. “How did I get here?”

“You don’t remember?”

“Would I ask you if I did?” she retorted, trying to ignore pain in her side. She wanted to bite back her words at the look he shot her. Schooling her features into what she hoped appeared contrite, she said, “I mean, no, I don’t.”

Agent Langston’s expression told her she wasn’t fooling him for an instant. He snorted and took another drink before answering.

“After you killed that guy—who was he, by the way?—I followed you, chasing your car until you ran off the road and crashed. I picked you up, put you in the back of my car, and ended up here.”

“Killed a guy? What are you talking about? I didn’t kill anyone!” The thought was absurd.

“Yes, you did,” he said. “And judging by the fact that you’re alive with just a bullet wound while he’s dead, you had better aim than him.”

“I don’t know why you’d tell me these lies, but there’s no way I would ever kill someone.” The man was crazy!

He shrugged his shoulders as though bored with the conversation. “Save it for the judge. I already know you’re guilty.”

A knot of fear grew in her belly. This FBI agent thought he’d caught some dangerous criminal. “This is ridiculous,” she spluttered. “I’m not a murderer! I’m—” The sentence cut off abruptly as realization struck. “Oh my God,” she whispered.

Langston looked at her, his cynical gaze sharp. “Is it all coming back now?”

She ignored him. “I’m...I’m...” But the words wouldn’t come. They seemed like they were right there, right on the tip of her tongue, but refused to come out.

“Guilty? Don’t confess now, I don’t have any witnesses.”

“You don’t understand,” she gritted out, her hands moving to clutch her head. “I can’t remember.” She tried harder, her eyes squeezing shut. It had to be there. No one just forgot their own name.

“You hit your head,” he reminded her. “A concussion plus bullet wound plus shock. You’ll be fine in the morning.”

“It’s not that,” she said, dropping her hands and meeting his gaze. “I can’t remember. Anything. I don’t even know my name.” The horror of saying the words aloud made panic twist in her gut. This couldn’t be happening to her. Her. She had no name to even refer to herself by.

A shout of laughter made her jump, and she jerked her head up to see Langston was finding great humor in her situation. She ground her teeth, her hands clenching into fists so she wouldn’t hit him.

“You think this is funny?” she accused him, ice in her voice. What a jerk. Typical cop. Wait. Why had she thought that? Did she know a lot of cops? The fact that she didn’t know the answer to that question scared her.

His laughter trailed away, and he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. “It’s a stroke of fucking genius,” he replied finally. “I must say, I didn’t see that one coming.”

“I’m not lying,” she insisted.

He nodded his head, clearly not believing a word of it. “Sure you’re not.”

“You asshole!” she yelled. “I’m telling you the truth! I don’t know who I am!”

The fear in her voice must have gotten through to him, because his expression turned hard.

“You want to play this game?” he asked coldly. “Fine, I’ll tell you who you are. You’re Clarissa O’Connell, daughter of Flynn O’Connell, sister to Daniel O’Connell, and currently wanted by the FBI. You’ve been a criminal your whole life, following in the footsteps of dear dad and big brother. You’re currently wanted for multiple counts of fraud, money laundering, and racketeering, all crimes you’ve racked up while working for a mob boss who goes by the name of Solomon. In the past few hours, you added murder to that list. Shall I continue, or are we done here?”

He slammed his empty glass down on the table and got to his feet. Giving her a contemptuous look, he said, “I suggest you get some sleep. We leave in the morning.” He tossed a bundle of fabric at her and disappeared into the bedroom, leaving the door open behind him.

Clarissa stared after him, stunned at the avalanche of information he’d just poured on her. A criminal? She was wanted for a list of felonies, including murder?

The thought rattled around inside her head. Murder. According to the FBI agent, she’d killed someone.

Her hand went to her side, the pads of her fingers brushing the bandage. She’d been shot, that much was true. Maybe she’d killed in self-defense.

Clarissa released a pent-up breath of relief. Self-defense was different from outright murder. It was OK to defend yourself. She couldn’t feel guilty for something she not only didn’t remember, but had been an act of self-preservation.

And at least she had a name now.

“Clarissa O’Connell,” she whispered to herself, letting the name roll around her tongue like the whiskey had. The name had the warm feel of familiarity to it but stirred no memories.

Clarissa touched the bump on her head, wincing at the tenderness. She’d seen movies where people hit their heads and lost their memories. It was usually temporary, wasn’t it? She had to believe that. The possibility that it might be permanent was too horrifying to think about, so she wouldn’t.

Suddenly, Clarissa had a burning desire to find a mirror. It was an odd feeling, not knowing what she looked like. Touching her hair, she saw that it was long enough to pull a lock of it around to see the color. Red. Hmm. Not too crazy about that.

Getting up from the couch proved unpleasant, the bullet wound was painfully tender and her head still ached. The blanket dropped, and cold air brushed her skin. Clarissa cast a quick glance into the darkened bedroom but couldn’t see anything. Aware that the cop might be watching her, she pulled on the T-shirt and pants as quickly as she could. The pants were about six inches too long, and she had to roll the waistband several times to get them to stay up.

The cabin wasn’t terribly large, the main space given over to a large expanse of windows along the back. The ceiling arched high overhead, and Clarissa could see the snow still falling outside. Now that she was inside and warm, she could appreciate the beauty of the scene, and paused for a moment to watch. The snow clung to the already laden branches of the fir trees, weighing them down even more.

The drifts looked as though they'd been sculpted by an artist, rather than the careless wind.

The warmth of the fire was at her back, and despite her current predicament, Clarissa smiled to herself. She liked the snow. Maybe she always had? Or maybe not. Regardless, it made her feel less like a stranger in her own skin.

Speaking of which...Clarissa resumed her search for a bathroom, and consequently, a mirror. Easing through one of the two closed doors, she found an office space, complete with a heavy oak desk. A computer monitor stood on top of the burnished wood's surface, and Clarissa stopped to stare at it. She felt drawn to it, almost an itch in her hands to sit down at the keyboard. How odd. Resisting the urge to satisfy her curiosity, and seeing as there was no attached bath, she retreated. Only a closet full of coats, boots, gloves and other assorted winter paraphernalia lay behind door number two.

Which left only one option.

A clock above the fireplace showed a half hour had passed since the cop had gone to bed. Surely he'd be asleep by now? He'd seemed exhausted, with lines of fatigue around his eyes. Not that Clarissa should care if he was tired. Sure, he'd saved her, but he'd been chasing her in the first place, accused her of lying, and was going to turn her in to the FBI.

She'd have to do something about that part.

Pausing inside the doorway, Clarissa let her eyes adjust to the darkness. The glow from the fireplace wasn't much, but enough so she could just see the outline of the bed. An inky rectangle to her left seemed to promise an open doorway to the bathroom.

Clarissa carefully skirted the bed, on which she could now make out a lumpy form that could only be Agent Langston. Her gaze caught on a slight metallic reflection on the table next to the bed.

Keys.

OK, change of plan. Apparently, she was adaptable. Forget the mirror, she had keys. Keys that would get her inside the car outside and take her far away from this man who'd hunted her, seemed to know way too much about her misdeeds, and wanted to put her in jail.

Clarissa stood very still, barely breathing, just listening. She could hear Langston breathing too, slow and deep. Her steps on the thick carpet were silent as she reached for the keys, her fingers brushing the cold metal.

A hand clamped down like a vice on her wrist. Clarissa cried out in surprise, the metal keys pressing sharply into the palm of her hand as she reflexively clenched them.

"Going somewhere?"

The cop's icy voice sent a shiver of alarm up Clarissa's spine. She fought for nonchalance as she said, "The thought crossed my mind."

Keeping a tight grip on her arm, Agent Langston reached out and flipped on the bedside lamp. Clarissa blinked in the sudden glow, though it wasn't very bright.

Despite her attempts to resist him, Agent Langston turned her hand palm up and pried the keys from her grip.

"Not going to happen," he said, pushing the keys into the pocket of his jeans.

Clarissa swallowed hard. Agent Langston had taken off his shirt to go to bed, and the light from the lamp revealed

a broad expanse of male skin. The muscles in his chest and arms were flexed as he held her captive.

It really was too bad he was a cop, Clarissa thought.

“You can’t blame a girl for trying,” she said sweetly, pulling at her arm until he released her. She rubbed her wrist, not that it hurt, but for something to do so she wouldn’t stare at him. Her heart was racing so fast she was sure he could hear it, though she hoped he attributed it to her botched escape attempt rather than him.

How absurd, her reaction to him. You’d think she’d never had a boyfriend before.

Had she?

The thought sobered her. She had bigger problems than a sexy, half-naked FBI man.

“Looks like we’re going to have to do this the hard way,” Agent Langston said.

Clarissa watched with too much nonprofessional interest as he got up and grabbed something off the bureau. When he turned around, her eyebrows shot upward.

“Oh no,” she said, backing away. “You are not going to use those.”

Agent Langston opened the metal handcuffs with a quick flick of his wrist. “You don’t leave me much choice.”

“I swear I’ll be good,” Clarissa offered. “I won’t try to escape.”

“You’re right. You won’t.”

He had her cornered now.

“Wait!” she said.

He paused.

“I have to...you know...” She jerked her head toward the bathroom.

“Fine,” Langston said. “You’ve got five minutes. Don’t make me come in after you.”

Clarissa disappeared into the bathroom, flicking on the light before closing the door. It was a windowless room; no help there. Turning on the faucet to cover any noise she made, she began searching.

“Time’s up,” Langston called through the door a short time later.

Clarissa briefly contemplated putting up a fight, but he was a lot bigger than she was and she’d probably end up being the one hurt. She decided to bide her time. The more she cooperated, the more off guard he would become, the easier it would be to escape. She opened the door.

Langston was waiting, cuffs in hand. The cold metal locked around her wrist. She looked up at him, but he was looking down, concentrating on making sure the handcuff was secure. He was so close she could see the thickness of his eyelashes and catch the scent of his skin.

It wasn’t a bad smell at all. In fact, she rather liked it.

“Come on,” he said, tugging the cuffs so Clarissa had no choice but to follow him. When he approached the bed, Clarissa’s brows climbed.

“You’re handcuffing me to the bed?” she asked, glancing at him. “If I’d known this was standard operating procedure, I would’ve gotten arrested sooner.” To her surprise, the quip caused a faint red to tint his ears. How adorable was that?

“I have to keep my eyes on you, and I need some sleep.”

The urge to see the cop get even more embarrassed was too strong to resist. “You sure you don’t want to keep more than your eyes on me?” Clarissa asked with a mischievous

grin. So he was an FBI agent who believed her to be a criminal, thought she was lying to him about her memory, but turned red at her teasing innuendos. He was a bit of a contradiction. How interesting.

Erik clenched his jaw, trying to hold on to his temper. He was tired, pissed off at how this whole thing had gone down, and irritated that he was stuck in the middle of Nowhere, Colorado, riding out a snowstorm with a woman who looked more like a college girl wearing her boyfriend's clothes than a hardened criminal and murderer.

"Sit down," he ordered.

She looked down, then back up at him.

"Sit," he repeated.

"On the floor?" she asked, her tone bewildered.

"Yes, the floor."

O'Connell's forehead puckered. "No."

Erik's eyebrows shot up. "Excuse me? 'No,' did you say?"

"It's cold and hard on the floor," she pouted. "And I've been hurt. You shouldn't make me sleep on the floor."

"The carpet's thick; you'll be fine," Erik said, ignoring the niggle of guilt in the back of his mind.

For a moment, he didn't think she was going to do it, which left him wondering how exactly he would make her, but she finally gave in, sitting down with a dignity and grace that belied her overlarge clothes. After locking the other handcuff around the bedpost, he gave it a jerk to make sure it was secure. He was turning away when he saw a quick wince cross her face. Erik hesitated.

"You all right?" he asked before he could think better of it.

O'Connell gave a stiff smile of long-suffering that made Erik wonder how many times she'd had to practice that in front of a mirror.

"If it wouldn't put you out too much for a pillow and blanket?" she asked.

As Erik grabbed the requested items, he had a quick flash of what his mother would say if she saw he was making an injured woman sleep on the floor, handcuffed to the bed. She wouldn't care that said woman was wanted by the FBI. Erik grimaced at the thought of the lecture he'd get.

"Here," he said, depositing the pillow and blanket next to her on the floor. He watched as she awkwardly struggled to position the pillow with one hand before arranging the blanket. When her breath caught and she froze, her face draining of color, Erik's conscience reared its head.

Before he even realized what he was doing, he'd unlocked the handcuff and picked her up. After depositing her on the bed, he snagged the metal again, quickly locking it around the iron bars at the head of the bed. They were topped by a thick piece of wood, making an interesting headboard and a very convenient spot to cuff O'Connell.

She caught his eye and lifted a delicately arched brow. "Is this your side or mine?"

"Yours," he bit out between clenched teeth. His tone didn't seem to faze her, the tiny smile she wore making him want to curse his mother for ingraining chivalry into his very bones.

O'Connell shook the handcuffs, causing an irritating clanging noise, which Erik ignored as he rounded the bed. It wasn't a big bed, but she wasn't that big either, so it would be fine. He certainly wasn't going to sleep on the floor.

“Thank you, Agent Langston,” she said as he lay back down, keeping a good distance between them.

“Whatever,” Erik sighed, closing his eyes. God, he was tired.

It was blessedly quiet for a few moments before, “So where are we?”

Erik didn’t bother opening his eyes. “A cabin. In the woods.”

“I see that,” she said tartly. “I meant what country? State?”

Erik cracked an eye, glancing at her. “Still going with the memory thing?”

She did not look amused. “Just tell me.”

“Colorado,” he replied, turning away again. “We were near Vail. Now I don’t know where the hell we are.”

O’Connell seemed to process this, and Erik thought he’d finally be able to sleep. She quickly disabused him of that notion.

“What’s going to happen tomorrow?”

“We’re going to get out of here,” he replied. “I’ll drop you off at the office in Denver.”

“Where will you go?”

“DC.”

Silence.

“You said I had family. Where are they?”

“They’re both in prison.”

That shut her up, but only for a moment.

“What did they do? How long have they been in prison?”

“Armed robbery. Your dad’s been in for fifteen years. Your brother’s served two years of a twenty-five-year sentence.”

“What am I doing in Colorado?” she asked. “How did you know I was here?”

Erik’s temper flared. He abruptly sat up and leaned over O’Connell. She flinched backward in surprise.

“Stop this bullshit!” he demanded. “You know why your family is all in prison and why you’re here. It’s what Solomon had you doing—breaking into his competition’s homes to embezzle their money and expose their secrets. I’ve been tracking you for months and got a tip on who the next hit would be. Now, I don’t give a shit if you want to keep playing the damsel in distress card, but I’m not buying it. What I do want is for you to shut up so I can get some sleep!”

His voice ended in a near-shout, which he immediately regretted. Keeping a tight grip on his temper was something Erik took pride in; the fact that this girl was able to undermine that was disconcerting.

O’Connell’s green eyes were wide as she stared at him. For a moment, Erik didn’t move, his breath coming hard after his tirade. He realized suddenly how close their bodies were, his arms braced on either side of her as she lay half reclined against the pillows. His memory conjured the image of her pulling on the ill-fitting borrowed clothes while he’d watched from the shadows, unable to look away.

The firelight had danced across her skin, illuminating shadows and valleys and making her skin appear like warm ivory. The red of her hair was an echo of the flames, her fingers carelessly pushed through what Erik knew were silky, soft strands. Her arms had stretched over her head as she put on the shirt, and the black lace of her bra had seemed inadequate to hold the plump flesh that spilled from its confines. Erik had nearly groaned aloud at the sight before her breasts had disappeared from view.

In a move he was sure she had done just to torture him, she'd turned her back and bent at the waist to pull on the pants he'd given her. A light sweat had broken out on his forehead, and Erik wouldn't have blinked if a gun had been held to his head.

Then the show had been over, though the effect on his body had been damn inconvenient, just as it was now as he struggled to dispel the images in his head.

O'Connell didn't speak, but neither did she seem frightened. She looked more interested than anything else, studying him curiously. Her tongue darted out to wet her lips, and Erik's gaze fell to her mouth.

The electricity between them was suddenly thick, prickling Erik's awareness and heightening his senses. The silence was a living thing, the only sound the pounding of his blood in his ears.

"It sounds like you could really use a vacation," O'Connell said thoughtfully. And the tension was broken.

Erik collapsed back onto his side of the bed, a huff of laughter escaping him. "You've got that right," he sighed. Especially if he was going to start being sexually attracted to the criminals he hunted. He gave a mental shake of his head. Fatigue and stress were getting to him, that was all. And obviously going too long between one-night stands. Kaminski had been right, which was painful to admit.

Thankfully, she was quiet then. The bed dipped slightly with her movements as she got comfortable. He heard another sharp intake of breath, but Erik resisted asking if she was all right. After a few minutes, she settled, and he closed his eyes.

When he opened them, hours later, the weak sunlight of dawn had dispelled the darkness. Erik rubbed his eyes, which felt like sand had been poured in them overnight. Glancing to his left, he froze.

She was gone.