



# Covert Past (Hope Island Securities #6)

**Author:** *Mary Alford*

**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** It takes a spy to know one. . .

As the newest member of the Hope Island Securities team, Boone Langston knows a spy just by looking into their eyes. And Ellie reflects awful things . . . just like his. He'd spent most of his military career as a Navy SEAL working for the CIA's Special Operations Unit. And the past three years trying to forget everything he'd done.

When he accidentally runs into Ellie in front of the Hopeful Coffeehouse, the look in her eyes, the constant scanning of the foot traffic in front of the shop, all seem to hint she is living the nightmare as well . . . until Ellie's past catches up with her removing all doubt.

**Total Pages (Source):** 19

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:52 am*

December 2017, West Bank, Tel Aviv.

The bombed-out building stood like a ghost among many like it. A shiver sped up Ayla Galante's spine despite the warmth of her coat. She checked the time. The contact was more than two hours late.

They'd come here for information. Daniel Malin's asset within the Syrian Intelligence Agency had promised details. Someone inside Mossad was feeding information to Syria and other enemies of Israel. Daniel had been working the contact for months. The man had finally agreed to a meet. Now he was late. Had it all been a ruse?

The uneasiness that had followed her in recent days increased, signaling a warning something bad was about to happen.

"Daniel, this is off. We need to get out of here. Now. It's a setup." She turned to face the man who was more than her partner and found herself alone in the building. "Daniel?"

A few minutes earlier, Daniel had been practically glued to her side, his concerns mirroring hers. Now he'd seemingly vanished. Fear played with her mind. Her gaze darted to the deeply shadowed corners of the building, expecting death.

The faintest of sounds came from the gaping hole where the door had been. She spun toward it. Someone grabbed her from behind. A sharp object pricked her neck. Ayla fought her attacker. If these were the men Daniel's contact had warned them about, they were Syrian Intelligence, and they'd probably discovered their breach and

eliminated him. They'd come here to take out the threat Ayla and Daniel posed.

Her vision blurred as the toxin they'd injected coursed through her veins. Ayla's knees grew weak.

She sensed others closing in. Ayla tried to scream. To speak. Nothing came out.

Figures moved in front of her. Three. One man held her captive. That made four she could account for. Were there more?

A calloused hand touched hers. She thought they were trying to take away her weapon . . . only the Glock remained in her grasp, feeling as if it were weighing her hand down. She couldn't lift her arm. What had they given her?

Ayla blinked. Tried to focus. Impossible.

"No. Please don't." Daniel? Where was he?

Her arm lifted and not by her own strength. The gun in her hand went off. Three times. She hadn't pulled the trigger. What was happening?

A thud followed. Something hit the ground.

"No." Fearing for Daniel, she fought to escape her captor. Something hard smashed the back of her head. Pain splintered from the contact point. The man released her. She stumbled. Put her hands out in front of her as she hit the floor. Her stomach turned. She vomited. Bits of reality filtered through the pain. If she didn't get out of here soon, she'd be dead.

She stretched her hand out to feel in front. Ayla touched someone. The person didn't move. Her searching fingers found the Star of David belt buckle Daniel wore. "No!"

she screamed. The rusty scent of blood mingled with gunpowder assaulted her nose. She searched for a pulse. There wasn't one.

"Daniel." His name came out slurry. Footsteps moved behind her. She tried to crawl, but her body wouldn't cooperate. Another jab. This time the drug acted far more quickly, paralyzing her completely.

Cruel fingers grabbed her arms. Someone else picked up her feet. They lifted her from the ground and began walking. She couldn't see anything. A slight breeze ruffled her hair. They were outside the building.

Daniel! Her weapon had been used to kill him.

Tears. They rolled from her eyes. She couldn't feel them. She couldn't feel anything.

A cottony blackness closed in. She fought a losing battle against its hold.

???

Darkness enveloped her, pressing in, cradling her in its cold embrace. Was this what death felt like? She moved her head. Searing pain down her skull shattered the illusion.

If not dead, then . . .

Ayla stretched out her hands. She touched metal. Above. On all sides. A box. She'd been crammed inside a metal box.

The fog lifted, and she remembered the terrible details.

Her fiancé. The man she loved. Her partner in life and work. Dead. A wounded cry

escaped. Tears flooded her eyes. She screamed and then screamed again and again, but the pain that cut much deeper than physical wouldn't go away. Would never go away.

“No.” Ayla tamped down the sorrow.

You are useless if you fall apart. Take out the emotions, Ayla. Find the truth . Gideon Broder, her Mossad director's training, broke through the grief. He'd said that same thing to her through countless missions. If she was going to find Daniel's killers, she had to get out of this box.

Ayla shoved as hard as she could against the lid. It didn't budge.

Someone responded with what sounded like a fist being slammed against the box. “Be quiet in there.” The words were spoken in Arabic.

Where were they taking her? All sorts of worst-case scenarios chased through her head.

Ayla struggled to control her panicked heart rate and listen to the sounds around her. A lapping of water against the side of a boat. No motor. They were probably using paddles to move through the water.

“This is good enough,” a different man spoke. “The tide is coming in.”

They were going to toss her into the water. She pulled in several breaths and forced herself to slow her thoughts. Think, Ayla ! She could almost hear Daniel saying.

Her second weapon. The Ruger her director and friend Gideon had given her when she joined Mossad. It was tucked inside a hidden sleeve in her boot. No one knew about it. Not even Daniel. Chances are they'd searched her for a weapon. If they'd

found it, everything was over.

Her legs were folded beneath her body. Hands zip-tied in front.

“Get her ready,” the same man said.

She struggled to free her legs in the cramped space. The box jostled as if someone had picked it up. Her head cracked against the side. She came close to blacking out. Ayla fought her way back. Tried to right herself and then . . . the box was tossed.

Don’t think about it. She kept working. Managed to straighten her legs. If she could reach the gun. All she had to do was reach the gun.

The box struck the water. Immediately it began to fill. She had seconds to live. With her hands tied together, she fumbled inside the boot. Found the Ruger. Held her breath as water poured in. There would be one shot. She had one shot to save her life.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:52 am*

Hope Island, Maine. Present Day.

The sign in the window said, “Help Wanted—Barista.” Ellie Jamison walked past the notice, barely giving it a glance.

Two weeks. She’d been on Hope Island for two weeks lying low. Trying to heal. Over the past seven years Ellie had lost count of the number of places she’d lived all over the world . . . and the different aliases she’d used to escape the two-fold attack coming her way.

From Syrian Intelligence who’d shot her on the shore of the Dead Sea and knew she’d escaped. For reasons she didn’t understand, they’d been persistent through the years. Determined to find her and shut her up.

But the hardest truth came in knowing she was considered an enemy of her own country. She’d been accused of murdering Daniel and betraying secrets to the Syrians. Her mind reeled every time she thought about those accusations her director threw at her.

She’d been running for so long Ellie had lost track of the places she’d gone. The names she’d used. The people she’d met while unable to make a connection. They passed through her life like ghosts.

Ellie massaged the spot on the back of her neck where they’d injected her with something meant to paralyze her body briefly and render her unconscious. It had left a nasty scar. It and the gunshot wound she’d suffered after she’d escaped the box were constant reminders of what happened that night. But the emotional wounds ran

much deeper.

Through the years, she'd endured countless near misses until she'd ended up in the Pacific Northwest.

Oregon had felt different. Days had turned into weeks, then months, and Ellie started to believe she'd finally outrun the threat until she'd walked into her tiny apartment and straight into an ambush. The last attack had almost taken her out. It happened less than a month earlier in a small coastal town.

She'd fought with everything she could muster but lost. If it weren't for her neighbor reporting the incident to law enforcement, Ellie would be dead. Police sirens had scared off her attackers.

Ellie had known if she didn't get away before the cops arrived, she'd be brought in for questioning. Besides Syrian Intelligence, Ellie had no doubt Mossad had agents stationed across the US who were actively searching for her still.

If caught, she'd either be sent back to Israel for prosecution or she'd be dead, depending on who captured her.

Barely escaping, she'd left everything she owned behind in Oregon except for the engagement ring Daniel had given her and the Ruger that never left her body anymore.

But she had survived. She was alive, and maybe this time—this place—would be different.

Ellie passed another window. The same help wanted sign appeared there. A barista. Could she allow herself to settle here? Grow comfortable? Form surface-level connections. She'd learned how hard bonds with others were to sever—even bonds



that weren't well rooted like most of hers had been through the years—when she had to leave in the middle of the night after danger found her again.

Over the past seven years, she'd worked for a tailor. On a ranch in Montana. For a winery in Napa Valley, to name a few. Anything to pay the bills while she searched for answers. She'd never been a barista before, but she did love all things coffee .

The window of the Hopeful Coffeehouse showed a dozen patrons seated inside despite it being mid-afternoon in late summer. Most of the vacation traffic appeared to be slowly dying away. Schools were back in session. What she was witnessing here as an outsider looking in was Hope Island locals at ease in their favorite coffeeshop.

Several chatted. Others worked on laptops. Some played on their phones.

On one wall, the large TV broadcast storm updates. The weather service was predicting more of the same over the next few days. Resulting in heavy swells in the Atlantic and tides that might break decades-old records.

Ellie had been through desert storms where the sand was so thick it became impossible to see your hand in front of you. She'd lived in Montana where the winter could be brutal. In Oregon she'd experienced an abundance of rain. But never anything like this. Late summer storms were battering the coastline near Hope Island relentlessly.

She tore her attention from the gloomy weather report to assess the business. The counter lay to the left in the establishment. Rows of three tables deep cluttered the middle section, with booths placed against the right wall.

She'd been here once before. The first week after she'd come to Hope Island, back before all the bruises had faded. Ellie had done her best to cover them but had been

forced to wear sunglasses during the entire outing.

Back then, vacationers were everywhere around the island. Despite the crowds, there had been something almost promising about the Hopeful Coffeehouse that she hadn't found in any of her previous landing spots. Hopeful. She wanted the promise of hope the coffeeshop, as well as the island, offered.

Foolish. Hope was a luxury she couldn't afford.

When she'd been here before, Ellie had sat at the back near the hall leading past the restrooms to the rear exit. She'd been trained to always have an escape plan. For the moment. For life itself.

Daniel's handsome face floated into her thoughts, unwelcome. Over the years, she'd done her best to compartmentalize what happened with one goal in mind. Find the ones responsible for Daniel's murder and make them pay.

Questions still swirled around what happened that night. Why hadn't the men taken her to the deepest part of the Dead Sea to ensure death? They'd been watching for her. As soon as she emerged from the box, she'd been shot in the shoulder. Why not a vital organ? That question kept her up most nights.

While she'd nursed her injury, she'd pulled in every favor she had from assets only to learn she was wanted by her own people for murdering Daniel and accused of being a Syrian spy.

Gideon, the man who had seen her potential first and brought her onboard with Mossad, was more than her boss, he was like a second father. She'd thought he, of all people, would believe her. Only he hadn't. Not that she could blame him given the fact that her weapon had been used to murder Daniel. There was no record of a meet. Gideon claimed she'd lured Daniel there to kill him because he'd found out she was a

traitor.

Stop it . . .

Feeling sorry for herself hadn't gotten her anywhere. Daniel deserved justice. If her own people didn't believe her, then she'd find a way to get it for him.

Her attention returned to the help wanted sign in the window. She needed money. She'd coasted onto the island on fumes. Used all her money to rent the small bungalow along the shoreline. There wasn't enough extra cash left to buy such luxuries as gas for her car, so she'd taken to walking. Besides, it kept her sharp, her body fit.

However, to keep afloat she'd need to get a job and soon.

Ellie swung toward the door and slammed into a man talking on his phone. The impact jolted Ellie back to the present. Strong hands descended on her shoulders. Immediately, she tensed and stepped back out of his grasp while wincing at the pain his touch created.

Her gaze inched from a broad chest, past a strong stubble-covered jaw, to settle on the deepest, most intense brown eyes she'd ever seen.

"I'm so sorry. Are you okay?" The tall man in his thirties waited for a response Ellie couldn't give because she was too busy assessing him as a possible threat.

Mossad had agents all over the world. They also used assets that were not necessarily Jewish, so the threat coming after her from her former team wouldn't be easy to spot.

"Ma'am, are you okay?"

She watched his full lips move and realized she was staring at them.

Ma'am. He called her ma'am. Ellie bit back a laugh. She was barely thirty herself and yet she felt years older. The toll being on the run had taken on her appearance probably made her appear older.

He'd asked her something . . .

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize I'd hit you that hard."

He thought he was responsible for her pain.

"No. I'm fine. It wasn't you." Ellie slowed her words realizing she was talking too fast. "It's just an old injury."

His concern lifted, and he smiled, revealing perfect white teeth. "That's good to hear. I thought I might need to take you to the hospital." He waited again for a response she couldn't give because Ellie realized their interaction was creating somewhat of a scene. She couldn't afford to draw unnecessary attention to herself. Staying in the shadows as much as possible kept her alive.

"No, it's not your fault. I wasn't paying attention to what I was doing."

Stop talking . . .

The instinct that had kept her alive for seven years kicked in to remind her even the nicest of people sometimes hid secrets.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:52 am*

Ellie glanced around as others walked past them. “I should go.” She didn’t move. There was something about him that pulled her in. He exuded confidence, but not in a cocky way. Compassion softened the hard planes of his face. Ellie glanced down at her frayed jeans and plain blue T-shirt. Did he think she was a tourist? Or worse, homeless?

She couldn’t remember the last time she’d trusted anyone, no matter how nice they seemed. Letting down her guard made her vulnerable. The kindness she saw in this man could all be an act. She might be looking at a Mossad agent sent here to bring her in.

Stop it . Her brain had been trained to automatically treat every new person she met as a threat. As much as her head told her this encounter was purely accidental, her gut wouldn’t let her dismiss it so easily because she knew bad guys were not always easy to spot.

He was at least six-five and fit. Probably a jogger or maybe into some type of water sports given the island setting. He carried himself in a way that pegged him as having a military background. Dressed casually in a blue pullover and jeans. Boots that looked as if they’d been well broken in. His short, chestnut hair combed back from a wide forehead, he sported a neatly trimmed beard and mustache.

She realized he was assessing her in the same way she had him, further confirming he’d seen battle of some type .

“Again, sorry to have bumped you. I hope you have a nice day.” When she didn’t respond, he shrugged and turned toward the entrance of the coffeehouse.

Once he was out of her personal space, Ellie blew out a breath she hadn't realized she'd kept in. The encounter had her rattled because it served as a reminder she was a long way from a hundred percent if even the slightest touch had sent splinters of pain shooting from the contact point. If her enemies came after her now, she wouldn't stand a chance against a direct attack.

A sense of unease slithered into the pit of her stomach. She tugged sunglasses from her pocket and slipped them into place. Over the years, she'd changed her hair color almost as many times as she'd changed her name. Currently, it was a golden brown. The first thing she'd done upon arriving on Hope Island was to darken the blonde color she'd worn in Oregon.

The man who bumped her now reached for the doorhandle and opened it, sending her a final evaluating once-over look before going inside.

What is wrong with you? Ellie gave herself a mental shake. She was normally much better at keeping her emotions to herself. She blamed it on the years on the run and her recent injuries. She'd come as close to dying in Oregon as she had the night Daniel was murdered, and yet she was no closer to understanding what had happened. Her training told her the rumor about a mole inside Mossad was true. Someone had tipped off Syrian Intelligence, and it hadn't been Daniel's contact within that agency.

Ellie became aware of the foot traffic passing her by. Her attention returned to the help wanted sign, and she made up her mind.

Peering through the window, Ellie noticed the man she'd bumped into stood near the door scanning the room for someone. A woman with startling red hair waved to get his attention. A smile creased his face as he weaved his way through the tables and gave her a hug. A couple? She wasn't so sure. They seemed friendly enough, but their body language hinted at more of a working relationship perhaps.

She waited for several people to leave the coffeehouse before she went inside. As her gaze connected with the man who'd bumped her, she realized he'd been watching her since she entered the establishment. Those intense brown eyes narrowed as he continued to try and figure her out.

The redhead appeared amused by her friend's attention.

Ellie pulled hers away from him and headed for the counter.

A young blonde woman in her early twenties smiled at Ellie's approach. "Welcome to the Hopeful Coffeehouse. What can I get you?"

Ellie hesitated. Was she sure she wanted to become a barista? She certainly lacked that bubbly personality this woman presented to the world. She could fake a smile, but she'd never been accused of being perky. Hopefully, perkiness wasn't part of the job description.

A glance over her shoulder confirmed the man's attention still rested on her. Though he spoke to the redhead, he continued to watch Ellie.

For the first time since arriving on Hope Island she became concerned. She'd moved across the country for a chance to heal and regroup. Shades of the beating she'd taken in Oregon bled into the moment. Her body still held the marks of how close to death she'd come. The swelling had gone mostly. She'd used heavy makeup to cover the remaining bruises, yet she needed rest and the peace of mind that would allow her to get it.

Coming back to the moment, she realized the blonde waited for an answer.

Ellie crooked her thumb toward the help wanted poster. "Actually, I wanted to ask about the barista position."

The woman's smile slipped a little as she took in Ellie's clothing. Her hair tangled from her walk along the beach earlier. She hadn't exactly expected to go to a job interview today.

"Let me get Hank. She runs the place." She turned before Ellie could respond and disappeared through the opening behind her.

Ellie somehow hid her surprise. Hank was a female. While she pondered what she'd say to the owner, a noise out on the street had her on alert. A pop that sounded like gunfire made her jump, no doubt drawing more attention. Ellie's gaze went to the window and the passing people. No one out there appeared nervous.

"That's Fred Wilber's old Ford. It backfires a lot."

Ellie jerked toward the deep male voice she recognized. The man from earlier was now alone.

"Fred brings fresh produce in for the local restaurants every day." His smile transformed his face to handsome. He was an attractive man, and he had a nice smile. "Name's Boone Langston." He held out his hand.

Boone. The name sounded made up.

"Yeah, I know. My parents had a weird sense of humor. My mom is a huge Daniel Boone fan." The smile remained in place though his gaze zeroed in on her reactions.

Ellie broke eye contact and realized he still held out his hand. She shook it awkwardly. Human contact had been limited to the occasional hand touch whenever she paid for something. "Ellie." She kept the handshake to a mere second before pulling hers free.



His only reaction was a slight twitch of his lips. “Nice to meet you, Ellie. You must be new to the island. I don’t think I’ve seen you around.”

Already this was getting too personal for her. She never gave information about herself away. “That’s right. I’m just getting the layout of the land.”

He nodded at her odd answer, his gaze going past her to something else. Ellie realized she was being approached and turned.

The blonde returned with a woman Ellie pegged in her fifties. This must be Hank.

“Hank.” Boone nodded his greeting, confirming Ellie’s assumption.

“Boone. I thought that was you. Where’s Janine?” Hank clearly knew him.

“She had to pick up the kids.”

This grabbed Ellie’s attention immediately. Kids. Had she been wrong about Boone and the woman called Janine’s relationship? Boone didn’t wear a wedding ring. She understood some men preferred not to, but still.

“She and her husband and little ones came in the other day. Those kids are growing like wildflowers.”

Boone’s laugh washed over Ellie. It was nice. Normal. The kind of laugh she wished she had the ability to possess. “They are indeed. I don’t know how she does it. I watched them for her for an hour once while she met with a client. I had no idea how much energy kids have.” He shook his head. “Well, I should be going. I’m meeting with a client.” His attention returned to Ellie, unsettling her again. “Nice to meet you.”

Ellie watched him leave before realizing she'd left her potential employer waiting.

The older woman appeared amused as if Ellie had been watching Boone because she was attracted to him. There was no good way of saying it was out of self-preservation.

"I'm Hank. I hear you're here to apply for the barista position?" Hank held out her hand. Were all the locals this friendly?

Ellie took it. "Yes." Ellie's attention was divided between watching out the windows as four men slowly walked past the establishment and listening to Hank's questions.

The men disappeared from her line of vision. There was something about their appearance on the island that put Ellie on edge. She couldn't explain it other than her survival instincts had grown stronger through the years. Maybe it was the way they were dressed that didn't fit with an island outing.

"Are you okay, honey?"

Ellie whipped her head back to Hank. She was failing her interview badly. "Yes, yes, I'm sorry."

"Why don't you come through to my office and we'll talk."

Ellie forced a smile. "Thank you." With a final uneasy glance outside, Ellie shelved her concern for the moment. She followed Hank past the order station, where the blonde flirted with a couple of young men, to an office crammed into a small space.

"I'm sorry, I don't think I caught your name?" Hank latched onto her gaze and held it.

“It’s Ellie. Ellie Jamison.”

“Nice to meet you, Ellie. Please, have a seat.” Hank pointed to one of the chairs in front of her desk.

Ellie slipped into it and clasped her hands together. The sound of the truck backfiring out front as well as the four men had served as a reminder that she couldn’t afford to let her guard down for a second. If she got this job, there was a very real chance she might have to leave the island at a second’s notice without letting Hank know anything about her reasons why.

“So, tell me a little about yourself, Ellie,” Hank asked while settling into her chair.

Seconds ticked by while Ellie recalled her fake bio. “I’m thirty-four. I’ve just recently moved to Hope Island.”

Hank’s smile didn’t hide her doubts. “This is a great time of the year to be here. Summer is almost over. Fall is breathtaking on the island.” Hank tossed back her long, silver braid and picked up a pen, rolling it between her fingers. “I’ve run Hopeful Coffeehouse since it opened ten years ago right after I moved to the island following my divorce.” Her expression softened. “Starting over can be hard.”

Ellie cleared her throat. “It can.”

“How long has it been since you lost him?” she asked gently.

Ellie fought emotions she’d thought had been shut off a long time ago. “Seven years,” she said, her voice a rough whisper.

Hank leaned forward, her pale blue eyes intense as they focused on Ellie. “Have you worked as a barista before?”

Ellie decided the truth was the only way to go with Hank. “I haven’t, but I’m a quick learner.”

Hank sat back, tapping the pen against the desk as if trying to decide. “I believe you. When can you start?”

Wait—had she just gotten the job? “Now.”

Hank laughed. “Good, because Suzanne is going back to college soon and there won’t be much time to train. And if we continue to get more of those thunderstorms they’re predicting, I’ll need someone to help get this place ready for possible flooding.” She rose with a purpose. “Come with me, and I’ll introduce you to Suzanne.”

Hank started back to the shop. A heartbeat later, Ellie scrambled to keep up. The woman moved like a lithe cat.

As they approached the counter, Ellie remembered the men from earlier. An involuntary shiver trailed down her spine. Her gut screamed they were the enemy. Had they somehow followed her here to Hope Island? If so, then finding a job was of little importance. While the last thing her weary body needed was another move, she’d do it because the alternative was unimaginable.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:52 am*

There was no doubt in Boone's mind he'd met one of his own kind. As a former spy, he knew all the tricks and the traits that were embedded into their very nature. And Ellie—unknown last name—was a spy.

Though her reaction to Fred's old truck backfiring could be related to military PTSD, the lack of giving personal information out while assessing him. The way she'd scanned the coffeehouse as if searching for threats all seemed to confirm his gut reaction.

Outside the Hopeful, several men who appeared to be in their thirties to forties passed by him on the sidewalk. Boone wouldn't have thought anything of it despite their somewhat formal dress for the island if he hadn't caught fragmented strands of the language they spoke. Arabic. Not enough to catch what was said, but enough to have him turning to watch them as they passed by.

All four peered inside but kept going.

The island got all different types of visitors, including many from other countries. Still, Boone couldn't let go of the uneasiness he felt from their presence.

He glanced inside the business once more. Ellie and Hank were talking to Suzanne. Boone stepped closer to the window and retrieved his phone. He waited until he had a clear shot at Ellie and snapped a picture making sure it was a good one before he continued walking.

If the predicted storms hit the coast, Hope Island was in for some dark times ahead and this tranquil setting wasn't going to be the place to be for long. The torrents had

already caused some minor flooding. So far, it hadn't reached any of the homes or businesses along the coast, but with more bad weather on the way that might change.

Once, six months earlier, he'd been one of the visitors to Hope Island, never thinking he'd end up calling it home. Since leaving the service, he'd drifted from town to town not fitting in anywhere. Unable to run away from himself. Then, he'd visited Maine. Stayed at a bed and breakfast and heard about a little place called Hope Island. He'd come for a visit and ended up the newest member of the Hope Island Securities Team.

JT Wyatt and the others had taken a chance on him despite his closed-off ways. He'd found his place at last. And, slowly, he was learning to open up to the team. Most understood what he'd gone through, having served in the military themselves. Janine, the only one not ex-military, was former FBI.

He checked the time on his phone. Half an hour until the meeting. Janine had brought him up to speed on the case she'd once spearheaded. A disturbing one that had clearly gotten to Janine as a mother causing her to recuse herself from the case. A little girl named Lizzette had been kidnapped by her father some ten years earlier. The mother was a friend of one of Hope Island Securities' founders, JT. He had worked the case when he'd been on the police force. All leads had dried up. The mother had spent hundreds of thousands of dollars looking for her daughter.

JT had kept in touch with the family through the years. When the mother found out JT ran his own private investigation firm, she'd asked to hire them to get a fresh set of eyes on the kidnapping. JT had taken on the case Pro Bono.

That was the reason Janine had wanted to meet with Boone earlier to make sure he was up to speed on the case. He'd told her yes. He'd read through the police file, spoken to JT personally, and believed himself ready to meet with the client. JT would be there for support, but he wanted a fresh take on the evidence they had.

Boone turned the corner onto the street that housed Hope Island Securities. He brought up the photo of Ellie and zoomed in. They'd never met—he had no doubt—yet there was something about her that screamed she was on the run from something. The implication was chilling. Why would a former spy be on the run unless they were deep undercover. They'd been burned by their agency . . . or they'd betrayed their country.

He stopped in front of the office. Inside, their office manager, Katrina, manned the phones. Bryce Malone, who had been the newbie until Boone came along, had his feet propped up on his desk and was chatting with Eli Warren, who sat perched on the edge of said desk.

Boone smiled. These men were brothers in arms as well as teammates.

He stepped inside. Katrina looked up, smiled and then winked—her usual form of greeting.

Bryce and Eli acknowledged his presence each with a two-finger salute.

“Everyone except for these two are in the conference room,” Katrina told him.

In her twenties, Katrina treated everyone like she was their kid sister.

Bryce held up his hands. “Hey, I’m waiting on the age-enhanced software to do its thing.”

“And I’m waiting for you.” Something in Eli’s tone grabbed Boone’s attention immediately.

“Anything wrong?” Boone’s frown deepened. Since he’d moved to the island, he’d been staying with Eli and his wife, Sashi.

In the past, Sashi had almost died because of her assistance to the US military efforts in Afghanistan. There had been several attempts on her life in recent times. Eli had reason to be concerned.

“I’m not sure.” Eli mentioned seeing an alarming number of men that appeared to be of Arab descent on the island. “It could be nothing, but I wanted to run some of the images by you to see if you recognize any of them.”

Boone had worked with the CIA during his career as a Navy SEAL and had been part of the team to assess threats to the US from foreign terrorist groups. He had friends in the Agency.

“Send them to me, and I’ll reach out to my CIA contacts.”

“You got it.” Eli confirmed before working his phone. A heartbeat later, Boone’s dinged with the incoming images.

“Any updates on the storms predicted?” Boone asked.

Eli shook his head. “On track for later today at some point.”

Not the news anyone wanted.

Boone and the two men started for the conference room, where JT and his wife, Rachel, waited along with Declan Thomas, another core member of the team.

“What’s the news from the client?” Boone asked before pulling out a chair.

Both Bryce and Eli flanked him.

“She’s almost to the bridge. She’ll be here soon.” JT looked to Bryce. “Do you have



the enhancement photos of Lizzette?”

Bryce held up his phone. “They just came through.” He connected the phone to the digital projector. Soon, the photos of Lizzette at two when she disappeared appeared on the screen up front followed by what the child would look like now at twelve. This cutting-edge technology was amazing, in Boone’s mind.

“There’s been no further sightings of the father or child since he picked Lizzette up from daycare all those years ago?” Boone couldn’t believe the man had simply disappeared into thin air with his child. Marvin Horton’s parents and siblings had been interviewed extensively and cleared of any connection to the kidnapping. Horton’s entire life had been torn apart for any connection that might shed some light on the situation. There was none.

“Nothing,” JT confirmed. “Wherever he went, he had it planned out in advance. It’s as if he simply stopped existing. When someone wants to disappear that bad, they’re dangerous.”

JT’s warning settled around him ominously. Just how dangerous was Marvin Horton? Enough to take out himself and his daughter to keep her from her mother?

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:52 am*

He couldn't sleep. The case was part of it. But mostly Ellie's reaction to him—to Fred's truck—kept him awake.

Boone tossed back the covers and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He'd finally gotten comfortable enough to sleep through most nights and not have the things he'd witnessed while working with the CIA come back to haunt him.

For a long time after he'd returned stateside, he couldn't let them go. He'd gone to visit his sister in Connecticut and spent some time with her husband, who was a minister. Tim had helped him see that holding onto the pain and ugliness he'd been running from for three years wasn't what God wanted for his life. He'd given them to the God of his childhood, and it had changed everything. Sometimes at night the faces of the victims crept into his head. On those days, he hit his knees and prayed.

Tonight, it was a different face that kept sleep away. Another troubled soul like he'd been, who was on the before side of what Boone had gone through himself.

With sleep no longer an option, Boone dressed in jeans and a black sweatshirt before leaving his garage apartment on Eli and Sashi's property.

Boone thought about the woman he'd run into outside Hopeful. His gut screamed she was a spy and running from something. Whatever it was, it wouldn't be good if that problem found its way here to their island.

A drive along the beach always helped clear his head. Tonight, though, the beauty of the ocean waves against the shoreline and the three-quarter moon hanging low over the water didn't have the quieting effect he'd hoped for. When he reached the turnoff

leading into town, Boone kept going.

He found a place to park the pickup and opted to walk. Despite summer winding down, several restaurants remained on vacation-time hours still.

Almost ten, according to the time on his phone. Boone stopped in front of the Hopeful Coffeehouse. It stayed open until eleven during the summer months. He looked inside the window. Hank was leaning against the counter talking to Ellie. So that was why Ellie had wanted to speak to Hank. He'd forgotten about the help wanted sign that was no longer there.

Boone stepped inside, the bell above the door alerting the women to his presence. Hank beamed. Ellie's reaction was quite different and a reminder of how she'd reacted earlier when she'd heard Fred's truck backfire.

"What brings you out so late?" Hank asked as he approached.

Hank was a direct, no-holds-barred kind of person. She'd told him once that her father and her son had served in the military as well. He and Hank had connected during slow times at the coffeehouse.

They'd had quite a few heart-to-hearts. Hank had lost her son to the Afghanistan war. She told him she was grateful her father hadn't been around to live through the pain.

"Couldn't sleep." Boone said in way of an answer. He glanced to Ellie and nodded.

She didn't respond to his greeting.

"Pull up a chair. Ellie and I were just gabbing."

Boone's lips twitched. Ellie didn't appear to be the type to "gab." He dragged out one

of the stools near the counter.

Hank, anticipating his wishes, poured black coffee before she crooked a thumb Ellie's way. "You two meet earlier?"

"We did." Ellie confirmed while casting a look Boone's way.

"Ellie's my new barista." Hank set a cup of coffee in front of him .

He faked surprise. "Really?"

Ellie couldn't have looked more ill at ease. "I thought I'd try something different." She shrugged and reached for her cup.

"Sounds like me. I'd never been a private investigator until I came here."

Her eyes widened without asking the question.

"Boone here joined the Hope Island Securities Team a few months back. And he's single." Hank gave him a wink.

He shook his head. Hank meant well, but he was too mixed up inside for a relationship. At least for the time being.

Ellie ignored the comment entirely.

"Well, I've shown you around the place and explained everything." Hank glanced out the window. "And I don't think we're going to see too many more customers tonight." She faced her new employee. "You feel up to closing the place for me?"

Ellie hesitated, clearly not wanting to be alone with Boone.

“Good.” Hank dug out the extra key from her pocket. “I’ll see you in the morning then. Bright and early.” She removed her apron and fished her purse out from under the counter. “Be sure to lock the back door before you go.”

Hank gave them a little wave then left.

Boone laughed despite the awkward situation. “Looks like you are officially a barista.”

Ellie stared at the key in her hand before shaking her head. “I guess you’re right.” She refilled his cup and then hers. “What branch of military?”

He inclined his head. She’d sized him up too. “Navy SEAL.” He left out the part about the CIA.

“Afghanistan?”

He looked at her curiously. “Some. Other places—other wars as well.” He didn’t elaborate, and she didn’t ask. “And you?”

Ellie immediately grew cautious. “I’ve done a lot of different jobs.” Her answer could not have been more evasive. She wasn’t ready to give the truth—she didn’t trust him yet. He’d have to do something to fix that because he had a feeling Ellie needed someone she could truly talk to.

“What brought you to Hope Island?”

She kept watch out the window as if expecting someone. Boone recalled the men who spoke Arabic earlier. Were they here as simple visitors to the island or was there something else going on?

He'd sent his CIA contact Eli's photos of the men who had him worried. Boone had recognized them from earlier outside the coffeehouse and told Eli as much.

He'd been a bit surprised there hadn't been a hit on any of the Agency's databases. Regardless, the encounter had both him and Eli concerned. On a whim, he'd included the photo he'd taken of Ellie and was surprised when her image hadn't triggered in any of the databases. His gut told him she was a spy. He didn't believe for any of the US's intelligence agencies, but definitely somewhere.

Ellie pulled her attention away from the window to answer his question. "It seemed like a nice place to visit."

Visit. So, she had no long-term plans to stay and yet she had gotten herself a job.

He chuckled. "Normally, I'd say it is. Unless we keep getting more of those." He nodded toward the TV that Hank had set to the Weather Channel broadcasting twenty-four-seven coverage of the barrage of storms pummeling the small towns along the coast. "Are you just passing through then?"

She made eye contact. Surprise lived there. "Depends, I guess." She clearly didn't enjoy being questioned.

He continued to press for answers because he wanted to know. "On what?"

She blew out a sigh. The kind that came from deep down in your gut and carried the weight of a whole lot of bad history with it. "On a lot of things."

Every vague answer seemed to confirm he'd been right about her being on the run.

Boone decided to back off. By now, she hopefully understood he wasn't a threat. He polished off the last of the coffee he didn't need to keep him awake.

Ellie went to refill his cup, but he declined. “Another one, and I’ll never fall asleep.”

She smiled. “I can’t remember the last time I slept through the night.” It was a response made absently that kicked up his curiosity. Boone fought to keep from asking questions.

She poured herself another of what appeared to be a caramel espresso and then added rock sugar to it.

He’d only seen that type of drink once before during his travels. Israel. His curiosity skyrocketed. “What’s that you’re drinking?”

She shot him a wary look and told him it was called a Rocky Caramel. “Hank wants to add it to the menu.” She shrugged. “It’s been my favorite since my college days.”

That she’d opened up as much as she had made him feel as if he’d put her at ease a little. “I never went to college.” Her eyes widened, and he laughed. “I joined the Navy right out of high school. I just wanted to see the world. I figured there had to be more than Alaska.” He faked a cringe.

“That must have been difficult.” She kept her attention on his face.

It was. “It felt as if I’d been thrown into another world. My family owned a small cabin in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.”

Her confused expression confirmed she clearly hadn’t heard of it.

“There are only a handful of private homes within the refuge. There’s no electricity, no running water. We trapped and hunted. Fished. It’s off the grid.”

“A hard way to grow up.”

“Sometimes. My brothers and I always fussed about getting around in the snow. But I wouldn’t trade a moment of my time in Alaska.”

Her face held a certain look of wistfulness as he talked about his family home. “Do they still live there?”

“My parents and older brother do. Jeff is married. He and his wife and three kids love the life. My two sisters and other brother, Caleb, have since moved to the Lower 48.”

She appeared thoughtful before asking, “Do you visit them?”

He did. “As often as I can.” Not exactly the truth. He’d been avoiding family get-togethers because of the questions that would inevitably come.

Boone rose and dug out a ten. He hadn’t meant to reminisce about the past, especially with someone he barely knew. Ellie was a good listener.

She went over to ring him up, but he shook his head. “Keep it.” Acting on an instinct that had brought him here in the first place, he pulled out his business card and handed it to her. “If you ever need . . . anything, my cell number’s there on front.”

The clock above the counter chimed off the time. Eleven. Closing time. “If you’d like, I can hang around until you lock up and walk you to your car.”

A breath slipped from her parted lips. Clear relief flashed across her face, seemingly confirming the truth. Something—or someone—had Ellie spooked.

“That’s awfully nice of you but I walked here.”

She’d been at the coffeehouse since he’d met her earlier. She had to be dead tired.



“Then I’ll give you a lift.”

She hesitated. He got the feeling Ellie wasn’t the type of person to accept help from anyone. He’d been there once. Boone certainly understood wanting to do things on your own. It gave you a sense of being in control.

A loud roar of laughter coming from the bar next door had her jumping.

“That would be nice,” she said in a rush. “Thank you.”

“No problem.” Boone waited by the door while she shut down the coffeeshop and checked to make sure the back entrance was locked, as Hank requested, before joining him at the door.

“I’m ready.”

Boone stepped out first and waited while she locked the front door. He pointed to his truck and they started walking side by side, he caught a waft of caramel on her breath and . . . something else. Coconut. Perhaps from her shampoo .

“How long have you lived on the island?” she asked while watching each passerby far more closely than normal.

“Not long. Maybe six months.” Boone waited for the inevitable questions that didn’t come. Ellie, of all people, understood there were some secrets that were best left buried.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:52 am*

“It’s the house at the end of the beach.” Ellie pointed to the small rental she’d found online.

Most of the other homes along this stretch of beach were sprawling and probably cost into the millions. The owner had told her the two-bedroom bungalow had been one of the original ones on Hope Island. He’d had offers from potential buyers but hadn’t wanted to let go of the property that had been in his family for several generations.

“This is Myron Small’s place, isn’t it?” Boone asked as he parked the truck in the driveway.

Ellie turned in her seat. “That’s right.” How would he know this being a short-timer himself?

Boone seemed to pick up on her unanswered question and smiled. “He was the first case I helped with when I joined Hope Island Securities. He wanted assistance tracking down his brother’s grandson. Myron’s an interesting character.”

Though Ellie hadn’t met Myron in person, their conversations had clued her into that truth. Myron lived by his own rules even at eighty-eight. “He is. Were you able to locate the family member?”

Boone didn’t respond. He was staring at the house with a deepening frown.

Ellie whipped toward it, a gasp escaping. The door stood open. Only slightly, but enough to confirm her worst nightmare had come true .

They'd found her. Again.

"I'm guessing you didn't forget to lock up." It wasn't really a question.

Ellie opened the truck's door, barely aware of Boone telling her to wait.

She registered the closing of his door before he came after her and grabbed her arm. "You can't go in there."

She pulled her free and pivoted his way, knowing his reasoning. What Boone didn't understand was she wanted to catch them. Wanted to use her training in interrogation to find out who killed Daniel.

"I'm calling the police," Boone said.

"No." She grabbed his arm. The word came out far too quickly.

His attention homed in on her face, analyzing every tic. "Why not?"

Ellie let him go. She had to think fast. "Because I may have left the door open after all." It was an out-and-out lie. As much as she'd perfected her skills at protecting herself, she'd gotten rusty at thinking on her feet. Too much time alone. "It's fine," she added before he had the chance to respond. "I'm fine. You can go now."

"Ellie, . . . if you're in trouble you can tell me." He waited while she tried to find a way to convince him otherwise. "I can help." He added to her silence.

"There's no trouble. As I've said, I'm fine. Thanks for the lift." She crossed her arms and prayed he wouldn't push.

After a long standoff, Boone threw up his hands. "Alright. You have my number if

you need me.”

She allowed herself a smile. “I do. And thank you.”

Boone slowly turned on his heel and headed back to his truck, his shoulders hunched as if doubting his decision to leave her.

He got in and turned the truck around before slowly driving away, his headlights moving down the beachfront road.

She bent over and retrieved the Ruger she’d tucked into her boot and eased closer to the opening.

The men she’d seen earlier in town. There was no doubt in her mind they were Syrian assassins. Teams of them had been searching for her since Daniel’s death. The only question was why?

As far as her former agency was concerned, Ellie killed Daniel to cover up her involvement with the Syrians. There would be no help coming from them. She was on her own.

The door squeaked slightly as she opened it enough to enter. Ellie froze. If they were waiting inside, she’d just alerted the intruders to her presence.

She stepped into the living area and set her bag, and the polo shirt Hank gave her to wear with the coffeehouse logo displayed across the top left of the shirt. Ellie listened. The only noise came from the waves crashing against the ocean. Without turning on lights, she moved through the small space searching each room. All were empty. The back door remained locked as she’d left it.

Relief weakened her limbs. She clicked on the kitchen light and looked around.

Nothing appeared out of place. Same in the rest of the house. Had she left the door unlocked? The thought was ludicrous. Her safety routine was the one thing that never faltered.

If they had come inside, there would be nothing here to confirm her identity. She'd made sure of it. Through the years, Ellie had gotten good at traveling light. She had everything she needed about Daniel's death memorized. She kept the engagement ring tucked into her jeans pocket in a small jeweler's bag and the Ruger hidden away.

Myron had moved to Florida for the warmer weather several years back. He'd told her he rarely came back to Hope Island. On occasion one of the family members would come by to check on things, but the house hadn't truly been lived in for years. Besides, Myron would have warned her someone would be stopping by to check on the place.

There were family photos scattered around the house. Ellie had memorized each one's location. How many there were. And what position they were placed in.

That's when she saw it. A picture of Myron and all his kids, grandkids, and great grandkids in the living room was just a quarter of an inch askew. Enough to confirm her fears.

Someone had been inside the home.

Syrian Intelligence? Her people? A new threat she wouldn't see coming?

When she'd gone to Gideon for help, he'd told her Daniel's death had been confirmed and she was their prime suspect. As director, he'd have no choice but to dispatch all Mossad's resources into bringing her in. He'd pulled a weapon and tried to call for assistance. Somehow, Ellie managed to overpower Gideon and tie him up. She'd bought herself time but knew they'd keep coming after her. Mossad agents

wouldn't stop until they found her . . . or confirmed she was dead by the enemy's hand.

She'd kept out of sight while quietly doing what she could to investigate Daniel's murder. Ellie understood why her people wanted her captured, but why the enemy? What could she possibly know that would cause them to spend seven years seeking to silence her?

Over the years on the run, she'd racked her brain, searching for the missing piece that would explain why "that night" had happened. She'd gone over every single second of the night Daniel died as well as the days before and the few details she knew about the contact within Syrian Intelligence. Nothing made sense.

A noise at the rear of the house jolted her back to the moment. Had they returned?

She swung toward the sound, weapon drawn and ready to shoot. Over her accelerated heartbeat, nothing but quiet could be heard. Yet she hadn't imagined the sound. Her hearing had become attuned to anything out of place. A habit from her days with Mossad she couldn't break. A breath later she heard it again. Something rustling around near the garage set her nerves on edge.

Ellie eased through the front opening without making a sound, each footstep carefully placed. At the edge of the house, she flattened herself against the structure and pulled in a breath before peeking around.

Nothing moved in the shadows. The rustling sound was joined by a snort of some type.

Ellie continued to move forward until she reached the garage. She zeroed in on the location of the noise. Near the front of the garage facing the ocean. Ellie covered the space between the house and garage in two steps. Reaching the front, the sound of

snorting was joined by what sounded like digging. Digging?

She counted to three and charged into the open. The sight of a potbelly pig rutting near the place where she kept her garbage can was so unexpected it took several seconds to register. A spotted piglet. Here. As she approached, the animal spared her a glance before continuing its rutting, confirming the animal wasn't afraid of people. A pet perhaps?

"What are you doing out here?" As she reached the pig, it became clear it was young. The animal was muddy and unkempt. So, maybe not a pet. "Are you hungry?"

The pig snorted and bobbed its head as if to say yes.

Ellie holstered her weapon, the threat inside taking back place to an animal in need.

"Come with me." She started for the back of the house. After she'd taken a few steps, Ellie glanced behind to see the pig following. This was about as unexpected as her getting a job at a coffeehouse.

She opened the back door and waited for the pig. Once inside, Ellie relocked it and then did the same to the front. Before she had time to return to the kitchen, the female pig had shadowed her into the living room.

Ellie had no idea what pigs ate but she'd brought some artisan bread at the bakery recently. She tore off a couple of pieces and placed them on the floor. The pig sniffed then gobbled them up.

"You were hungry." Ellie gave the animal more and then poured water into a bowl. She grabbed a kitchen towel and wet it, intending on getting some of the mud off the pig.

An engine grew louder as it neared the road in front of her place. This was the last house down this way. No one would come this far by accident .

Ellie snatched her weapon and killed the kitchen light. She eased toward the front windows. A set of headlights flashed across the house. Ellie ducked back. The vehicle stopped out front. A door opened and slammed shut. One person. Was it the same person who came here earlier?

From the kitchen, the pig snorted as if voicing its concern.

Ellie waited for the driver's next move. She had weapons stashed all over the house. If they came for her, she'd fight with everything she had to live.

The knock took her by surprise. Most assassins didn't knock. She wasn't taking any chances. Maybe someone was lost. If so, they'd leave after a minute.

"Ellie?"

She immediately recognized Boone's voice, relief weakening her limbs. Why was he here?

"Come on, I know you're in there."

She placed the weapon on a bookcase and unlocked the door.

Boone stood before her. "Anything wrong?" His attention was on her face as if seeing things even a trained Mossad agent couldn't hide.

"No, nothing." A complete lie, but she was holding onto her facade.

He came inside, and she stepped back, putting distance between them. Ellie slammed



into the bookcase, her injured ribs sending currents of pain down her side.

Boone reached out to steady her but she stopped him while holding onto her injured side. “I’m okay. I fell a few weeks back and bruised some ribs.” A flat-out lie that he probably didn’t buy. Thankfully, Boone didn’t push.

The pig in the kitchen came to investigate. The little darling stopped next to Ellie and looked up at Boone as if to challenge his presence.

“Who’s your friend?” He eyed the animal with a crooked grin.

“I don’t know. She showed up here tonight. I think she’s someone’s pet.”

“More likely she came from the illegal petting zoo that was in town a few days back. They were shut down. The owners left in the middle of the night. Word around the island was they were squatting in one of these vacation homes. No doubt, your neighbor’s place. They probably kept the animals in the garage and out of sight. I’m guessing this little cutie got left behind intentionally.”

Ellie’s heart went out to the creature. She’d been abandoned by her people as well. “I’m not sure what to do with her.”

Boone shrugged. “You could call animal control.”

“And have them put her down? No way. I’ll keep her before I let that happen.”

He leaned over and petted the pig’s head. “I don’t blame you.” Once he’d straightened, he frowned. “Though it makes me wonder if she was left behind in the house how she’d get out.”

An uneasy feeling slithered into the pit of Ellie’s stomach. Myron told her she’d have

this stretch of beach to herself. All her neighbors' places were summer homes, and with summer ended, they'd have left the island by now.

He looked around the place. "Doesn't look like they did any damage."

Ellie squared her shoulders. "I told you I left the door open."

Boone stopped her before she could build on the lie. "You didn't leave it open." Ellie bit her bottom lip and waited for him to continue. "I realize I haven't known you long, but I gather you're not the type to leave anything unchecked. You would have made sure the doors were locked before you left."

The challenging look he gave her demanded she deny it. She couldn't.

"I used to work for the CIA," Boone said quietly.

Immediately Ellie's guard flew up. A spy. She mentally tried to determine the threat to her safety.

"I've seen a lot of things during my time with the Agency. Enough to spot someone running for their life." He waited for her to deny what she couldn't. "What's going on, Ellie?"

She couldn't tell him . . . could she? She hadn't shared her ugly past with anyone. If she spoke the words aloud, would he condemn her?

"It's best that you don't know. You can't help me."

He stepped closer. "Try me. I won't judge you, I promise. I've done some awful things during my time with the CIA. Things I can't take back. I've killed."

Ellie flinched at the declaration, giving too much away. She balled her hands into fists. The truth was on the tip of her tongue. Could she say the words? Was it possible there might be a light at the end of this dark tunnel she'd been traveling down for so long?

"You were once intelligence, correct?"

Her expression froze in place, her breathing labored.

"Not CIA or any of the US intelligence agencies. I checked."

"You had no right." The protest came out half-hearted. There would be no record he could find of her time with Mossad. No information on her crimes.

He shrugged. "You're right. I didn't do it for any other reason except to help you. I've been where you are. Where it feels as if you're all alone."

Tears were close, and she fought them back. "I am alone. I've lost everything." The words slipped out before she could stop them. What was wrong with her? What was it about Boone that broke through her defenses?

"Someone you loved died?"

She crumpled to the closest chair and covered her face as the tears she'd fought so hard to hold back refused to be denied.

One sob escaped, followed by another, until she was crying in earnest. The first time she'd actually allowed herself to shed tears since that night.

Boone knelt beside her and gently gathered her close. Ellie tensed, half expecting pain, rejecting the human contact that she'd craved for so long. When the pain didn't

come, she leaned into his embrace and allowed herself to be human for once.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:52 am*

“It’s going to be okay,” he whispered while she continued to cry. The pig settled at her feet seemingly making up its mind about Ellie like Boone had. She was a good person—he’d sensed that about her from the beginning. But her story was going to be dark, he could almost feel it. He’d told her he could help. But what if he couldn’t? What if Ellie was beyond his help?

Please, God, give me the words and the wisdom to help her.

She sat up straighter and wiped her hands over her eyes. He let her go and rose. Ellie needed a minute to compose herself before facing him.

“I’m sorry. I don’t usually fall apart.” Her attention fell on the pig. She petted the animal.

“I think that pig likes you.” Boone was rewarded with a watery smile.

“Want some coffee?” she asked and stood abruptly. She didn’t wait for him to answer before heading to the kitchen, the piglet running after her like a shadow.

“Coffee would be nice.” Coffee was the last thing he needed but if she wanted it so did he. “You know you’re going to have to name that pig.” He wanted to lighten the moment and was happy when she laughed.

“You’re right. Any thoughts?” Ellie went about making coffee while he considered the white female pig with dark spots.

He had no idea how to name a pig. Back home they’d had a group of sled dogs that

were named, but the dogs were working animals and not pets. He hadn't really had a pet his entire life. Kind of sad to think about.

"Dottie?" he finally said.

Ellie stopped pouring water into the coffeemaker and considered the pig. "Dottie. I like it." The smile she gave him transformed her worried expression and confirmed his first impression of her. Ellie was strikingly beautiful.

The thought hit him like a blow. He hadn't thought about a woman in such a way since Victoria. They'd dated during his time in the Navy. He'd thought once he was done with his tour with the SEALs and came back to civilian life he'd marry her. When word reached him that she'd died in a car accident, Boone had been devastated. He understood the loss Ellie went through because he'd been there himself.

"What was his name?" he asked when she handed him coffee.

She didn't answer right away. Ellie poured herself a cup and then added creamer and rock sugar. When she offered the creamer and sugar to him, he shook his head.

She indicated the table as she pulled out a chair and sat.

Boone sat across from her and sipped the dark-roasted coffee. It was so strong it had him cringing.

She smiled. "Sorry, it takes some getting used to. It's called, botz or 'mud coffee.'"

He recognized the term immediately from his time in Israel, where he'd had the espresso once. He nodded without questioning her and wondered what her connection was to the country. The strong coffee worked its way down to churn up his stomach. He waited. Something told him her story wasn't going to come quickly.

“To answer your question, his name was Daniel,” she said so softly he almost didn’t catch it. “We were going to be married. He was murdered.”

Hearing the truth spoken so calmly and without emotion was a shock, but he had a feeling Ellie had gotten good at holding back emotion.

“What happened?” This was the question that would either prove she trusted him—or at least wanted to trust him.

She fiddled with the rim of her cup. “We worked together. We were on a mission, and he was killed.”

A mission. He put two and two together. “You’re Mossad.”

Ellie seemed to be in a struggle within herself. Would she tell him the truth or deny it? He had a feeling there was so much more to the story than what she’d told.

She kept her attention on the cup. “I was Mossad until Daniel died.”

“Who killed him, Ellie? What happened to you?”

Her startled expression went to him. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve been hurt, and I don’t believe you fell. Did someone do this to you?”

She blew out a breath and rose, pacing the small kitchen. “Daniel was killed but I have no idea who was responsible for his death. Either Syrian Intelligence or . . .”

“Or who?” he said softly.

“Or our own people.”

Soon, the whole sordid tale began to unfold, and he tried to take it all in. She'd been set up to take the fall for Daniel's murder. Ellie was being hunted by her own people as well as others.

"I'm a wanted person. My former comrades believe I killed Daniel. They've been searching for me for seven years."

His heart went out to her. Sure, he didn't know her that well, but being in the CIA had taught him quickly to trust his gut. She wasn't a murderer.

"I've moved more times than I can say, changed my name just as many times, yet they keep finding me."

"Who? Mossad or Syrian Intelligence?"

"Both. Mostly Syrian Intelligence."

His frown deepened. "There has to be a way. Do you have anything from the past that they could use to track you?"

She shook her head. "I left everything behind except for the engagement ring Daniel gave me." She returned to her seat. "When I escaped the box, after I was shot, I somehow managed to get away. I had the clothes on my back and my weapon." She told him about going to her director only to be told he couldn't help her. He believed her guilty.

"How did you get away?"

"I had an asset that Daniel and I used from time to time. He was able to get me a new identity. I wanted to stay close to Israel to work some of our other assets, hopefully discover who was behind the plot to kill Daniel."



“And did you?” He knew the answer. Why else would she be on the run?

“No one knew anything, or perhaps they weren’t talking. I never knew the name of the asset Daniel used to get intel on the Syrian Intelligence Agency and their efforts to corrupt one of our own.”

Boone sat up straighter at this. “So, you were told someone from Mossad was dirty?”

She nodded. “According to Daniel, his contact told him he’d give us the name of the person when we met. That meeting never happened. We were set up. Daniel died. Shot with my weapon.”

“And you were supposed to disappear, never to be found. You’d take the blame for the murder. The traitor would be free to continue to sell out his country.”

“Something like that.” She picked up her cup again. “I went to Daniel’s apartment. I was so afraid I’d be found. I waited until it was dark and got in through the back entrance.” She pulled in a breath. “The place had been trashed. Whatever information was there had been destroyed or taken.”

Boone blew out a long whistle. “They covered all their bases. Is there anyone you can think of who might know something about what happened that night?”

Her fingers trembled as she ran several around the rim of the cup. “No one. I exhausted all my assets’ information. I found out a few days later that there was an agent from Syrian Intelligence found dead near the same location where Daniel died. I’m certain the man was his contact. They killed the agent so he couldn’t talk.”

Boone could hardly believe someone from Mossad would betray their country to the enemy. It seemed unthinkable, and yet he knew of many cases where agents within US intelligence had done the same. All for money.

“There’s absolutely nothing left that can be used to track me, and yet they keep finding me.” She looked around the room. “You were right. Someone was here earlier, I’m certain of it.”

He held her gaze. “Anything taken?”

“No, nothing. I have a phone, but it’s a burner and I keep it with me. I don’t own any other device. All I have are a few changes of clothes and toiletries. Every bit of information I’ve been able to gather on the case is up here.” She pointed to her head.

Boone tried not to let the hopelessness rearing its head win. Ellie needed his help, and he wanted to help her. “Is there anyone from your past I can reach out to?”

She shook her head. “Daniel had a younger brother. He was in university at the time. Michael would be . . . twenty-seven now.” She looked his way. “But he wouldn’t know anything.”

Boone pulled out the small notebook he kept in his pocket and wrote down Michael’s name. “What about his parents? Yours?”

She quickly shook her head again. “I haven’t dared reach out to my family. Mossad will be watching for any contact.”

“What about your former director?”

“Gideon won’t help. He believes I’m guilty.” She scrubbed her hand over her forehead.

“I know someone who can help,” Boone said quietly. “While with the CIA, I worked a mission with a Mossad agent. We’ve kept in touch through the years—”

She didn't let him finish. "You can't. If you bring this up, they'll know you're involved somehow. They'll come here. I will be imprisoned. Or worse."

Boone leaned forward. "I trust my friend. Let me feel him out. He doesn't know anything about where I live, or that I'm working as a private investigator."

He believed trusting anyone with her secret wasn't easy. She'd shared with him, and he was grateful, but they'd need more to go on than the information she'd gathered.

She slowly agreed. "But please, don't mention this to your people."

Boone wanted to tell her she could trust the men and women at Hope Island Securities, but that step would be for another day.

"Alright. For now. But I can't keep this from them for long."

"I know. Thank you." She looked into his eyes, and his heart melted. He'd been where she was. Not to the extent of being framed for murder, but to the point where he wasn't sure if he wanted to live with what he'd done. He understood how crippling it could be.

Boone glanced out the window as the first rays of daybreak lightened the shoreline. They'd been talking for hours. One thing became clear. He didn't trust leaving her here alone. "I think I should move in here for the time being."

He waited for her to reject the idea and was surprised when she didn't. Being on the run had worn her down. She was probably tired of fighting the battle alone.

"I would appreciate that. I don't want to be alone after what happened." She glanced at the time and jumped to her feet. "I'm going to be late for work."

“Go shower. I’ll tell Hank it was my fault.”

Ellie stopped midway to the door and gave him an incredulous look. “Your fault, how?”

She didn’t want her employer getting any ideas about them, did she?

“Don’t worry, I’ll think of something.”

Ellie left to shower, Dottie following at her heels. Boone cleaned their cups before turning off the coffeemaker, his brain churning over the story she’d told him and the best way to approach his friend for answers.

As the shower turned on, Boone walked over to the kitchen window and looked out at a new day dawning. He frowned. A man and woman walked down the beach. Awfully early for a walk. They passed along the back of the house, and he kept out of sight. Boone didn’t recognize them, but he was new to the island himself. Besides, there were a few visitors left on the island. It could be nothing. He thought about Dottie. She’d been held at one of the houses. Maybe the people staying there hadn’t even realized a pig was in the garage.

His gut told him there was more to Dottie’s escape than a simple fly-by-night petting zoo.

The desire to move Ellie someplace safe wouldn’t let him go. He’d make an excuse to stick close to her during the day while he worked on finding a safe house for her to stay at until they figured out if danger had followed her here to Hope Island.

Boone got a message from Declan, who told him a severe thunderstorm warning had been issued for later in the day. The conditions were favorable for massive storms to hit Hope Island. The Weather Channel predicted the worst storm would hit between

sunset and early morning. This time of year, the weather could be volatile. Though they hadn't had any significant hurricanes this season, these oceanic storms that were being created because of the cold fronts coming in early were definitely doing some damage.

The shower shut off. A few minutes later, Ellie emerged wearing the green polo shirt displaying the logo of the Hopeful Coffeehouse. Hank told her she'd picked the color herself because it was her favorite.

"Ready?" he asked while he tried not to notice the scent of her soap or the way her jeans fit just right.

"Yes, I'm ready." She stopped near the door. "What about Dottie? We can't leave her here alone."

Boone had considered what to do with the piglet. "I'm sure Eli's wife won't mind watching her today until we can figure something else out." Boone told her about Sashi. "She's a good person. I'll tell her Dottie belongs to a friend."

She smiled and lifted Dottie into her arms. The pig snorted and snuggled her neck.

Boone didn't want to alarm her without cause by mentioning the walkers he'd spotted earlier. He'd do some checking to see who was around the area and if any of the places were being rented for the winter.

She got in his truck and placed Dottie between them.

Boone backed up and headed down the coastal road while trying to ease his fears. What if the men both he and Eli had spotted in town weren't after Sashi at all but were coming for Ellie? It made sense. She obviously knew something that was important enough for her enemies to want to silence her. The only question was

what?

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:52 am*

“We have her new location pinned down.” He stared at the house where his target had been staying and waited for the boss to speak.

“Are you certain? We can’t afford to be wrong this time. Now that everything is in motion, she has to disappear. No more near misses.”

“I understand.” He watched as Ayla and a man he hadn’t identified got into the man’s truck and left.

“Where is she hiding out?”

It surprised him that his boss cared. The instructions had always been to find her and eliminate the threat.

“A small house along the beach on an island town in Maine. Hope Island,” he told the boss.

“Hope Island. Leave it to her to search for something that will never be available to her.”

He laughed at the boss’s joke even though he didn’t find it particularly funny. “True. After all these years . . . You would have thought she’d given up long ago, especially after Oregon. For those like her there is no hope.”

The boss grunted an answer. “We’re stationed close. She isn’t going anywhere. The island is small. Once she’s alone, I’ll handle it myself.”

The boss didn't trust him to handle the job. That stung. Sure, he understood the importance of their mission, but he'd been the one on the ground during all the hunts to bring Ayla down, not his boss. All the other attempts to kill her had ended in failure for good reason. At one time, she was the best Mossad ever produced. Since being on the run, he had no doubt she'd perfected her skills. She knew how to stay hidden.

"What about the storm?" He wasn't sure why he brought it up. Perhaps because he wanted to be the one to take her out. "It's all over the news. It's heading straight toward the island."

"That should work in our favor, in my opinion. People will be more concerned with protecting themselves and their property than a few strangers on the island."

He held onto his anger with difficulty. "Look, I understand your concerns, but I have this. She's not getting away this time. There's no need for you to risk blowing your cover."

A very noisy harrumph followed. "You'd better be right because this is your last chance to prove yourself."

The call ended in the abruptness he'd come to expect from his boss. Failure wasn't an option. If he and his team couldn't eliminate her threat, they'd suffer her fate, no question about it.

But he knew how to find her, and things were not critical . . . yet.

That stupid pig. No one on his team realized the animal was in the garage until it was too late. The thing had followed them over to her house the night before and tried to go inside when they'd searched it. He'd shooed the animal off afraid the filthy beast would blow their cover. He wasn't sure it hadn't.



He stepped from his hiding spot near the back of her house to watch the truck disappear down the road. Who was this new man? That she'd allowed someone close had him wondering if the years on the run had weakened her.

He turned to the woman who was part of his team and motioned her over. With her help, they'd been quietly surveilling their target's house. He brought her along because a couple walking along the beach didn't draw as much attention as his four men had in town the day before.

"Find out who the truck belongs to." He gave her the license plate number.

She didn't respond but went to work on the task.

The rest of his team emerged from the shadows.

"Stay out of sight until I call for you," he told them once they were close. "She'll have seen you in town and can identify you. She's on alert. We can't afford for her to slip through our fingers again."

One man nodded and motioned the rest back to the house.

"Got it," the woman said. "The truck belongs to a Boone Langston."

He turned toward his companion. "Who is this Langston?"

She dug deeper into the man in question. "Former CIA." Her concern became clear. "This can't be good. If she's gone to them for help . . ."

"You said former. What's he doing now?"

She scrolled further. "He's part of a private investigation firm called Hope Island

Securities.” She looked him in the eye. “Not as bad, but still not good. If she’s talking, it’s possible the truth will come out.”

He shook his head. “She doesn’t know the truth. We’ll make sure it stays that way.” He headed for the car.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“After her. We need that information. They’re expecting it soon.”

The woman started to follow but he stopped her.

“I’ve got this. She’s my problem to take care of.” And his to take all the glory for bringing her down.

He opened the door and got inside the sedan. For seven years he’d fought Ayla and failed. No more. Now it was time to fix the problem. And he would. Once and for all he’d handle Ayla and end the threat she didn’t know she posed.

???

The break-in had her rattled. It happened so close to her arrival on Hope Island. Normally it took much longer for them to find her.

The back-and-forth swishing of the truck’s windshield wipers grated along her frayed nerves. The first wave of rain had started earlier than expected on their way in. It had grown steadily harder.

During the drive into town, she continuously watched the side mirror, her troubled thoughts on the men she’d noticed the day before. Through the years she’d gotten good at deducing threats. Those men were a threat.

Boone reached over and covered her nervous hand with his. She stared at his large, calloused hand. Human touch wasn't something she allowed herself often. Most people she met along the way were little more than passing acquaintances. Some less. Being touched even in a casual way wasn't something she was used to. She struggled to keep from pulling away.

"Relax. There's no one back there." Boone smiled over at her as he squeezed her hand.

She turned her head and looked into his eyes. Something she hadn't felt—hadn't thought about since Daniel—clawed its way to the surface past the bitterness.

No, she couldn't go there. If her life remained on its usual course, she'd be forced to leave Hope Island soon. Those men from the day before crept into her head. She'd stay long enough to earn enough money to leave and then she'd disappear again.

What had once been her routine now made her stomach turn. She'd been running for so long that she couldn't even see what normal looked like anymore. Didn't remember it. Would there ever come a time when normal would be possible? She'd love to be bored, sitting around and doing nothing. Not having to look over her shoulder for fear of what crept up behind her. Ellie smiled to herself at the thought.

Boone slid the truck into one of the many parking spots in front of the Hopeful Coffeehouse. The lights were on. Ellie checked her phone for the time. Two minutes to spare.

"I'll go in with you to make sure everything's good, then take Dottie over to Sashi's."

"Thank you, but you really don't have to babysit me. I'll be fine." Ellie gave the pig a hug.

“I’m coming with you,” Boone confirmed without backing down. “To keep from drawing undue attention to myself, after I’ve dropped Dottie off, I’ll stay in my truck. I should be able to see most of the foot traffic from here. If those men from yesterday show up, I’ll let you know.”

Ellie was grateful to have him close.

“Put my number into your phone so you have it in case there’s trouble.”

Ellie typed in the number Boone gave her. Relying on others for help—she couldn’t remember the last time that had happened. Maybe Daniel, but even then, they’d been partners protecting each other.

As a little girl, her parents were her world. Her father was an American soldier on leave, spending time in Israel when he’d met Ellie’s mother, a member of the Israeli Defense Force. They’d fallen in love. John moved to Israel to be with Maya. They’d married as soon as his tour of duty was over. Ellie was born a few years later and then her sister, who had followed in their mother’s footsteps and became a soldier for the IDF.

There was a certain code among those in the military. Never leave anyone behind. Boone wouldn’t leave her behind, and she prayed she wouldn’t bring her trouble into his life.

“Stay here,” Ellie told Dottie and hopped out, rushing toward the door as the rain pelted her. Boone did the same.

Ellie went ahead of him inside the coffeehouse, where Hank stood behind the counter.

“Glad you made it. The rain’s really coming down. They weren’t expecting it until

much later,” Hank told her as she entered. “With the flooding and another storm apparently closing in, I don’t think we’ll see much traffic today. It’ll be time to batten down the hatches soon enough.” She noticed Boone, and a knowing grin crossed Hank’s face.

Ellie cringed. Of course, she would think Ellie and Boone were together.

“Boone gave me a ride in.” Ellie came up with some excuse about car trouble .

“Well, that was nice of him.”

Ellie tried to determine if Hank believed the car trouble story. She couldn’t tell.

Hank handed them both towels and poured coffee for Boone while Ellie did her best to dry off.

“Better put that in a to-go cup, Hank. I’ve got some errands to run.”

Hank’s expression gave nothing away. “Fine by me.” She poured the coffee into a paper cup, added a lid, and then handed it to Boone. “According to the updated forecast, it’s supposed to rain most of the day. What tourists who haven’t left yet will want to get off the island in case of flooding. It’s going to be just us locals.”

“That it will. Stay dry, the two of you.” Boone headed for the door. With a final look Ellie’s way, he left.

“Suzanne called me last night and asked if I’d mind if she left the island a little earlier to beat the storm. She wanted to spend some time with her parents in New York before heading off to school. She sure was glad you applied for the job. Not too many people looking to work at a coffeehouse around these parts.”

Ellie half-listened, her focus on the danger breathing down her neck.

“It all worked out well. I think you’re going to be a good addition to the business.”

Her confidence was nice, but right now all Ellie could think about was the men she’d spotted outside the coffeehouse the day before. Her gut screamed they were enemy soldiers here for her. Boone wanted her to trust him. He had no idea how hard giving that trust would be.

Before long, a few workers came in before heading to their fishing vessels to get in a little fishing before the storm worsened. They ordered coffees and breakfast pastries for their trip. Time flew by. A few more locals came in but didn’t linger long. The “final wave,” as Hank called it, was the remaining tourists preparing to exit the island. By the time the last customer received their coffee, hours had flown by.

Boone texted to let her know when he returned. He told her he’d parked down from the coffeehouse and so far saw no sign of the men.

Had she been wrong? They could be innocent tourists here to enjoy the beauty of Hope Island. Hank told her the coffeehouse received visitors from all over the world. Ellie wanted to believe herself safe for the moment, and yet the survival instinct that kept her alive all these years wouldn’t let her lower her guard.

“Looks like that’s it until mid-afternoon and depending on the weather.” Hank wiped down the counter while Ellie gathered coffee cups to wash.

“Is the weather always like this?”

Hank ginned as Ellie rolled her shoulders. “Sometimes. You get used to it. Just part of the attraction to the island.”

Ellie wasn't so sure about that.

"I'm going to run to the bank with the deposit. Will you be okay here by yourself for a bit?"

After everything she'd gone through in her past, Ellie believed she would.

"Call me if you need anything." Hank pointed to a card she had next to the register. "My cell's the first there."

"I will."

Hank grabbed the deposit bag and her purse and headed out the back entrance.

Ellie finished cleaning the dishes and wiping down tables, then made herself a Rocky Caramel.

A noise at the back of the shop had her wondering if Hank had forgotten something.

"What'd you forget?" Ellie set her coffee on the counter and headed to the back. Only it wasn't Hank who greeted her. A man with dark hair glistening with rain and dressed entirely in black stepped through from the back entrance. Right away, Ellie knew she was looking in the face of the enemy.

She had to get to Boone. Ellie ran toward the front entrance, snatching up her phone as she did. Before she'd taken more than a handful of steps the man grabbed her from behind.

"You aren't going anywhere," he said in Arabic. "Where is it? "

Ellie slammed her foot against his as hard as possible. The man reacted in pain,

loosening his hold slightly and giving her the space to jab her elbow into his midsection.

A string of curse words followed, but she was free. She ran for the front. Another man she hadn't seen enter came up from behind her and snatched hold of her hair, dragging her back away from the windows. She screamed in pain.

Ellie tried to call Boone. The phone was yanked from her hand and tossed across the room. Her only means of communicating with Boone gone, she was in a fight for her life, and it was her against at least two armed men.

She reached up and behind her, jamming her finger into her captor's eye. The move gave her a moment of reprieve. She managed to twist around in his grasp and slammed her fist hard against his jaw, immediately freeing herself.

Ellie grabbed the weapon she kept in her boot and pulled it on him. Holding his bad eye, he aimed his handgun on her. They were in a standoff to see who would back down first.

The second man charged her.

Ellie hated that she would have to shoot up Hank's coffeehouse, but her life was in danger. She fired once. He grunted and grabbed for his shoulder, the force of the bullet knocking him backwards.

The man with the gun turned slightly. Ellie fired, grazing his side. He yelped.

"I'm calling the police," Ellie said in Arabic, hoping to scare them both off.

His lips curled back. Teeth barred. "You won't. You're a wanted woman. They'll arrest you. You'll be dead before nightfall."



Those chilling words washed over her. Out of the corner of her eye, Ellie spotted Boone running toward the coffeehouse.

The mouthy man noticed as well. Holding his side, he stumbled toward the back, telling his friend they had to leave. The man on the floor jumped to his feet and ran after his partner as Boone entered the building.

“What happened? I heard shots.” He scanned the disheveled dining space.

“They were here. Two men. They left through the back. Boone, they’re both armed.” Ellie sank down to the floor while Boone raced after the men.

Outside, sounds of car doors shutting were followed by tires squealing down the alley.

Seconds later, Boone came back. “They got away. I did get a license plate number, though. I’m so sorry I wasn’t here.” He lifted her to her feet and held her close.

Ellie clung to him. It had been just her for so long. Having someone to lean on didn’t change the truth. They’d found her.

And she couldn’t stay.

She pulled free. “I have to get out of here. They’ll keep coming.” Ellie looked around at the chaos left behind by the attack. The blood spattered on the floor, the wall. The overturned chairs. “This place is a mess.” She absently began straightening tables when Boone stopped her.

She closed her eyes. “I can’t stay, Boone.”

He tugged her closer. “You can. Let me help you. Let my team.”

She immediately rejected the idea. “No. No one else can know.”

He didn’t let her go. “They’re not going to turn you in. They’ll believe you like I do.”

She searched his face. “I wish I could be so trusting. But never letting anyone else in is the only way I’ve stayed alive for seven years.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:52 am*

From the lengthy silence on JT's end, Boone could tell his friend was struggling to comprehend the story Boone shared.

"You believe her?" JT's question, filled with doubts, stung, but Boone certainly understood it. He'd have asked the same thing if on the other end. After all, her own country thought her responsible for betraying them and for murdering her partner.

"Yeah, I do." Boone couldn't explain it, but when he'd looked at Ellie as she explained her past, he'd believed her.

"Alright. That's good enough for me."

Boone wasn't surprised. In the short time he'd worked for Hope Island Securities, he'd gotten to know the men and women who worked there. They were all strong in faith and most had weathered storms that helped them do the job day after day when faced with some of the most heart-wrenching cases around, like the missing child case Boone had taken on.

"Well, let me work on getting a safe house for Ellie and you. I'll have our people help with protection. You said you had a license plate number for me to run?"

Boone gave it to him. "I'm sure it's a rental, but it's someplace to start."

"Got it. I'll let you know what I find." JT paused for a long moment before telling Boone to be careful. "This could escalate into an international event very quickly. If she's being actively pursued by Mossad then our interference will be frowned upon. And if this does involve Syrian Intelligence, well, that's a whole other ball game. Our

government has enough friction with other countries as it is.” He sighed deeply. “On another note, have you heard the latest projection from the weather service? Looks like the storms gathering in the Atlantic are gaining in strength.”

Boone glanced over to where Ellie sat at the counter staring into her cup. “Not what we need right now. And I get what you’re saying about our interference, but I’m telling you something’s wrong here.”

“I believe you, and I trust your judgment,” JT told him. “Let me see what I can do to get you out of sight. That’s our first step. Get her safe. We’ll figure out the rest from there.”

Boone told him about the couple he’d seen walking on the beach. “It seemed fairly early for a stroll.” Then he mentioned Dottie. “I’m guessing the people who owned the illegal petting zoo had her and other animals stashed in one of the homes along the beach. My guess is the one next door.”

“Agreed. I’ll get Will Kelly, our chief of police, involved. I’m guessing the people watching Ellie were staying at that house and didn’t realize it had been inhabited by a pig.” He hesitated. “She can’t keep working at the Hopeful.”

Boone realized as much. “I’ll figure out something to tell Hank.”

JT chuckled. “Good luck. Hank is sharp. She’ll know something’s up.”

“Yes, she will.” But he could tell the older woman liked Ellie. Hopefully, she wouldn’t press too much.

“Stay close to her until you hear from me. I’ll be in touch soon.”

“Copy you.” Boone ended the call and joined Ellie. “He’s working on getting you

someplace safe to stay. Once that's accomplished, we'll get the team together and go over the information we have." He faced her. "You won't be able to keep working here."

Ellie slowly nodded. "I know. I feel awful about it. Hank hired me to take over for Suzanne. Now, I'm leaving her in a lurch. "

She had a good heart. "Hank will understand. Thankfully, it should be slowing down due to the weather."

He heard someone at the rear entrance and strode to the back door. "Ellie, is anything wrong? The door's locked," Hank called out through the locked door.

No time like the present to get things over with.

"Just a second." Boone unlocked the door and opened it. Hank was clearly surprised to see him.

"Where's Ellie? Is she okay?"

Boone's first hint that Hank suspected there was more to Ellie's story.

"She's fine, but something did happen." He strode back to the dining area, where Ellie waited for them.

Hank looked from Boone to Ellie. "Well—tell me."

Ellie gave as few details as possible while leading Hank to believe she was being chased by a stalker.

"Oh, honey, I'm so sorry. I knew something was wrong—I could just tell it from the

way you acted—but I never imagined this.”

Ellie lowered her head. “I’m sorry that I’m going to have to leave you shorthanded.”

Hank was quick to tell her not to worry. “I have a friend who will give me a hand from time to time.”

“Thank you, Hank.” Ellie glanced Boone’s way. “For now, maybe I can help you out. Just for a little while.”

Boone didn’t like the idea of Ellie staying in the same place as the attack but he believed he’d have a fight on his hands if he tried to stop it. “Only until we finalize the safe house.”

Hank squeezed her hand. “Are you sure, Ellie? I don’t want to put you in further danger.”

“I’ll be fine. Boone will be here.” She squared her shoulders expecting him to argue.

Hank smiled. “Good, because I’ve enjoyed working with you.” Not one to show emotion, Hank busied herself behind the counter.

“You know this isn’t wise,” Boone whispered.

“Maybe not, but I won’t leave her shorthanded with the storm coming. And I can’t run out on another person like I have in the past. I can’t.”

He blew out a sigh. “Alright, but, like I said, it’s only until we have a safe location to take you. Until then, keep the back door locked.”

“I’m way ahead of you, Boone.” Hank headed toward it.

Boone's phone alerted to an incoming call. Tobias's number popped on the screen. "I have to take this."

He put space between himself and Ellie. He didn't want her overhearing the conversation.

"Shalom, my friend," Boone said in greeting.

"Shalom. Sorry about not being able to talk earlier. Too many ears. Your request was vague. Can you elaborate?"

Boone did his best to explain Ellie's position without giving too much away.

"Ah, yes. That was before my time with Mossad, but I remember hearing about the case. A female agent who sold secrets to the Syrians. She's on the wanted list."

Tobias confirmed Ellie's belief that Mossad was actively searching for her. Boone fought against being discouraged. Ellie mentioned the men from earlier spoke Arabic. His instincts insisted they were not Mossad agents.

"You'd better tell me why you wish to know about one of our rogue agents, my friend."

Boone hesitated. "Can I trust this is just two friends talking?"

Tobias hesitated much longer than Boone hoped. "You can. I owe you. You saved my life."

Boone looked Ellie's way. "What if I can prove your traitor isn't her?"

Tobias paused for a long moment. "There's evidence that says differently."

“I know it’s asking a lot, but can you tell me what happened?”

Tobias could get into real trouble by divulging Mossad intelligence to an outsider. “I can give you the short version. An agent by the name of Daniel Malin, Ayla Galante’s partner, was shot with her weapon. He died. Mossad did its best to cover up the assassination to protect itself, but I’ve seen the file. There was evidence that someone within Mossad was feeding secrets to Syrian Intelligence. Daniel, the lead agent, set up a trap claiming to be meeting with an agent who worked within Syrian Intelligence. It was him and Ayla. They were supposed to flush out the traitor . . . only turns out she was the traitor. She was the one who turned on Daniel and killed him.”

Nothing Tobias said made sense. Ellie claimed to love Daniel. She spoke about his murder. He told Tobias as much.

“How do you know she’s telling you the truth?”

Tobias was a good man. He’d proven himself to be trustworthy during the time they’d worked together. Was Boone making a huge mistake by trusting Ellie?

He didn’t think so. During some of the worst cases he’d worked undercover for the CIA, the one thing that kept him alive was trusting his gut. Now, it told him Ellie had been framed.

“The same way I know I can trust you to keep this conversation between us,” Boone finally said.

Tobias chuckled.

“Is there anything you can give me that might point to someone else being involved?”



“Not really. Both of their apartments were searched. There was an unusually large amount of funds in her account. Seemed to prove she was on the take.” Tobias sighed. “I’ll try to get my hands on the actual file, but I can’t promise anything.”

“Whatever you can give me would be welcome. Be careful, Tobias. I have a feeling there is so much more to the story than what you and I currently understand.”

“For your sake, I hope you’re correct. As your friend, I must tell you to watch your back. Goodbye, Boone. We’ll talk soon.” Tobias ended the call.

Boone chose not to share his conversation with Ellie because Tobias appeared convinced Ellie was guilty.

He found Hank’s stash of sandbags and went out to prepare the shop for the possibility of flooding while Ellie and Hank filled orders for the handful of patrons looking for an early afternoon pick-me-up. Was he wrong? He’d trusted Ellie’s word while not really knowing her well.

Once the last of the bags were in place he went back inside and pulled out a chair at one of the tables that would allow him to watch the entire room and door.

Ellie smiled at one of the male customers who thanked her and left the coffeehouse. She was a well-trained spy. Mossad agents were experts in intelligence collection, covert operations, and counterterrorism. They underwent an extensive two-year training period. Ellie would know how to make a lie believable. He’d certainly learned to sell a cover story during his time. After a while, the lies take over and you lose a little more of the real you.

The incoming message brought his attention to the phone in his hand. JT had run the plates. As expected, the car was a rental. The name on the lease is Conrad Biggs.

I did a search on the name. Nothing to draw any attention. I'm guessing they created just enough information to make the background check believable. Paid with a credit card from the same address in a small town in Massachusetts. I've brought in Will—I trust him to reach out to the police department there. They'll check out the address, but I have a feeling it's going to be a bust.

Having the Hope Island police chief involved worried Boone a little, but Will was a good friend of the team, and JT trusted him.

Will and his people had searched the house next to Ellie's place. They found evidence of someone squatting there illegally. There were take-out containers piled up and slept-in beds. The forensics team was searching for fingerprint and DNA evidence.

Boone thanked JT for his help.

Any luck on securing a safe house on the island?

JT's response came quickly. Working with Declan on that one. I'm sending him and Eli to you for backup. Stay safe.

Things had been set into motion. He'd have his team here with him. It was going to be okay.

So why didn't it feel okay?

Throughout the afternoon, customers came and went. Several stuck around to chat with Hank. These were the locals.

When Eli and Declan arrived, Boone was grateful for the assist.

They spotted him and came over, each clasping Boone's hand. The team had taken him in and made him feel at home right from the start. For someone who couldn't seem to fit in, that was a welcome experience.

Both pulled out chairs at Boone's table.

"JT and I figured the best place to get Ellie out of sight is on Breakers Island. It's a small island a little way off the coast of Hope. I have a cabin there. There's only one other family that still comes there from time to time so it's not on anyone's radar. The cabin's small and a bit rustic, but it's a good place to hide. No one will be looking for her there." Declan scanned the dining area looking for trouble. "I just hope this storm lets up before we leave. Crossing the water in these conditions won't be easy."

Boone blew out a relieved sigh. "Me, too. I appreciate the use of the cabin. That's a huge relief. Still, we don't know if they're sitting on this place or not. We'll have to be careful getting there."

Declan nodded. "You believe her?" His attention homed in on Ellie clearing tables.

Boone didn't hesitate even though there was a small part in the back of his head that warned him to be careful. "I do. She didn't kill her partner."

Like JT, Eli told him that was good enough for them. "Might be wise to have someone else go back to retrieve her things . . . oh, and by the way, thanks for bringing the pig to my wife to babysit." Eli pretended to be upset. "She wants us to adopt one now."

Boone chuckled. "Sorry about that. I wasn't sure who else might be willing to watch Dottie until we could pick her up."

"Dottie. That's fitting. Sashi sent me a picture." Eli scrolled through his phone and

brought up the picture of the piglet. “I have to admit, she’s kind of cute. But a pet pig?”

Boone held up his hands. “I get it. The thing wandered up to Ellie’s house, and she seems determined to keep it. Can you send me that picture? I’ll show it to Ellie. It’ll make her feel better knowing Dottie’s in good hands.”

“Sure thing.” Eli’s expression sobered. “I’m guessing these men we spotted yesterday are here for Ellie and not Sashi.”

Boone knew his friend was worried about his wife’s safety after everything she’d gone through in the past. “Probably. They may be Syrian Intelligence Agents. Ellie believes they’ve never stopped searching for her.”

Ellie came over with coffee for them. “I wasn’t sure what you all drank,” she told them after Boone introduced the two men. “There are coffees and my Rocky Caramel espresso drinks. Help yourselves.” Her worried gaze bounced between the street out front of the coffeehouse and Boone.

“Thanks for these.” Boone tried one of her signature drinks and told her about the safe house. “As soon as we can leave Hank comfortably, I’ll have Janine—she’s one of our people—pick up your things and meet us over at the dock.”

Ellie’s tension didn’t ease any at the news. “Thanks. I don’t have much so it shouldn’t be hard to collect.” She glanced over her shoulder as another group of people Boone didn’t recognize came in. “I’d better go help Hank.” She hurried away.

As he watched her go, Boone could almost see the weight of the world on her hunched shoulders. He wondered what she would be like when the past holding her down was gone. When? That was an awfully positive assumption.

“She has no idea how they keep finding her?”

Declan’s question pulled Boone back to the conversation around the table.

“None. She told me she got rid of everything from her past. Except her engagement ring and weapon. The phone is a burner. I don’t get it.”

Declan’s frown deepened. “There’s something from her time in Israel and with Mossad that’s allowing this. Maybe a laptop or tablet?”

Boone shook his head. “Nothing. Not even a water bottle or coffee cup.”

Declan didn’t let it go. “There’s a connection somehow. We just have to find it.”

Boone had no idea what it could possibly be. Once they were safely out of sight, perhaps the team could help Ellie go over everything she’d experienced since the night her fiancé died. Declan was right. There had to be some way. Finding it would be key to breaking the hold her enemies had on her. At least, for the moment.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:52 am*

“We’re almost there,” Declan confirmed with a glance in the SUV’s rearview mirror. Like everyone else in the vehicle, he was on edge.

Though the severe thunderstorms that could produce more flooding weren’t predicted to strike until sometime after dark, the skies had continued to turn ugly, with high winds and rain.

Ellie shivered at the thought of being on the water with lightning strikes. She couldn’t imagine how terrifying that would be.

She’d dealt with rain before but never one storm after the other like what was happening now. If Hope Island flooded, she had to wonder about Breakers, a much smaller piece of land that was vulnerable and more exposed to the ocean.

She sat in the back of the blacked-out SUV alongside Boone, while Declan drove and Eli sat beside him.

Peekaboo glimpses of the ocean winked at them through sheets of rain.

To ease her tension, Boone showed her a picture of Dottie with Sashi. She took the phone from him. “I can’t believe someone would abandon her.”

Boone squeezed her shoulder. “I think it might be divine providence. She’s definitely better off now.”

She smiled. Silly to lose her heart to a pig she barely knew. Dottie represented the first brick in her possibly having a forever home here on the island with her adorable

little late-night intruder.

“There it is.” Declan, navigating the SUV that belonged to Hope Island Securities, pointed to a weathered gray building perched beside the water.

Dreadful memories from the past and her narrow escape from the Dead Sea crept into her thoughts. The box intended to be her coffin filled with water. The effects of whatever medicine they’d given her weighed her limbs down. It had taken all her strength to swim to the nearby shore. Before she reached it, one of her captors spotted her and shot her in the shoulder. She’d almost passed out. Anger and grief were the only things that kept her going. She refused to die. Not without first finding out why Daniel had been killed.

“Sit tight. I’ll get the door.” Eli hopped out and went over to the building then opened the roll-up door. Declan pulled in alongside another parked vehicle, where a woman stood next to it.

“That’s Janine,” Eli told them.

Boone opened the door and got out. Ellie slipped out beside him. The woman she’d seen before with the bright red hair stood near the back of her car with her arms crossed.

“Did you have any trouble?” Boone asked as they neared.

“Nope. I wasn’t followed. I think I got everything. I’m Janine by the way.” She extended her hand to Ellie.

Ellie clasped it. “Thank you for taking the risk.”

Janine shrugged off her thanks. “It wasn’t a problem.” She popped the trunk. A

couple of boxes. All Ellie had to her life. It never bothered her before how sad it was that she'd condensed her life to two boxes. A few changes of clothes both warm and lighter depending on where she'd end up. A change of shoes. Some toiletries. A few books she'd gathered along the way to ward off the loneliness.

Pretty pathetic. She touched the ring in her jeans pocket. Daniel had proposed while they were on a mission in Iran. During a moment of calm, Daniel had gotten down on one knee and told her he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her.

It was one of the few times she'd cried. Those had been tears of happiness. The last joyful ones she'd shed.

"Let's get everything loaded onto the boat," Boone said from close by.

She turned. Those brown eyes watched her carefully. Was he wondering if she was the murderer her own people believed her to be? Had she made an awful mistake by telling him her ugly secret?

"I picked up some supplies for you." Janine opened the back door and handed over several bags of food. "I know you have a freezer full of meat at the cabin, but I thought you might need some vegetables and dairy. Depending on how long you'll stay there, I can arrange to bring out more."

"That's very kind of you." Ellie was humbled by how people who didn't know her at all were risking their lives for her. "I can't pay you right away, but soon, in time."

Janine squeezed her shoulder. "Don't worry about it. It's what we do for each other."

The building was large enough to fit the SUV comfortably. Above the dock and on a hydraulic lift was a twenty-eight-foot fishing vessel equipped with twin outboard motors that would cut through the choppy water quickly.



Once everything was stowed, Janine prepared to leave. “Be safe. According to the harbormaster, the winds are growing. Waters are treacherous. Waves are churning and might be dangerous.” She hugged her people and then did the same for Ellie. “Take care of yourself. You’ve got some of the best people on your side. Let them help you.” She turned on her heel and headed back to her car.

Ellie watched her leave, overwhelmed by the kindness these total strangers showed her.

“We’ll leave the SUV here in case we need to evacuate Breakers.”

Ellie shivered at Eli’s words. For seven years she’d been living in shadows. She’d told herself she was working on getting answers, but in truth what she might find out scared her. What if the monster who had taken Daniel’s life posed as a friend?

Now, she’d set into motion something that couldn’t be stopped. Boone and the members of Hope Island Securities were good. They wouldn’t stop digging until they had the answers she claimed to want. The truth would be known whether she liked it or not.

Boone held out his hand to help her onboard.

Eli closed the door they’d driven through. As soon as he returned and everything was secured below, Declan hit a button on a remote control that lifted the door to reveal the ocean. The rain appeared to give them a brief reprieve for which she was thankful for.

Declan fired the twin engines and idled out of the dock. The door closed, and they were on their way.

The vessel moved through chaotic seas with ease although the wind continued to kick

up. Despite the windshield, a salty spray peppered her face as they picked up speed. She brushed her hair from her face and watched colors of the sunset barely visible through the thick clouds. Silvers of burnt orange colored the waters. Within the distant clouds lightning flashed. The storm was gaining strength.

Despite her concerns, Ellie couldn't look away from the fragmented sunset. She didn't remember the last time she'd enjoyed one. Tears stung her eyes. She turned her head away and brushed the tears aside.

Growing up, her parents hadn't been practicing Jews. They'd kept the high holidays but more as a time to get together with family than to remember the reason for celebrating the occasion.

During her adult life, Ellie hadn't believed in much of anything except what she could see.

But staring at the majesty of the storm and the sunset, seeing the way things had fallen into place to bring her to Hope Island and how she met Boone, her mindset began to shift. She'd trusted someone, something she'd never done before, and she believed Boone had been the right person to tell her story.

Now, she had a team working on her side to help get her answers. That couldn't be a coincidence. Maybe it was time for her to get better acquainted with the God she'd ignored for so long.

"Everything okay?" Boone touched her arm. She hadn't realized he was so close until he'd spoken.

She squared her shoulders and tried to control her emotions that simmered close to the surface. "I'm fine. Just admiring the sunset."

He claimed the seat beside her. “Yeah. I never really paid that much attention to them before either,” he said as if reading her mind.

She turned her head and studied his profile. Handsome. The thought popped into her mind unexpectedly. Ellie couldn’t remember the last time she’d thought of a man as attractive. During school and then in her training for Mossad she’d been focused. Being paired with Daniel had changed that. She’d lost her heart to him.

Ellie swallowed back the lump in her throat and realized she’d been quiet, but Boone didn’t seem to mind. He kept his focus on the sunset.

“I grew up going to church every Sunday, but I never really believed in God until I was on the battlefield. Seeing someone die for the first time, well, it changed me. I thought about all those messages I’d heard about God’s love, and I realized I didn’t really know Him. It didn’t take long for me to remedy that.”

She looked at him curiously. “Did it help?” She tried not to flinch when another lightning flash lit up the sky. Ellie turned toward the cloud bank.

“It did. Knowing there was Someone up there watching over me made it easier to get through those dark days.”

She thought about what he’d said. Could she have this type of relationship with God? She sure wanted to find out.

“According to Declan, we should be at the cabin in about an hour.”

She shifted her attention back to him and realized he was watching her. Not as someone assessing her reactions like before, but as a man looking at a woman.

Ellie caught her breath when he tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear, his fingers

brushing her skin. Touch. She'd gone so long without it. Ellie had forgotten what a simple touch felt like. She closed her eyes, her breath growing shallow and her heart rate racing. She was falling, and she couldn't afford to let down her guard.

Ellie cleared her throat and faced forward. Boone's hand dropped to his side. Regret made it hard to hide her sadness.

She expelled a breath. "Let's hope they don't locate us on the island." The enemy had a way of finding her she didn't understand. Being secluded on an island made for a good place to hide out unless the enemy tracked them there.

"Doesn't look as if we're being followed." Boone's voice held a roughness. "With the storm I doubt anyone would venture out on the water."

The last light of day slowly faded. With the settling dusk, the temperature on the water dipped lower.

"Hang on. I think I have a jacket in the stuff Janine brought from my place."

Before she had time to protest, Boone disappeared, returning a few minutes later with a camo jacket. He slipped it over Ellie's shoulders.

"Thank you, but aren't you cold?"

"Naw. I love this kind of weather. It's bracing. It reminds me I'm alive."

She could almost feel his smile though she didn't look at him. Boone was a complex man. Caring and kind.

"Are you glad to be done with the CIA?" The question popped out without her meaning to ask it.

He was silent for so long she wondered if she'd overstepped. "Sorry, I can imagine it's hard to talk about."

He inclined his head. "Some things are. I mostly think about the people who lost their lives along the way." She waited for him to elaborate. "We believed we were doing what was best for our country and others, and I honestly think we were. But on the flip side, the ones we were fighting against believed the same way."

She understood what he meant. "I felt the same. Our country is tiny, and yet there are enemies that want nothing more than to wipe us off the face of the earth simply because of who we are." An age-old battle that went back to her long-ago ancestors.

"I get that. A jealousy that dates to Isaac and Ishmael."

She brushed the spray from her face. "Something like that."

Up ahead, a dark silhouette appeared on the horizon.

Declan idled down the engines as they neared Breakers Island. Almost there. Almost safe.

As much as she wanted to believe she'd get the breathing room she needed to find answers, Ellie remembered the number of attacks she'd survived. Some happened so close together she'd barely had time to gain her bearings before she had to leave again. Like the small country of Israel, she felt surrounded by the enemy. They were closing in. This time she sensed the beast breathing harder down her neck. If she and the members of Hope Island Securities didn't figure out what had happened that night long ago, she might die without ever knowing the truth.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:52 am*

“S o you failed.” The condemnation came through in every syllable. “Like every other time before, you failed.”

“We’ll find her,” he said with more confidence than he felt. The signal had grown weak, though. Not the first time through the years. It was subject to weather like most GPS signals.

“No. I’ll handle it.” The boss’s anger burned through the line. This was the first time he’d wanted to get his hands dirty.

“That’s not necessary. We’ve got it.”

A growl followed. “Clearly you do not. I’ll be on the island within the hour.”

If the boss could arrive so quickly, it meant he was nearby.

“If you’re flying, I can pick you up,” he said, trying to gain intel.

“I’ll find you.” The call ended.

Of course, everyone was on edge. The major event planned to coordinate with current world affairs must go off flawlessly. The margins for error were slim, he understood, but the boss hadn’t wanted to be involved before. Was he receiving pressure from those above him?

He shoved the phone into his pocket and gave himself a few minutes to let go of the anger. He’d been with the boss since before the initial attack that should have been

the end of her.

Everything went wrong that night. Ayla had escaped. She was out there in the world working to figure out the truth. They did their best to keep her on the move and off her game, but even he knew it was only a matter of time before she guessed why she'd been set up to take the fall. By then, it would be too late.

???

The lightning flashes were becoming more frequent. Answering thunder sounded like they were entering a war zone. Boone was thankful when they reached the island's pier. Being caught out on the ocean in a thunderstorm wasn't exactly his idea of a good time.

Boone jumped onto the pier that looked as if it had seen better days. At least, he didn't fall through. He grabbed the rope from Eli and tied it off.

The last half hour of the trip had continued to become more perilous. The wind gusts had to be close to thirty miles an hour, creating dangerous waves that made the trip nail-biting. Not to mention the light show.

"I've been meaning to repair that thing," Declan said with a grin as Boone tested the strength of the pier. "We'd better secure the boat extra sturdy. I think we should prepare for a long night if we take a direct hit from the storm."

Declan had been through several of these storms, he'd told them, but this one had all the makings of one of the worst Boone had ever seen.

It felt as if everything were coming together to create a showdown of epic proportions with Ellie's past that had him wondering who would be left standing.

Boone helped Ellie from the vessel and steadied her when a wind gust almost toppled her over. “You okay?”

She slowly nodded. “I have a bad feeling about this, Boone. A really bad one.”

He felt the same way.

Declan killed the twin motors. He and Eli unloaded boxes of supplies.

With everyone carrying supplies, Declan clicked on his flashlight and led the way. “There’s a path, but it gets grown up after the summer rains. Watch your step. ”

Eli strode behind Declan. Boone let Eli go first so that he could keep an eye out for any danger behind them.

Boone saw no sign of anyone coming after them. He guessed the bad guys weren’t keen on braving the weather or the waves. Yet Boone couldn’t relax. The tension between his shoulder blades seemed to confirm whatever was going on with Ellie was a long way from being over.

“Another family has a place on the island. The Petersons. Robert and Becky. Looks like they may be here. I see houselights. I’ll check on them once we get settled in. They have several teenage boys and a couple of girls.” Declan stopped in front of a small cabin and retrieved the key from behind a porch light. “It only has one bedroom. I figure Ellie can take the bed, and we’ll bunk down in the living room. I have plenty of sleeping bags.”

A lightning bolt struck far too close, illuminating the cabin. Though small, the log cabin had an appeal, Boone could relate to. A place to get away. To think. Maybe catch up on some fishing . . . or spend the time with someone you cared about. He glanced over at Ellie, who had kept close to his side as the storm grew in ferocity.



Declan opened the door and then flipped on a light switch. Boone was surprised there were lights until he realized they were generator powered.

“The generator’s outside the kitchen. I have it set up to where I can control it through my phone.” Declan set his bag near the door.

“How’s your fuel supply for the generator?” Boone had noticed there were several cans of gas onboard. Chances were, they could be stuck on the island for a while.

“We should be good for a couple of days. Let’s hope it doesn’t take longer. I’ll go back and grab the rest of the fuel with Eli. I’m praying the main part of the storm misses Hope Island and here.”

Boone hoped for the same thing. He carried the box of food over to the table and placed his overnight bag on the living room floor.

“I’ll give you the nickel tour,” Declan said with a grin. “Kitchen and living room.” He stepped past them down the hall and opened a door. “Bedroom’s in here and bath across the hall.”

Boone realized they were getting more than a tour. Declan used it to confirm the place was empty.

“Basement is this way.” He flipped on a light and started down the steps. Everyone followed.

Boone glanced around the basement that covered the entire width of the house. Shelves of canned goods stood against one wall. Camping supplies were stowed on another shelf. Extra firewood was piled against another wall.

“Looks like you planned for everything,” Ellie told him, sounding impressed.

Declan chuckled. “Sort of. My wife and I come here sometimes during the winter when the weather is unpredictable. You want to be prepared for anything.” He grabbed a couple of sleeping bags and passed them around. “It gets cold at night. We’ll have a fire going, but these should keep you warm.”

Boone gathered some firewood in his arms. “Might as well get one started.”

Upstairs, he placed some kindling and wood in the woodstove and lit the fire.

“If anyone’s hungry, there’s plenty of meat in the freezer,” Declan told them. “Excuse me while I check on the Petersons.”

Lightning continued to illuminate the outdoors while thunder rattled the windows.

And Ellie couldn’t hide her worry.

“Are you doing okay?” Boone asked.

She forced a smile. “I’ve never been a fan of thunderstorms.”

He could understand. “We’ll be safe inside. This place seems well built.”

“The Petersons aren’t answering their phone,” Declan said with obvious concern. “I’ll keep checking.”

Boone could tell from his expression he’d hoped for the extra manpower.

Declan retrieved his laptop, and he and Eli set up shop in the kitchen.

Boone went over to Ellie. “Everything okay? ”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. I can’t explain it, but it feels as if something is going to happen soon.”

He had felt the same tension building inside. “Whatever it is, we’ve got to figure it out before that happens.” On a whim, Boone brought up his phone and prayed cell service was working.

Though slow he was able to bring up a search bar. He typed in information regarding Israel. Since he’d been out of the CIA, he hadn’t kept as careful a watch over world events as before. What he saw had him believing this was key. “The Israeli prime minister is coming to the US.”

Ellie’s eyes widened. “You think there’s going to be an attack on him while he’s here?”

He couldn’t be sure. Foreign dignitaries were well-guarded when they were on US soil. Perhaps he was simply grasping at straws.

“I think it’s worth considering.” He told her about what Will discovered at the house next to hers. “I noticed a man and woman walking very early this morning right before we left. It seemed fishy, so JT had our chief of police check it out. There were clear signs someone had been staying there and not with the owner’s knowledge.”

“That’s probably how Dottie got out.”

Boone nodded.

Ellie appeared even more concerned. “They were so close. Why didn’t they take me out when they had the chance.”

Boone remembered what she’d told him about the men who came into the

coffeehouse. “They believe you have something, and they need it.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “What?”

“I don’t know, but whatever it is, it’s clearly important.”

She rubbed her hands down her arms. “I need something to take my mind off everything.” Her attention landed on the boxes of food. “It’s been hours since any of us ate.”

Boone went with her to the kitchen where they took stock of the food.

“I think I have everything to make cholent if we can find some stew meat.”

“I don’t know what that is, but we can check the freezer downstairs. Declan said there’s plenty of meat there.” He headed back down to the basement with her. “What exactly is cholent?”

They reached the freezer, and she opened it. “Cholent is a traditional stew normally served on Sabbath.” Ellie dug around until she found the stew meat and handed it to him. “In order to create a delicious meal that could be served without having to turn on the stove, this slow-cooking stew would be started early on Friday before Sabbath. We won’t have that long, but hopefully it will be good.”

Boone tucked the stew meat under one arm. “Need anything else from down here?”

She appeared to go over the ingredients in her head. “We have potatoes, and I think I saw the necessary seasoning.” She snapped her fingers. “Lima beans, if we can find them.” She saw his reaction and smiled. “I know—they’re not for everyone, but they do make the stew taste better.”

After searching shelves, Ellie settled on fava beans. “These are close enough.”

Upstairs, Declan and Eli worked their laptops. Both looked up as they returned.

“Did you find everything you need?” Declan asked.

“We did.” Ellie thanked him. “Is there any news on the storm?”

The way Declan’s jaw tightened confirmed it wasn’t going to be good news. “It hasn’t made landfall with any of the smaller islands in its path. Good for them, but not so much for us. Hope Island may be spared, but from the way I track the storm we won’t be as lucky.” He checked his phone. “I’m worried about the Petersons. As soon as the storm lets up, I’m going over there to check on them.”

As if being hunted by deadly terrorists wasn’t bad enough, it seemed as if everything was conspiring to bring the storm of the century, as the weather forecasters were calling it, directly to their location. The flood damage could be extensive. And they didn’t know how the enemy kept finding Ellie. That bothered him the most. There had to be something . . . he remembered she’d told him she’d kept Daniel’s engagement ring.

“What is it?” Ellie must have picked up on his unease. She finished cutting the vegetables and wiped her hands before adding them to the meat and broth already boiling. Ellie placed the top on the stew pot and lowered the temperature.

“You said you only kept Daniel’s ring and your weapon from your past?”

“That’s right. The ring and my Ruger, which has never left my possession.” She searched his face. “You don’t think . . . ?”

His brows arched. “They’re finding you somehow. It’s worth looking into.”

She wiped her hands on a towel and brought out the small dark blue jeweler's bag. Ellie removed it from its protection. "Here it is." She handed Boone the simple solitaire emerald ring that was mounted in a silver band.

The wind howled around the corner of the cabin.

"What's up?" Eli came over and lifted the lid of the pot. "This smells good."

Boone shared with both men his thoughts about the engagement ring.

Eli clearly had doubts. "I guess it's possible."

"Technology is always advancing," Declan told them. "Every intelligence agency is in a race to develop ways to spy on others. But I'm not sure how advanced Syrian Intelligence is or whether."

He turned the ring over in his hand and had no idea what to look for. "Declan, you're our tech guy."

Declan took the ring and examined it under the kitchen light. "Nothing's visible . . . see this." He pointed to a darker spot in the stone. "Looks like there may be something there or it could just be a flaw." Declan looked to Ellie. "I'll need to take it apart to be sure."

Boone could see the decision was a hard one for Ellie. She slowly gave her permission. "Daniel wouldn't want the ring to be the reason I ended up dead. Do what you have to do. I'm ready for answers."

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:52 am*

“Take her to the basement.” He ordered once the husband and wife had been successfully subdued. “If you want to see your husband and son again, you’ll cooperate.”

Her distraught eyes held her husband’s while two of his men forced the woman down the steps.

The husband fought against the men holding him in an attempt to get to his wife. “Let her go. If you hurt her . . .”

“That will depend on your cooperation,” he told the man. It had been unfortunate that his team’s stolen vessel had drifted off course amidst the strong winds and had run ashore in the rocky shallows near Breakers Island. The vessel had broken apart. The pieces swept out to sea. They’d been forced to swim ashore. Though everyone had survived, there would be no way to leave the island. When his team had picked up her signal again after a period of silence, he’d given the command to act. His men had procured a boat and headed after the signal. He’d hoped to have good news by the time the boss arrived.

Only that hadn’t worked out.

When the boss called demanding to know what was going on, he’d told what happened. What should have been a chance for him to redeem himself in the boss’s eyes had failed miserably.

The boss insisted on being brought to Breakers immediately. At that point, there hadn’t been any choice but to involve others. It had been a stroke of luck that the

couple was visiting the island. Not so lucky they'd let their son take their boat to the mainland.

After a few threats the problem was solved.

"Call him again. And if you try to warn him, you'll all die."

The fear on the father's face confirmed he believed every single word.

???

While getting answers on how they kept finding her was critical, a part of her hated the thought of seeing her ring broken apart. Silly really. Her heart believed Daniel wouldn't want her to risk her life because of it. He'd loved her too much.

"Hang on. I think I have some tools in the basement." Declan excused himself.

"Are you sure you're okay with this?" Boone had seen what she couldn't hide.

"No, but if it helps us discover how they keep finding me, then Daniel would want me to."

He smiled down at her, and she felt a little unbalanced. Something she hadn't expected to happen was taking place, and Ellie didn't know how she felt about it. Her heart softened with each smile from Boone. She felt safe with him, and she hadn't experienced that feeling in a long time.

Eli watched something on his phone screen. "Bad news. The storm is gaining strength." He looked up at them. "They're predicting a direct hit on Breakers. We need to get this place ready."



Declan returned, and Eli updated him.

“We’ll be safer in the basement. I have some leftover hurricane supplies down there from the last one that came through,” Declan said. “While this isn’t a hurricane, it’s best to treat it the same to be safe. We should have a few hours to prepare. Hopefully, long enough to enjoy that delicious-smelling stew before it hits.” He brought out a flashlight and held it close to the ring, examining the facets.

“What is that spot?” Ellie asked. Never in a million years would she have thought something might be hidden inside her ring.

“I’m not sure.” Declan looked to Ellie. “Has this been out of your sight for any amount of time?”

She told him about keeping it hidden while on a mission.

Boone frowned. “What about with Daniel? Any idea if anyone might have been able to get to it before he gave it to you?”

She thought back to what Daniel told her. He’d been so nervous when he’d proposed. “He told me our director Gideon went with him to pick it out.”

“Gideon? Wait, is that . . . ?”

“Gideon Broder. He’s the director of Mossad. Gideon was much more than that to both Daniel and me. He was like a second father. Daniel told me Gideon held onto the ring until he was ready to give it to me.”

Eli quickly typed something on his phone and drummed his fingers at the slow response. “Here it is. I thought I’d read something about this. Gideon Broder is the opposing candidate for prime minister in the next election.”

“You’re kidding.” Ellie had stopped keeping up with her former country’s news because it was too painful. “I had no idea.”

Declan managed to get the emerald free of the band. He held the stone up close to the light. “There’s definitely something in there. To get it out, I’ll need to smash the emerald.”

The last part of her life with Daniel would be gone. She fought back emotion and cleared her throat. “Do it.”

Boone squeezed her arm. “I’m sorry.”

She nodded because it was hard to speak over the lump in her throat.

Declan found a small hammer in his toolbox and placed the emerald on the table. It took three tries before the emerald fractured and something tiny fell out.

“What is that?” Eli leaned in closer as did Boone and Ellie.

She recognized it right away. “It’s a microscopic zip drive. It’s usually accessible with a special reader that can be plugged into a phone.”

Declan lifted the device into his palm. “I think I have a reader that will work.” He dug into his laptop bag and found the small device placing the drive into it and attaching it to his phone. “This might take some time. Usually getting access to the drive itself is a challenge. Who knows what we’ll find once I’m past the first hurdle.”

“Whatever is there, it isn’t how they’re finding me. That’s an information drive. We used them a lot. There’s no GPS in it.”

Boone swung her way. “I hadn’t thought about that. You’re right.”

They were back to square one.

She was convinced whatever was on the drive would hold answers about why Daniel died.

Outside, the wind slammed into the house with growing force. Windows shook.

“From what I can tell through the weather reports, this first thunderstorm moving our way is going to be a monster. We’d better get this place ready for the storm,” Declan told them. There’s a propane stove downstairs. I can’t imagine we’ll have to put sandbags out to keep the cabin from flooding, but I have some if needed.”

“Has the cabin flooded before?” Boone asked with growing concern. They were some distance from the water.

“Not during the last couple of hurricanes,” Declan told them. “Best to be prepared, though. We can transport the stew and then gather the supplies we need.”

Boone carried the pot while Ellie and the men brought down the dishes and utensils they’d need to eat.

Once the stove was going to keep the stew warm, Declan pointed them to the boards they could use.

He placed the small drive into the reader and set it on the table. “As much as I’m itching to dive into this and see what’s on it, we’d better get this place secured.”

Working together to bring the boards up from the basement, it took less than an hour to cover the windows and secure the doors .

“That should do it,” Boone dusted his hands and scrutinized their work. “Let’s get

downstairs and see if we can crack that drive.”

Ellie bit back a scream when the lights flickered as they made their way down.

“We shouldn’t have to worry about them going out with the generator,” Boone told her.

Ellie checked on the stew. Almost done. Upstairs, the wind continued to grow in strength. She claimed the chair beside Boone and watched Declan sit back in his seat, shocked. “I’m into the actual drive itself but it’s encrypted. This might take some time.” He turned the phone Ellie’s way. “Any idea what type of program is used?”

She studied the screen before telling him no. “Sorry, that’s not one of our programs. I would’ve been able to help you otherwise.”

Declan nodded. “No problem. I’m going to send this to my laptop. I have several programs to crack encryption installed on it.”

“The current problem remains. We don’t know how they’re finding us.” Eli voiced his concerns aloud.

She rubbed the back of her neck. “There’s nothing else from my past. The ring was it.”

“Everything okay there?” Boone asked when he noticed her massaging her neck.

“I’m fine.” She told him about the injection spot that had gotten infected. “It’s a constant irritant.” Even more so than the bullet scar. The beatings she’d taken through the years.

“Got it loaded on my laptop,” Declan announced. “I’ll run it through all the

programs. Hopefully, something will work.” He waited until the first decoding program was going before he joined their conversation and asked, “You’ve changed your name to something that isn’t close to your former ID?”

Ellie confirmed she had. “More times than I can remember. I went underground to get my IDs.”

“Do you think someone you went to for help could be giving the enemy your information?”

She thought about it for a second. “I don’t think so. When I first changed my name, I went to a former contact who dealt in illegal identifications, but even if they somehow found out about him, that was half a dozen name changes and a long time before I came to the US.”

Boone crossed his arms. “I can’t imagine there are a lot of illegal ways to get IDs. Did you do any online?”

“A few. But I covered my tracks. I don’t think they could have found me.”

“Maybe not, but with technology changing so quickly and with spy technology always shifting, it’s possible there was a way.” She could tell from Declan’s expression that it was a longshot. “This may take hours. I’m going to check in with my family and JT.” He stepped away.

“I think I’ll get in touch with Sashi too. See how the weather is holding up on Hope Island.” Eli stood.

When it was just her and Boone, she rubbed her neck again, a habit she’d gotten into when stressed.

“Is that injection spot bothering you again?” Boone noticed the tic.

“Sort of.” She lowered her hand. “It’s also a nervous habit.”

“Let me have a look.”

She shook her head. “I’m okay. Really.”

He gathered her hand in his. “I know it's frustrating. We’ll figure it out.”

Ellie tried to hold onto Boone’s confidence, but hers was fading again. “You said Gideon is running as opposition to the current prime minister?”

“That’s right. It was announced a few weeks back.” He searched her face. “You didn’t know.”

“No. I stopped keeping up with things from my homeland. It’s too painful.” She remembered Boone mentioned the Israeli prime minister’s upcoming visit. “Why is Prime Minister Mizrahi coming to the US anyway?”

“There’s a peace summit taking place at Camp David. He’ll be in attendance, and I believe several Arab leaders.”

“Syrian?” She asked on a hunch.

“No. We don’t have diplomatic relations with Syria.”

All the wind went out of her sails. Ellie couldn’t let go of the Israeli prime minister being in the US. Was it a big coincidence?

Gideon would report directly to the prime minister. She told Boone as much.

“There could be a connection.” He typed something into his phone. “Looks like all the dignitaries will be arriving this weekend.”

Declan came back. “If the storm keeps on course, it might graze Hope Island, but they won’t get a direct hit like we will.”

Ellie shivered. “Nothing’s changed on that course?” With everything going on, having to worry about risking their lives in a storm was the last thing they needed.

“Not so far. It’s still some ways out at sea.” Declan checked the laptop. “But it’s moving fast.”

Boone told them what he and Ellie had discussed.

“I agree with you. Finding the connection won’t be easy.”

“Sashi’s going to take Dottie and stay with JT and Rachel,” Eli told them. He cocked his head and listened to the storm. “It’s definitely getting worse out there.”

Ellie couldn’t sit. Too many things were up in the air. “The stew should be ready.” She went over and stirred it. Boone helped her spoon the thick stew into bowls they carried over to the table.

“Thank you,” Declan smiled up at her. “I can’t wait to taste this.”

“It was my grandmother’s favorite meal to serve on the Sabbath.”

Once everyone was served, Boone asked if he could pray for them.

“That would be nice.” Ellie squeezed his hand. He held onto hers while everyone around the table bowed their heads.

“Father, we thank You for your protection getting here, and we ask that You keep us all safe from the storm coming our way and from the danger Ellie is faced with. Give us answers, Lord. Help us figure out what’s happening so that we can help her. So that she can have a life uninterrupted by danger. Amen.”

Ellie was humbled by his earnest prayer. She’d never had someone pray over her before.

“Thank you,” she whispered with a catch in her voice.

Boone held her gaze. The promise she saw in his eyes swelled her heart.

“This is good,” Eli said, unaware of the emotions between Boone and Ellie. “What’s it called again?”

She pulled her hand free. “Cholent. This recipe has been in my family for decades.”

“Well, it’s wonderful. Thank you for fixing it for us.” Eli told her that Sashi had a similar dish. “I don’t think it’s as good, though if you tell her I said as much I’ll deny it.”

Everyone around the table laughed.

“There’s more if you want it.”

Eli went back for a refill.

“Once we’re finished, I think I’ll take a look at the boat and make sure it’s secured enough,” Declan told them.

“I’ll give you a hand. Boone, you should stay with Ellie.”



Once the meal ended, Boone helped her carry the dishes upstairs to clean.

Declan pried the board covering the door free. He and Eli went out into the storm.

Ellie finished washing the last bowl and poured the remainder of the stew into a container before washing the pot. Her fingers shook every time a gust of wind rattled the windows.

“Hey, it’s going to be okay,” Boone took the pot from her and set it down, then gathered her close. “Declan and Eli have been through several hurricanes before. They know what they’re doing.”

She leaned her head against his chest, a sigh escaping. “I know. It’s not just the storm.” She closed her eyes, listening to the steady beat of his heart against her ear while trying to fight this feeling growing inside of her whenever she was close to Boone. Her life was in chaos. She’d brought her troubles to him and others. Did she really think this time would be different? That the truth behind Daniel’s death would be solved after so many years?

“It will be okay.” He pulled back so that he could look into her eyes.

“How can you be so certain? I’ve lived with this for seven years, Boone. I’m the one my people believed killed Daniel.”

“But you didn’t. We both know this.”

“After all the things you’ve seen during your time with the CIA, how could you have so much hope?” she asked him.

“Because I trust God and I know you.”

When she would have pulled away, he held her there. “You are a good person, Ellie,” he whispered, tugging her closer.

Tears filled her eyes. His blurry face swam before her. “I don’t feel good. I haven’t felt this way in a long time.”

He tipped her chin back and brushed tears from her cheeks. “You’ve been thrown into something that no one should have to go through simply for some person’s gain.”

Was it that simple?

“I want it to be over. Whatever we find out, it’s better than not knowing.”

“It will be over. Soon.”

She looked into his eyes and held her breath. He was going to kiss her, and she wanted that so much.

Boone lowered his head, his lips touching hers.

A sob escaped as she leaned into him and kissed him back. No matter what the future held, she would remember this moment forever.

What sounded like a crash coming from outside broke them apart.

Ellie’s breathing was ragged, matching Boone’s. “What was that?”

“I don’t know. Stay here and let me check it out.”

“I’m coming with you.” She grabbed her weapon from where it was hidden. Boone pushed her behind him as they stepped out into the night. The wind screamed so loud

it was impossible to hear anything.

Boone clicked on his flashlight and scanned the area. A small storage building nearby had a tree limb through its window.

Ellie bent over in relief. “We should check on Declan and Eli. The storm’s really picking up.”

The lightning frequency had increased. Seconds ticked by before the answering thunder confirmed the storm would strike much sooner than expected.

Boone hesitated. He was worried about her but gave in because of his friends. “You’re right.”

The wind almost blew them over as they walked. Ellie looped her arm through his, using his strength to stay on her feet.

As they neared the pier, Ellie spotted the two men, but something was missing. The boat. “It’s gone.”

Declan saw them coming and let Eli know.

“What happened?” Boone asked as they neared.

“I’m guessing the surges broke the ropes free,” Declan told them. “There are some swells that have to be close to fourteen feet. If this keeps up, the dock will go next. The vessel’s probably halfway out to sea by now. It took the rope with it, too. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“But it didn’t damage the dock’s pilings . . .” Ellie pointed out. Something else had done that. Or someone.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:52 am*

Ellie could tell Boone was trying not to show his concern.

“There’s nothing we can do until the storm passes,” he told her. “We should call JT and tell him we will need a way off the island.”

“What brought you two out?” Eli asked as they all started back for the cabin.

“We heard a crash and were worried about you.” Boone explained about the tree limb.

The rain picked up into a deluge.

“We need to get back to the cabin. There’s nothing we can do here until the storm passes. We may lose phone service soon. I want to let JT know what’s happening.” Declan stepped back inside the house. The others followed. Eli and Boone secured the door.

“That should hold it.” Boone double checked to be certain. “Let’s get downstairs.”

Ellie couldn’t explain why but she slipped her hand into Boone’s as they started down the steps.

Declan checked that the laptop hadn’t hit on a program to decode the drive while Boone made the call to JT placing it on speaker.

The static on the line was so loud it was hard to hear.

“What’s happening there? From the radar, it looks as if the brunt of the storm is closing in on your location. How are you all holding up? ”

“We’re fine.” Boone told him about the boat being gone. “We have no means of leaving, not that it’s possible with what’s coming.”

“I’ll have a boat on standby. As soon as it’s safe, we’ll come get you all. Anything new on the program?”

Boone told him no. “We’re waiting for something to work.”

“Let’s hope your software hits on something soon. We really need answers. Keep checking in with us. You’re all in our prayers.” The call ended. The silence left in its wake hung heavy with tension. They were stuck here on a small island with a storm barreling down on them and no way to escape.

Ellie rubbed the back of her neck again. The small knot was a constant reminder of the night Daniel died. A physical scar to match the one on her heart.

“Are you okay?” Boone had been keeping a close eye on her. She realized he picked up on her anxiety.

She dropped her hand. “I’m fine. Just a reminder from that night.” She told him more about the knot. “I had an allergic reaction to whatever they gave me. It took weeks for the spot to heal.”

Ellie’s attention went to the Ruger that she’d placed on the table. “Wait, what about my gun?”

Boone didn’t follow right away. “What about it?”

“They keep finding me. I never thought about them tracking me by some device until now. What if there is something planted in the Ruger?”

Boone held her gaze for the longest moment before he whipped toward his team members. “Is it possible?”

Both men had been listening. “Maybe, but it would be subject to a certain range as well as the weather.” Eli picked up the weapon. “Do you mind if we take a look at it?”

Ellie shook her head. “Whatever you need to do.”

Eli removed the magazine and ejected the round from the chamber. “It’s been a while since I’ve had to take one of these apart. Let’s see if I remember how.”

Ellie slipped into the chair across from him. “It’s pretty basic. I’ve had it apart before, and I didn’t find anything, but I wasn’t really looking for a tracking device.”

Eli handed it to her and Ellie quickly dismantled the weapon.

“That was fast.” Eli picked up the barrel and examined it closely.

Boone claimed the seat beside Ellie and touched the grip. “What is this?”

She noticed him looking at the manufacturer’s emblem on the side. “That’s the Ruger emblem. A bird then the R for Ruger.”

He held the grip up for a closer look. “Yeah, but this one is different.”

Ellie couldn’t explain. She’d owned the gun most of her adult life. It was her weapon of choice for her career. The gun was never out of her reach.

Boone gently worked the emblem free to reveal a minuscule compartment. “There’s something in here.” He turned the grip over and something metal hit the table. He let out a low whistle, his attention capturing hers. “I’m guessing that’s how they keep finding you.” He held up the smallest tracking device Ellie had ever seen. It was smaller than the head of a pencil.

Declan and Eli both leaned over his shoulder. “I’ve never seen one that small,” Declan told them. “As much as I’d love to dissect it, we need to destroy it. I’m hoping with the storm whoever is tracking you won’t be able to pick up the signal.”

Boone handed it to him, and he tossed it into the fire.

Ellie was stunned. “I can’t believe it. I’ve taken the Ruger apart many times. I missed looking beneath the emblem. All these years, and it was right there with me.”

“I’m surprised it held up for so long,” Eli commented. “At least, we know we’re safe for now. That gives us some breathing room to figure out what’s on the drive and try to understand how it’s connected to the peace summit taking place at Camp David.”

Ellie couldn’t believe it. She of all people should have realized they had some way of tracking her. She never thought to look at the weapon she carried. “I don’t understand how they got the tracker inside the weapon. I hid it in my boot on the night of the attack. Not even Daniel knew I carried it.”

Boone frowned. “Maybe they searched you before they put you in the box?”

Maybe, but she didn’t buy it. “I had it concealed. It would have to be a pretty thorough search to find it, and I can’t imagine they had that much time.” It was the only explanation that made sense, and she couldn’t let it go.

Declan’s computer dinged, and he hurried over. “I’ve got a hit.” His eyes widened.

“This is something along the lines of what the NSA uses only slightly different. It may take the program a while to work through the difference.”

Ellie latched onto the National Security Agency. It didn't add up. “Why would Syrian Intelligence be using an encryption matching NSA?”

“Maybe it wasn't put there by Syrian Intelligence,” Eli said.

Ellie couldn't make the connection. “Then who? Daniel and I were there to meet with his contact within the Syrian Intelligence Agency that was believed to have gotten one of our agents to work for them. Daniel said his contact was working on getting the name of the traitor inside Mossad.”

“It would stand to reason that Syrian Intelligence wouldn't want that cover blown,” Boone said. “They probably blackmailed whoever this person is. They wouldn't want to lose that hook inside Mossad.”

A disturbing thought occurred. “What if it was my own team who planted the tracker?”

All eyes were on her. Boone took up her line of thought. “You think this is Mossad technology used against you?”

“It's possible. Our tech department was working with some of the most cutting-edge technology for its time. What if the real mole in Mossad planted the tracker because he knew what would happen that night?”

Declan kept a close eye on the laptop as the decoding program continued to work. “What happened to the informant within Syrian Intelligence?”

Ellie told them what she'd learned from one of her contacts. “ They found his body



not far from the building where Daniel and I were to meet up with him. I'm sure he died before the attack on us."

"They were tying up loose ends," Eli said. "They probably figured out he was giving away secrets and tortured him until he gave up the name of who he worked with at Mossad and where the meet would take place."

Ellie appeared to have no doubt. "They killed Daniel because of something his contact might have told him."

"And they framed you because the rumor was out that there was a mole within Mossad. You made the perfect patsy," Boone said gently.

She shook her head. "I have no idea what Daniel might have died for. Or what is on that drive."

"Whatever it is, we'll figure it out." Declan glanced at his laptop. "We're about 5 percent along in the decoding process."

Even from the safety of the basement, the storm's rampage could be heard. Though there weren't any windows, for which Ellie was grateful, the rain battered down on their location hard enough to cause waves of concern.

"I'm going to check on the water level outside." Declan scraped back his chair, grating along Ellie's nerves.

"I'll come with you." Eli rose and followed his friend upstairs.

"I can't believe this." Ellie couldn't stay seated any longer. She stood and paced the room. "All this time they've had easy access to me. Why didn't they kill me from the start? If I'd died in that box, the truth would have died with me. I would have gone

down as a traitor. The mole would be protected, and no one would be the wiser.”

Boone stood as well. “My guess, it’s whatever was hidden inside the ring—” Boone stopped speaking.

“What?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “Did you have the ring with you that night?”

Ellie didn’t understand where he was headed. “No. I rarely wore it during work.”

“Where was it?”

She had kept it in a safe deposit box whenever she was working. She told him as much.

“Under your name?”

“No.” The confusion cleared away. “No, under an alias. I kept it there along with some money and an ID under the alias in case . . .”

He stopped beside her. “That has to be it. They needed you alive to get the ring’s location. Whatever is on it is important to someone.”

There was one flaw in his theory. “They tried to kill me, remember?”

“Or did they?”

“You think they wanted me to believe I was being set up so I could lead them to the ring?”

“It makes sense. Think about it. They didn’t find the weapon you had hidden. That’s a rookie mistake. You were supposed to escape.”

“They shot at me . . . but it was only a shoulder wound.”

“You’re smart, Ellie, and you’ve been a spy for a while. It would have to appear believable.”

“I see what you’re saying, but they didn’t follow me.”

“Something must have prevented it. Maybe they were watching your place expecting you to show up there.”

She told him about going to Gideon for help. “He was my mentor. He trained me. Gideon told me he couldn’t help me. He left me out in the cold, and I’ve spent the last seven years blaming myself for what happened to Daniel.” And wishing she were the one to die that night instead.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:52 am*

“It wasn’t your fault.” Boone clasped her hand. “You’re just as much a victim of that night as Daniel.”

Her mouth twisted. “It doesn’t feel that way. I can’t help but keep thinking if I’d done one thing differently none of this would have happened.”

He didn’t understand. “What do you mean?”

“The day of the meeting Daniel became anxious. I’ve never seen him like that. He told me he had a bad feeling and that he thought we should call off the meet.” She had been the one to push for the go-ahead. “I should have listened to Daniel. If I had, his asset’s body would have been found and we would know something had been wrong.”

“Or you might not have found the body until much later.” Boone brought her hands together in his. “You can’t go back and second-guess things, Ellie. Believe me, I’ve done my fair share, and all it does is make life miserable. You did what you thought was best.”

He kissed her hands and let her go.

“Thank you.” Ellie touched his cheek. “I’ve lived on my own for so long it’s easy to stay inside my head and only see things from one perspective.”

Boone smiled down at her. “I’ve been there. But you’re not alone anymore, Ellie. You have people who care about you. I care,” he added softly, and her heart did a crazy little flip.

“I care about you too.” She hadn’t said those words since Daniel. The thought of her former fiancé brought the seriousness back into focus. Daniel had died because of whatever was contained on that drive. And the enemy wanted it.

The basement door opened, drawing both Ellie and Boone’s attention.

Ellie could tell from Declan’s expression things were bad.

“The dock’s completely under water,” Declan said as he and Eli hurried down the steps. “So far the water hasn’t reached us but it’s only a matter of time.”

“What can we do to help?” Ellie recalled Declan mentioning sandbags.

“Grab as many bags as you can. We’ll put them in front of the cabin as a barrier. There are more in the storage shed.”

Carrying two of the thirty-to-fifty-pound bags of sand was a challenge to get up the stairs.

Declan directed them where to place the bags. Once the sandbags from the basement were in place, they used the ones from the shed.

By the time they’d finished, everyone was drenched with rain.

Declan surveyed the wall of sandbags. “Let’s hope it holds.” Flashes of lightning split the sky. “We’ve done everything we can. Let’s get back inside.”

Ellie retrieved towels to dry off. “I’m going to make some coffee to warm us up.”

Rounds of gratitude followed her offer.

“I’ll help.” Boone hunted around the cabinets until he found the coffee while she poured water into the pot.

“I’m going to move everything upstairs. If the water breaks through those bags, the basement will flood,” Declan told them. “We can’t afford for everything on the drive to be destroyed. He turned to Eli. “Give me a hand?”

Eli nodded and went along with him.

“I can’t believe this is happening.” Ellie shivered. “You think those bags will hold back the water?”

Boone wanted to be positive for her. “I don’t know. I sure hope so. It sounds like the water level is rising quickly.”

Ellie cast a troubled look toward the door. “This is the last thing we needed to happen.”

The corners of his mouth lifted into a smile. “You’re right, but we’ll get through it.” Yet he wasn’t so sure.

Eli and Declan carried laptops upstairs and placed them on the table.

Once the coffee finished brewing, Boone grabbed a tray and placed cups, cream, and sugar on it. Ellie poured the hot liquid into cups and carried the tray over to the kitchen table, where Eli watched the screen over Declan’s shoulder.

“Something happen?” Boone set the tray down and went over to look.

“We have the first look at what’s on the drive, and it isn’t good.” Declan pointed to the screen, which showed what appeared to be surveillance photos taken at night.

Boone didn't recognize the man, but he was leaning against a car smiling at a woman.

"That's Gideon." Ellie pointed to the man on the screen.

Boone shot her a look. "Really? He looks different. Who's the woman?"

Ellie shook her head. "I have no idea. It's not Gideon's wife, Seraphina."

"Maybe he's being blackmailed," Boone concluded with a frown. "But if so, then the information we have here is only a copy. Someone would have the original in a safe place."

Ellie told him maybe. "Gideon was once one of the best agents Mossad ever had. What if he figured out the identity of the person blackmailing him and destroyed the information?"

"Then how did it get on a drive in your ring?" Boone faced her and could see she was trying to work it out and couldn't.

"I don't know."

"What about Daniel?" He hadn't wanted to bring her dead fiancé into the conversation, but it was suspicious that blackmail information would be found in the engagement ring Daniel gave her.

Her eyes sparked anger. "He wasn't involved. Daniel wouldn't blackmail Gideon. They were close."

"Unless he didn't have a choice," Eli said quietly. "It's possible he was a pawn in whatever game is playing out."

Ellie wasn't ready to believe it yet. "Then why kill him?"

"He could have tipped Gideon off." Boone watched as more information appeared on the screen. "Who is that?"

Declan blew the next photo up. "That's the current prime minister." The man appeared to be meeting with someone covertly.

"Do you recognize that person?"

Ellie leaned forward. "I don't."

"What is going on here?" Boone couldn't understand what he was seeing.

"While the program continues decoding, I'm running facial recognition on the woman and this new person." Declan copied the female's photo and then popped it into the facial recognition program. It didn't take long to get a hit and Declan sat back in his chair. "Whoa. She's a spy . . . or at least she was a spy. Meet Neesa Aberman."

"I can't believe I didn't see it before," Ellie said with her eyes glued to the screen. "Neesa's a legend. She and Gideon were partners back in the day. After he became director, she kind of did her own thing. But she supposedly died while on a mission in Iran almost twenty years ago."



*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:52 am*

“I guess it’s possible this was taken before she would have died, but I don’t think so.” Declan blew up the photo. “See the car she and Gideon are standing near? That’s at least a 2016 Mercedes.” He tapped the screen. “She was still alive after her supposed death. What was Gideon hiding?”

“I wish I knew.” Ellie was as baffled as the rest of them.

“Let’s see who the other man is.” Declan captured the mystery man’s image and ran it through the facial recognition program. The identity was shocking. “That’s a high-up official in Syrian Intelligence. What’s the connection?”

Boone rubbed the back of his neck. “We have a former Mossad agent who is supposed to be dead but is alive meeting with the director of Mossad.” He stopped. “What if it isn’t something nefarious, but Gideon ordered her to go deep undercover for a purpose?”

“The only question is why?” Ellie said with a sigh. “And how is it connected to the Syrian Intelligence agent? Let’s hope there are more answers in the file.”

“I’m going to check in with the office,” Boone told them after taking a slug of coffee. Once it connected, he put it on speaker.

The static on the line made it difficult to hear JT.

“JT, can you hear me?” Boone said over the noise.

“I’ve got you, Boone. Go ahead.”

“I guess even using the best high-tech boosters available and having a cell tower right on the island doesn’t eliminate service from being susceptible to the weather.” Boone attempted a laugh.

“Unfortunately, no. But I can make out what you’re saying. How’s the storm?” JT asked.

Boone told him about the rising water level. “Let’s hope we don’t have to try and evacuate. I don’t think there’s another place to go. Unless we go to the cabin of Declan’s friends, and it might have the same problem.”

“Anything on the device?” JT spoke to someone. “Bryce and his wife are here. Everyone’s hunkered down at the office. Looks like most of the storm is going to miss us. That’s good news anyway.”

Declan told him what they’d found so far.

“Wow, I can’t even begin to understand what’s happening or its importance to Ellie.”

Boone looked her way before answering. “None of us understand either. I’m sure there are answers on the drive.”

Ellie really needed to believe that.

“How are things in town? Has there been any more flooding?”

“Nothing more. Most of the water is receding. I checked in with Hank earlier. Things are good at the coffeehouse. Thankfully, there wasn’t any significant damage.”

“Any further spotting of those men from earlier?” Ellie asked.

JT told her no. “Not a peep. I’m thinking they’re holding up somewhere until the weather passes. As we suspected, the address that was given on the driver’s license to secure the rental car was a bust. The house had been abandoned for years.”

No surprise to Ellie. “I don’t suppose there were any prints left at the coffeehouse?”

“Lots but none that would identify our Arab visitors.”

“We really have no idea who sent them.” She tried not to lose hope.

“It appears so. On the bright side, the weather is predicting that the storm currently camping out over Breakers should be moving away soon. ”

It was something.

“Hopefully, we’ll be in touch with more information on the drive,” Delcan told him.

“Appreciate it. Bryce and I are on standby. As soon as you’re in the clear, we’re coming to you. I’ll leave Rachel and Janine to man the business. We can stay as long as it takes to unravel the truth and get Ellie answers. I have a feeling we’re going to need all the help we can get to figure this puzzle out.”

Boone ended the call.

Help would be on the way soon. So far, all they had to battle was the weather. Would that change? Her spy instincts told her something big was in the works and they’d better figure it out soon, otherwise lives might be lost.

She’d been in the crosshairs of a dangerous plot for years. Was it all because of what was hidden in the engagement ring given to her by someone she cared about?

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. A nervous habit she couldn't break.

She looked up and noticed Boone watching her. Even though they'd only known each other for a short amount of time, there was something about him that had gotten past the walls she'd built around her heart to protect it. Under the worst possible circumstances, she'd developed feelings for Boone. Her stomach clenched at the thought of something happening to him because she'd gotten him involved in her problem.

"This is taking longer than the previous data." Declan frowned at the laptop screen. I have a feeling this next part will be data rich and probably a more detailed encryption was used to protect what's there."

"So far, we have a former Mossad agent who is supposed to be dead, only she isn't. Clearly your director knew about it and covered it up." Boone wondered aloud why Gideon would do such a thing and risk his career. "The damage could be astronomical. At the very least, the director of Mossad could be removed from office. Worse, tried as a traitor."

Ellie rejected the suggestion of her director's involvement. "I know Gideon. He would never deliberately keep something like this a secret. He and I were close, but when I went to him for help, he told me he had to turn me in. There's more to the story than we know. Maybe she's deep undercover and the only way to make the cover believable was by faking her death."

"It's possible, I guess. You know him better than I do." Boone couldn't hide his doubts. "Someone, and I'm guessing it's an enemy of Israel, has been watching him and has proof that she's still alive and he knows it. They might believe there's a play there for blackmail. What I don't understand is why they included one of the top leaders of Syrian Intelligence."

“I agree with Boone,” Eli interjected. “From what you’ve told us, Ellie, we have to assume the people coming after you are part of Syrian Intelligence. If so, then the photo of one of their leaders doesn’t add up.”

“Unless he’s being investigated.” Declan said quietly. “And I think I have proof that might be the case.”

“You have more information?” Ellie rose and went over to view the laptop with the others.

“I do. This informant appears to be identified only by the code name of A. I’m guessing A is Issam Rafiq, the Syrian Intelligence leader seen with the prime minister. Clearly, he’s been under surveillance for some time. The writer of this report seems to believe he may be involved with someone who could compromise his decisions.”

“Someone like Neesa,” Ellie added, shaking her head. “If Neesa ended up going deep undercover to get in with Issam, she would have changed her look, which explains the way she looks in the photo with Gideon. What I don’t understand is why wait seven years to bring down Issam?”

“Maybe the person who gathered this information wasn’t working for Syrian Intelligence but Mossad.”

Ellie slapped her forehead. “That’s it. These are Gideon’s files. Gideon put this information on the drive for protection.” All eyes turned to her.

“Why would the director of Mossad feel the need to hide sensitive information?” Boone asked, clearly confused. “There would have to be a better way to protect the intelligence.”

“Unless he worried someone from our team was betraying him.” She paced the room. “This is just a theory, but what if this was such an important mission that Gideon didn’t tell anyone about it. He kept the information secret. Maybe he believed there was a breach within our team and he couldn’t afford to let the surveillance fall into the hands of anyone else.”

“What about hiding the device in your engagement ring? I’m thinking he had someone from your team involved.”

Boone was right. “It had to be Daniel. Gideon trusted Daniel. He would have made sure Daniel knew about the information hidden in my ring.”

“It may be why Daniel was killed. Somehow, details got out that the information existed but perhaps without naming names.”

If so, the information gathered by Gideon seven years earlier had resulted in the death of his right-hand man and had sent Ellie undercover on the run for her life.

Ellie noticed something she hadn’t before. “The storm’s letting up.”

Boone cocked his head. “You’re right. The rain’s definitely lessening.”

“I want to check on the sandbags.” Declan rose and then stopped because of something on his computer screen. “That’s it. The decoding program is finished. There’s no more information available.”

Ellie couldn’t believe it. All they had were a couple of photos and some data that didn’t clear up anything. “Now what? We don’t know what any of this means. All we can do is speculate.”

Declan shook his head. “We really need to reach Gideon. Maybe he can fill in some

of the blanks. After so long, the data here might not even be relevant.”

Outside, the weather had drastically changed. Off in the distance, lightning was barely visible. The responding thunder confirmed the storm was losing intensity. A gentle rain replaced the earlier deluge.

“Looks like the sandbags held.” Boone pointed to the water that had reached the bags but hadn’t broken through.

“Thank You, God,” Declan exclaimed. “It’ll take a while for the water level to recede. Hopefully by daybreak, we can figure out a place for JT and Bryce to dock.”

“I think we should loop the team into what we’ve been discussing.” Boone looked to Ellie. “We could use some fresh input.”

“That’s a good idea. First, I’d like to make sure the Petersons are okay. I’ll be back soon.” Before Declan had taken a single step, Boone stopped him. He couldn’t explain it, but it didn’t seem wise for one person to be wandering through the woods alone. There could be more dangers than what was left behind by the storm. “We should all go with you.”

Declan picked up on Boone’s concerns and agreed. “You’re right. There could be downed trees. I’ll grab a chainsaw from the storage shed first.”

They all donned jackets and headed out, not knowing what they might find.

Dead limbs that had come down in the storm littered the woods, making the going slow. Finally, they reached the Petersons’ cabin, and not a single light showed through the curtains.

“They couldn’t have left.” Declan reasoned to himself. He stepped up on the porch

and tried the doors. “Locked.” The rear entrance proved the same. All the curtains were drawn. “I don’t get it.”

“Maybe they’re getting ready to leave.” Boone tried not to give in to the panic that was growing inside. “Where’s their boat docked?”

“At the end of that path.” Declan led the way down to the water, where a boat sat. He stopped dead in his tracks. “Something’s wrong.”

As they neared, it became evident that the boat had sustained irreversible damage when it slammed against the rocky shore.

“If they didn’t leave the island, where are they?” Eli shone his flashlight over it, examining the damage.

“I don’t know. Maybe they saw the damage and called a friend to pick them up.”

Boone wasn’t buying it. “Wouldn’t they have checked in with you first?”

Declan rubbed the back of his neck. “You’d think. I left them a message, unless they didn’t get it because of the weather.” He appeared worried about his friends, with good cause. “It’s almost daylight, and the weather is clearing. I’ll keep trying them. If we don’t get an answer by time the sun rises, I say we find a way inside.”

Boone agreed. Something was off.

As they walked back to the cabin, Declan tried Robert Petersons’ number again. He stopped suddenly. “Robert?”

Everyone gathered around.



Declan put the call on speaker. “Buddy, I’ve been worried about you.”

Robert’s laugh sounded forced. “Sorry for the concern. We left as soon as the storm broke.”

Declan’s brows rose. “How’d you get out of here? Your boat’s destroyed.”

“Carter. He was on the mainland with our second boat. How’s the damage to your place? I didn’t realize you and Wynona were here, otherwise we’d have offered you a ride.”

Declan didn’t correct him, which drew Boone’s attention. “We’re safe. Glad you made it off the island okay.”

Robert thanked him and ended the call.

“Something’s off. That boat that ran ashore. It didn’t look like theirs,” Declan said once the call was over. “I’m pretty sure he’s lying.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:52 am*

Ellie had thought the same. “Why do you think he’d lie to you?”

“I don’t know, but I’m going to call Carter. Maybe he can shed some light on what’s happening.” Before he could make the call, his cell phone rang. “It’s Carter.” Declan looked around at each of them before answering. The noise in the background seemed to back up the story his father gave. “Hey, brother. I was just talking to your dad.”

“Yeah, I know. Dad’s here with me. His battery’s low so he asked me to call you back and make sure I didn’t need to come back for you.”

Declan blew out a breath. “No, man, we have help on the way. I’m glad you were close enough to pick up your mom and dad. Where are the rest of the kids?”

“They didn’t come with my parents. They’re all getting older. Most are busy with college or work. It’s a rare thing to get us all together on the island anymore.”

“I get that. Have a safe trip back, Carter.” Declan signed off and stuffed the phone into his pocket.

Even though Ellie didn’t know Declan’s friends, something about the story didn’t ring true.

A search inside Declan’s cabin proved the structure had withstood the storm without suffering any damage.

Once the storm-proofing was removed, Eli called JT and placed the phone on speaker so they all could listen and respond .

“How are you all holding up?” JT had answered first ring. “I’m here with Bryce and the rest of our family members. Things got a little hairy here. We were expecting the boardwalk to flood, but it looks like we’re spared. Declan, Wynona is fine, and so is Sashi.”

“That’s good to hear.” Declan updated them on the damage to the island. “We’ll know more in the morning. I’m hoping the other side of the island didn’t suffer as much damage as we did over here. The pier is gone. At first light, I’ll check to make sure we have a place for you to dock.”

“Sounds good. Anything new on the encryption?”

Declan told him yes. “And it’s even more confusing than we initially thought.” He shared what had been uncovered. “The encryption process is over. That’s all we have.”

JT sighed. “Gideon’s fingerprints are all over this. Ellie, you know Gideon better than anyone. What are your thoughts on his loyalty?”

The Gideon she knew would never betray his country, yet if the past seven years had taught her anything, it was things were not what they seemed. She did her best to stay unbiased as she explained Gideon had been a war hero who worked his way up through the ranks to become director of Mossad.

“I can’t see him betraying Israel for money.” Ellie pulled out the chair next to Boone. He reached for her hand under the table and clasped it.

“I know someone we can trust to reach out to Gideon.” Boone told them about his contact within Mossad.

“With your permission, I think we need to give it a try,” JT said while Ellie hesitated.

Everyone waited for her to respond.

Fear trailed down her spine. What if she made the wrong decision? What if reaching out to Gideon brought everything crumbling around her.

“It’ll be okay,” Boone said softly and squeezed her arm. “I promise we are not going to let anything happen to you.”

She’d trusted him with so much already and Boone had proved himself to be worthy of her trust. “Okay. Do it.”

Boone smiled as if realizing the battle she’d fought just to give her approval. “I’ll give my friend a call as soon as we’re finished here.”

She nodded and clutched her hands tight because they were shaking.

“Good.” JT told them they were about an hour out.

Declan explained about what happened with his friend. “There was something in Robert’s voice that didn’t sound right to me.”

Eli and Boone seconded his assessment.

“Let’s hope it’s just worry because of the storm. As soon as we get there, I’d say it’s a good idea if we go inside to make sure. Until then, keep your eyes open. This thing just keeps getting more bizarre.”

The call ended. Ellie felt as if the walls were closing in. Sitting still with so much up in the air became impossible. She stood and stretched out kinks from her shoulders then went to put on a fresh pot of coffee.

“You should try and get some sleep.”

Ellie turned at the sound of Boone’s voice.

The concern on his face was all for her. For the first time since she’d lost Daniel she had hope, and that scared her. Boone and the rest of the Hope Island Securities team were doing everything they could to get her answers. But what if the answers weren’t there to get? What if she was destined to spend the rest of her life on the run?

“I’m too keyed up.” She pointed to the coffeemaker. “The next best thing.”

He chuckled. “I get it. Caffeine and adrenaline were the only things to keep me going during many of my missions.”

She looked at him curiously. “Do you miss the adrenaline rush?” She hadn’t had the opportunity to miss being away from the spy game. At times, she’d think about what life would be like if she wasn’t running for her life.

“Sometimes,” he admitted while she poured them coffee. “For a long time after I left the service I couldn’t seem to settle down. It’s hard going from those kinds of life-and-death situations to being a civilian.”

“I can imagine.” She pointed to the living room. “Want to sit for a while?” The facts they knew kept swirling around in her head, not making sense.

She and Boone sat on the sofa. Ellie leaned her head back and closed her eyes. She listened to him speak about some of the things he’d witnessed while on a mission.

Before what happened to her, Ellie never really gave much thought to those caught in the crosshairs of the spy world. She focused on her target. Believed what she was doing would make her country safer. Now, it felt as if everything she’d once believed

in was about to crumble around her.

“Do you ever wonder if it’s worth it?” she asked. The price for freedom and safety was high in cost in the lives of those caught in the middle.

Boone settled his head against the sofa and turned his face her way. “Every day.”

The pain she witnessed tore at her heart. Though not hunted physically, Boone would always be haunted by the things he’d done for his country.

She touched his cheek. “You did what you had to do.”

He closed his eyes and covered her hand with his. “I did. It doesn’t make it any easier.”

Ellie leaned her head against his shoulder. She didn’t want to try and define what was happening between them. She just wanted to sit here with him in this moment of peace knowing that for now she didn’t have to run.

He still held her hand. The voices in the other room faded into the background like the worries plaguing her mind. For this second in time, she knew peace.

Ellie wasn’t sure what jarred her from the tranquility. Just the faintest of sounds. But enough out of place that it had her sitting up.

“Did you hear that?”

Boone confirmed he had.

She jumped to her feet with him. While she listened, something else made it clear the sound hadn’t been a figment. “That’s smoke.”

???

“We need her alive. Understood.” The boss’s dark eyes bored into him. The warning was as clear as if reading his mind. “Not a hair on her head will be touched until we have the information.”

He dug his hands into his palms but managed a confirming nod.

“Good. Ignite the fuel. When the others flee the premises, you can kill them. We need her.”

The men struck matches and tossed them onto the soaked logs of the cabin.

Whoosh. Even though the rain had drenched everything on the island, with that much fuel the house wouldn’t stand a chance. Soon, flames lit up the place. He watched and waited for the first person to leave. Over the crackling fire, nothing could be heard. Men were stationed at the rear of the house in case they tried to escape that direction.

There’s no way out for you, Ayla. Give yourself up. Accept your punishment. Die like you should have died the last time he and his men found her.

You’ve made me look like a fool for the last time.

It would be his pleasure to end her existence when the time came, and it wouldn’t come quickly. He’d take his time. Make sure she begged and pleaded for her life. He rubbed his hands together in anticipation. She’d understand what true pain really felt like!

???

“It’s at the front of the cabin.” Boone pulled her along with him to the kitchen and

pointed to the front. “The place is on fire.”

“There’s a hose around the side of the house,” Declan told them. “Hopefully, it will reach the fire. ”

Boone pulled his weapon, grabbing everyone’s attention. “There’s something off. The lightning passed some time ago. There hadn’t been any trace of a fire before when we were outside.”

“You’re right. It could be a setup.” Declan grabbed a pillow from the sofa and tossed it outside. A wealth of gunfire confirmed the truth.

“They’ve found us.” Ellie couldn’t believe with all the precautions they’d taken by destroying the tracking device, they’d found it too late.

“I’m calling JT. He and Bryce need to know they’re walking into a trap.” Boone grabbed his phone and made the call.

Eli hurried to the back entrance. “We’re surrounded.” He turned to deliver the disturbing news when shots rang out. The window above the sink shattered. One bullet hit its mark. Eli grabbed for his shoulder, the force of the shot knocking him off his feet.

Ellie screamed.

Declan ducked low and pulled his friend out of the line of fire.

“I’ve got to go,” Boone said into the phone and ended the call.

“How close are they? We’re going to need backup.” Declan opened Eli’s shirt to examine the injury. “It’s not so bad, buddy. The bullet went straight through.”



Boone's silence had Ellie turning his way. "What's wrong? Something happened."

"It's Gideon. He's been found dead in his hotel room. An overdose. Apparently by his own hand."

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:52 am*

The bottom dropped out of her world. Ellie couldn't stop shaking her head. "That's not possible. He wouldn't."

His eyes filled with sympathy. "It's true, Ellie. He's dead."

While she tried to wrap her head around it, more shots coming from the back of the house had Boone grabbing her and tugging her to a safer spot.

At the front of the house, the fire blazed.

"It won't take those flames long to engulf the house," Declan said, watching as the front window shattered under the intense heat. "They're waiting to pick us off out back. If we stay, the smoke will get us." He pointed to the stairs. "The attic. There's a window."

The suggestion did nothing to settle Ellie's fears, but it might be their only chance.

Keeping low, Declan lowered the ladder leading to the attic. He went up first and then, with the help of Boone, got Eli up.

"You go next." Boone waited while she climbed the rungs before starting up.

More windows blew with the heat. Boone reached the attic and shut the door.

"We don't have much time," Boone warned.

Declan hurried to the side of the window and looked down. "I don't see anyone down

there. This window faces the side of the house. I'm hoping they're watching the back."

Ellie looked below. "That's quite a drop. I realize we don't have a choice, but there's a real chance someone will break a leg."

Declan actually smiled. "We'll use this." A rope ladder had been tucked beneath the window. He unlocked the window and shoved at it until it lifted.

Down below, the back door of the kitchen gave way under the weight of someone throwing their body against it.

"We're out of time. They're breaching the house." Declan tossed the ladder down and climbed over the windowsill. "I'll go first. Eli, can you make it with your shoulder?"

"I can make it."

Ellie watched as Declan descended the ladder and worried there'd be men waiting below to take him out.

Declan reached the ground. Eli headed down.

So far so good.

"Search the entire house." An accented voice yelled over the roaring fire, which was gaining strength.

"Go, Ellie. They'll see the attic door soon enough. Hurry. I'm going to try and secure the door." Boone helped her over the side and then disappeared from her line of sight.

Ellie hesitated. She didn't want to leave him.

While she hesitated, Boone's face appeared above her again. "Hurry, Ellie."

Relieved, she rushed down the rope rungs as fast as she could. When she was close to the ground, Boone followed. A crashing noise from above confirmed their attackers had found the door to the attic.

Ellie jumped the rest of the way down and waited while Boone traversed the ladder.

Before he reached the ground, several men appeared in the window above.

"Boone!" she called, grabbing his attention. "Watch out."

His head jerked back to the window. One of the men fired his weapon. Boone grabbed his side and half climbed, half fell the rest of the way down.

Ellie rushed forward to catch him, his weight almost taking her to the ground.

The men above them continued to shoot.

"We've got to go. Now." Declan helped Boone out of the line of fire while Ellie returned shots.

The two men ducked back.

She had no doubt time was running out. Ellie ran after the men, catching up. "Which way to the dock where JT will meet us?"

"Straight through there." Declan led the way while Ellie kept watch behind them. The flames from the fire shot up in the air. With all the accelerant used, the house was going up quickly.

Over the roaring, another disturbing sound could be heard. “They’re coming. How far out were JT and Bryce?” What if they reached the dock and there was no one there? They’d be trapped.

“Ten minutes out when I called. They should be there,” Boone assured her.

It sounded as if a virtual army were tromping through the woods. “They’re gaining.” The words barely cleared her lips when a round of shots had everyone ducking for cover.

“We’ll never make it to the dock. We need someplace to take cover.” Declan switched directions. “The Petersons.”

Racing through the woods, Ellie’s heartbeat drowned out all other sounds around her.

The back of the house appeared. Declan ran up the steps. He reached inside the back light near the door and pulled out a key, not wasting time getting the door open.

Everyone rushed inside.

Declan relocked the door. He secured it with a chair under the doorknob. “That won’t hold them for long. Help me drag the table over.”

Ellie got on one side while Declan took the other. Together, they shoved the table against the door.

Boone checked the front window. “So far, I don’t see anyone, but it won’t be long before they figure out where we are.”

“There’s a gun cabinet in the living room. Robert collects them. We’ll need the extra weapons.” Declan grabbed a bookend and smashed the glass from the front of the gun

cabinet.

There were several handguns as well as rifles. Boone located shells. “At least we won’t run out of ammo.”

“How bad is it?” Ellie asked when she noticed the strain on his face. “Let me have a look.”

He shook his head. “Maybe later. I’m okay for now.”

A noise within the house had Ellie freezing. “Did you hear that?”

Boone nodded. “It’s coming from downstairs. A basement?” he asked Declan.

“Yes.” Declan headed for the kitchen. The three followed.

Declan opened the door to the basement. A muffled sound was followed by a crash.

Ellie pushed Boone behind her. She and Declan took the lead descending the steps.

“Help!”

Declan stopped and looked at Ellie. “That’s Becky.”

The four covered the rest of the steps and found Becky lying on the floor in a turned over chair. She’d been gagged but somehow managed to get it free.

“What happened?” Declan asked while he knelt with Ellie to untie her.

“They have Robert and Carter.”

The words rushed out as Declan helped her to her feet. “Who has them?”

“I don’t know.” She rubbed her wrists and glanced around at the new faces. “They barged into our home yesterday right before you arrived.” She saw Declan’s question and responded. “We heard you come in, but by then it was too late. They had us tied up.” She shuddered at the memory.

Boone retrieved his phone and brought up the photo of the men from the island. “Are these some of them?”

“That’s them, but I don’t see the man calling the shots, and there were more of them. They didn’t secure their boat, and it sank. They forced us to call Carter to bring another man, I think the real person in charge, over. I didn’t get a look at him because I was down here.”

“Where are Robert and Carter now? The rest of your children?” Ellie had a terrible feeling once the men were no longer useful . . .

“It was only Robert and me here. The kids are all scattered around New England doing their own thing. They forced Robert to call Carter when they learned he had our boat at our place in Maine. Apparently, theirs sank. Carter picked up Robert, and those men had them set out to pick someone else up. I’m so worried. The men who were here left a little while ago. I don’t know where they went.”

“To my cabin.” Declan told her what happened.

Becky’s hand flew to her mouth. “I’m so sorry, Declan. What are they thinking? They’ll burn the entire island down.”

“It’s because of me.” Ellie introduced herself while Boone explained as succinctly as possible why the men were coming after her.

“I’m so sorry.” Becky shook her head. “I thought I’d seen a lot as a police officer.” She noticed Boone’s injury. “You’re hurt. And so are you.” She’d seen Eli favoring his shoulder. “I have medical supplies upstairs. Let’s get you patched up.”

“I’m calling JT.” Declan tried his phone, then held it away from his ear. “It’s not going through.”

“They’re jamming calls.” The news was not completely unexpected. Ellie went over to the living room window and cracked the curtains. No sign of them.

“Sorry about the mess.” Declan explained the need for extra weapons.

Becky finished patching up Boone and Eli. “Don’t apologize. None of us expected this to happen. We’ll do our best to hold them off until your backup arrives.”

A terrifying thought chased through Ellie’s head. What if there was no backup coming? What if JT and Bryce had been taken care of? It would be up to them to stand and fight. From the number of people Becky indicated were on the island before the rest of the men arrived, they wouldn’t stand a chance.



*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:52 am*

Boone had lost enough blood to leave him weak. He'd do his best to protect Ellie and his friends, but if it came to hand-to-hand combat like he believed it would, he wasn't sure any of them would make it through.

"Nothing. I don't like it." Ellie stopped beside them. Her pretty face held worry. "How are you feeling?" Her clear eyes searched his, seeing what he wished he could keep from her.

"I'm okay. They're out there somewhere, no doubt waiting for this person to give the command."

He tugged her closer, surprising Ellie. His heart told him to say what he wanted because this was critical. "I care about you," he whispered for only her ears. "I know we haven't known each other that long, but I can't deny it, and I think you feel the same way."

Tears filled her eyes. She only nodded. Perhaps because words didn't seem easy.

"No matter what happens, I want you to know that I care about you and I want you with me for however long we have."

She touched his lips. "No, don't say that. It can't end like this. Not now. Not after we've come so close to finding the truth. Not when I've found you."

He let it go and simply held her because he loved her.

Their tender moment ended with the shattering of glass. It took only a second for

Boone to realize the enemy was using flash bangs to disorient them. Soon after, the second round of assault was tear gas. “Get low.” He managed and tugged Ellie down with him. The gas immediately burned his eyes and made breathing difficult. Boone held Ellie close trying to protect her, but he couldn’t hear or see anything.

Figures moved within the gas-filled room. Their faces distorted by what he believed were gas masks.

Ellie was torn from his arms.

“No!” He crawled toward a fractured image of light.

Two people hauled Boone to his feet and dragged him along. He struggled to breathe.

Then he was tossed aside. Fresh air filled his lungs, clearing out the gas. Tears streamed down his face. Eventually the blurred figures came into focus. A virtual army of men surrounded them. Ellie lay a little in front of him. He turned his head. The rest of his team were there along with Becky.

None of the soldiers made a move. They were waiting for someone.

Boone rubbed his irritated eyes. He felt for his weapon. It had been taken from him along with his phone.

Soon, the soldiers turned, and another group of men came into the clearing near the house. Boone heard her shock first as Ellie gasped. Then he realized her attention was on one man as he stopped close to her.

???

Ellie slowly raised herself to her knees. “Daniel?”

It couldn't be. Impossible. No. She must be dreaming. The sight of the man she once loved sent shockwaves through her body. Daniel. Her Daniel?

"You're alive." She stumbled to her feet and started for him then stopped.

The truth, far more horrible than any of them expected, began to fall into place.

"Daniel. No." A sob escaped. "You did this? You were the traitor?"

She couldn't comprehend it. It didn't make sense. The man she loved would never betray his country in such a way. Would never betray her.

Daniel's mouth twisted into a smile. "You had no idea, did you?" He seemed in shock himself. "The great Ayla had no idea she was being set up."

"H-how." She forced the word out. She had to know everything. "I recognized your belt buckle. It was you on the ground."

He laughed in her face. "That was the Syrian. My contact within their intelligence. He figured out it was me and was going to ruin everything. I couldn't allow it, so I killed him and put my belt buckle on him so that you would believe it was me."

"Why?" The question came out on a sob. "Why, Daniel."

He shrugged indifferently. "I'm sorry, but it had to be this way, Ayla. Too much was at stake. I couldn't risk him blowing my cover." Daniel took a step closer, the venom on his face nothing like the man she'd once loved with all her heart. "Where is it, Ayla? Where is the information Gideon hid?"

He'd fooled her. She believed the lies he'd told her.

She slapped him hard. “You faked your own death!”

His jaw tensed as if her response angered him. Good. She hoped it hurt like crazy. If nothing else, she’d get one last blow in.

He slowly smiled. “Look at you. So proud. So loyal. Just like Gideon. He knew someone from his team was working for the enemy. He tried to figure it out only he failed. For a while, he thought that you were the one who killed me and had been selling secrets, but then something changed. He reopened the investigation. Started asking questions. That’s why he had to die.”

Daniel, the last person Ellie would suspect of being a traitor, was the one who had betrayed her.

“You killed Gideon? You loved him. He was like a father to you. You told me so many times.”

Nothing showed on Daniel’s face. He stepped closer. “I need that information. Gideon put it inside the ring. He confessed before he died. It has the name of the undercover Mossad agent working within Syrian Intelligence. I promised to deliver. It will be bad for me if I don’t. My boss needs it.” He glanced behind him at a man she didn’t recognize.

“I’m not giving it to you. You’re going to kill me anyway. Why should I help?”

He clasped a strand of her hair, and she tried to pull free but he didn’t let her. “We were a good team once. I thought about bringing you in with me, but you were always so loyal to Mossad and Gideon.” His eyes narrowed. “You’ve seen the information. Who is it?”

Ellie fought back tears. “Was any of it real? Did you ever love me, Daniel? Why did

you even propose to me?”

Just for a second, something of the Daniel she knew and loved showed in his eyes. But that Daniel was gone in a blink of an eye. The anger returned. “Who is it,” he barked, making her jump.

Ellie squared her shoulders. “I’ll never tell you.”

“You will. Soon, you will. Gideon always thought you were the better agent over me, but you had no idea I faked my death. No idea the tracker in the Ruger wasn’t the only one.” He dug his finger into a spot at the back of Ellie’s neck. “The most powerful tracker is in here. It was designed especially for us. Set to last more than ten years.”

The spot Ellie thought was left by a needle injecting medicine was really where they’d implanted a tracker. Daniel wasn’t taking any chances of losing her.

Daniel motioned to one of his men who hauled Boone to his feet. “You don’t want to talk to me, well, maybe he can get you to talk. We’ve been watching you. I’ve seen how you look at him. You used to look at me the same way.”

Daniel grabbed Ellie and pulled her close. “How much will it take for you to talk?”

His captor jammed his fist against Boone’s injury. Boone screamed.

“No,” Ellie yelled and tried to break free.

Daniel laughed. “So I was right. You do care about him. Too bad watching him die will be the last thing you do.”

Ellie’s gaze latched onto Boone’s. He shook his head, warning her not to give up

Neesa.

A gunshot cracked the tension. The man holding Boone hit the ground.

Ellie's shocked gaze went to the dead man staring up at them.

A heartbeat later, the world around them exploded in gunfire. Daniel released Ellie and spun toward the noise. Boone grabbed Ellie and dropped to the ground, shielding her body with his.

"What's happening?" Ellie managed over the noise of war.

Boone held her close. "I don't know, but I think the cavalry has arrived."

The battle seemed to go on forever before the shots slowed down then ended.

Boone raised his head and then he whooped for joy. "There's JT and Bryce and an army of people I don't recognize, but they're with my friends so they have to be the good guys."

He got to his feet and helped Ellie up. "We're going to be okay."

Ellie quickly took stock to make sure the rest of their friends were safe. Daniel was being restrained by armed men along with the rest of his people and the one he referred to as 'the boss.' A woman Ellie recognized spoke to JT before starting their way.

"Neesa?" Ellie couldn't believe she was standing face-to-face with the woman. Neesa had changed over the years. No doubt life undercover had taken its toll.

Neesa smiled. "Glad to see you're okay, Ayla. We were afraid we wouldn't reach you

in time.”

Ellie struggled to make sense of what happened.

“Your commander reached out to us . . . actually, he called Gideon,” Neesa told Boone. “Gideon alerted me to trouble and asked for help. I was too late.”

“Daniel said he killed him because of the information on the drive.”

“He did. Daniel kept his secret identity hidden well. We had no idea he was alive until Mossad intelligence picked him up near where the peace talks were to take place recently. We did a facial recognition search and discovered we were dealing with a dead man.” Neesa watched as Daniel and his men were led away.

“He was the mole.” Ellie shook her head. “I can’t believe it.” She focused on the man Daniel referred to as the boss. “Is that?” she asked incredulously.

Neesa turned. “It is. Issam Rafiq. A high-ranking officer of Syrian Intelligence. After the location of the information drive was discovered, Rafiq knew it was far too important to leave in the hands of Daniel and his people, who had failed to get the information after countless attempts.”

Neesa shifted to Ellie. “We were never trying to kill you, Ayla. But we had to keep a close eye on your whereabouts to keep you and the information safe. We did—I did that by staying close to Issam Rafiq.” She shook her head. “Years of work to get close to Rafiq has been destroyed. My cover has been compromised. But we were able to uncover the plot Rafiq had put into place, and I have another mission to fulfill. The prime minister has asked me to take on Gideon’s position.” Neesa looked to Boone. “Your Mossad friend sends his regards.”

Boone inclined his head. “I should have known Tobias would talk.”

Neesa chuckled. “He alerted us to Ayla resurfacing and you asking questions about the case. With the intel we had on Daniel, we knew he was coming after you.” She turned to Ellie. “You’ve been cleared completely.” Neesa waited for the information to register.

After seven years on the run, her name was cleared. Ellie expected elation or at least a sense of vindication. None of those came. The man she once believed was the love of her life had played her. Gideon was dead. She’d lost seven years with her family.

“And I’ll need help in running Mossad,” Neesa continued. “We can use more strong, devoted women on our team.”

Ellie balled her hands into fists. After everything she’d been through, this was the moment she’d waited for, wasn’t it?

She wasn’t that woman anymore. The life she’d once loved no longer held an appeal.

But he did.

She turned to Boone. The love she saw in him was all she needed.

“Thank you, Neesa. But I think I have a better offer.” She held her hand out, and Boone clasped it.

Neesa smiled. “I was afraid that might be the case. I don’t blame you. There is more to life than what we do here. So much more. Enjoy your freedom, Ayla, or whatever you wish to call yourself now.” She turned to leave and then stopped. “Oh, your family is waiting to hear from you. I’d call them soon. Seven years is a long time for silence.”

Tears filled Ellie’s eyes. “I will. I promise.”



She faced Boone completely. “You told me you didn’t want to wait to share how you felt about me. I don’t either. I love you and I want to have a future with you, but I have a lot of baggage and unfinished business that I have to take care of first.”

He pulled her into his arms and held her close. “It doesn’t matter. I’ll wait for you as long as you need.” Then he lowered his head and kissed her with all the love that was in his heart.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:52 am*

One year later.

She couldn't believe this moment was finally happening or that she—Ayla—was finally able to face the world and not keep looking over her shoulder for danger.

Neesa had been true to her word. Ayla's name was cleared and her position within Mossad restored, though she'd officially retired from her post.

Daniel and his team, which consisted of Syrian agents, were now being held in prison here in the US. Neesa and her team worked alongside US intelligence to interrogate the group. After weeks of intense interrogation, the truth was revealed. An attack was to take place during the peace talks. The current Israeli prime minister would die, and their candidate would take Gideon's place as an independent candidate after his death. The attack would be blamed on a rogue Mossad agent—Ayla. Daniel planned to have the ring and the information he needed before Ayla was arrested.

For years, she'd thought the agents who ambushed her that night had been intent on killing her. Now, she realized it was all for show. If they'd wanted her dead, she would be. They needed the information hidden in her ring but wanted to make her believe the attempt was real. They'd planted the tracking device in her neck and in the Ruger while she was unconscious, hoping she would lead them to it only she hadn't. And every attempt to capture her to get the information through the years had failed.

"You look beautiful." Rachel finished the last touches to her makeup. "I'm so happy for you and Boone, and we're all thrilled to have you as the latest member of the Hope Island Securities team."

Over the past year, Ayla had reconnected with her family, whom she'd missed dearly. They were here helping her celebrate this blessed day. Her wedding day.

She'd done her best to keep some Jewish traditions in the wedding, but she'd given her life to God and wanted her newfound faith to be part of the wedding as well as her marriage.

Boone had been so patient. Learning to trust again was hard. She'd spent so long looking over her shoulder. Letting all that go hadn't been easy, but she was now in a good place.

Her father came into the room, tears in his eyes as he looked at her. "It's time, Ayla. Are you ready?"

She beamed up at him. "More than ready."

The women of Hope Island Securities along with her sister, Helena, were her bridesmaids.

Helena kissed her cheek. "We'll see you out there."

"Thank you." She rose and gave herself a final glance in the mirror. She'd lost that fearful look that had clung to her for so long. Learning that Daniel was the one to betray her would have destroyed her a few years back. Now, what she felt for him was anger and a little sadness. He'd thrown his life away for money.

For the first time in years, she wasn't afraid of the future. She'd signed a two-year lease with Myron for the cottage by the sea. She and Boone would live there starting today. Dottie, her sweet little constant companion this past year, waited for them to return.

She'd let go of all the aliases she'd used in the past. She was just Ayla again. Not

Mossad agent Ayla or fugitive Ayla. Not Ellie. Just . . . Ayla.

Over the past year, she'd worked with the Hope Island Securities team and found her place. She and Boone had managed to find the missing child and bring her home to her mother. And in her spare time, Ayla helped Hank out at the Hopeful Coffeehouse. When she'd first come back, Hank had been grinning from ear to ear when she pointed to the menu that featured her caramel espresso, the Rocky Caramel. The drink and the story behind the creator had become a quick hit.

Ayla looped her arm through her father's. They stepped inside the church as the music began to play the wedding song. Boone stood tall and strong up front waiting for her. For their future. This was her life. He was her future. The past and its ugliness had no place here with her today.

She started down the aisle while all their friends and family rose and beamed their happiness. God had given her and Boone another chance at love, and she couldn't wait to see where the future would take them. Together.