



# No Reason to Trust (Blackhawk Security #13)

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** Betrayed by her FBI boss and nearly killed, Olivia Williams quits and joins Blackhawk Security. But when she runs into Jake Dunbar the agent who was supposed to have her back she demands answers. Jake explains that their boss, Nelson, never gave him the backup assignment.

When Nelson sends Jake on a similar Bratva mission, suspicion turns to certainty – Nelson is dirty. Secretly, Jake recruits Livvy as backup, and together they uncover a deadly plot one that marks them both for death.

With danger closing in, can they expose Nelson before he silences them? And will they risk their hearts before it's too late?

**Total Pages (Source):** 26

# Page 1

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After crossing the Brooklyn Bridge, Olivia followed her mapping app down the streets, around corners and into Brighton Beach. Turning another corner, she was transported into the previous century.

Most of the signs above the stores were not only a different language, but also used a different alphabet. Driving slowly along the neighborhood streets, she watched the people on the sidewalks, most of them women. Some had children. Instead of pushing them in strollers, these women pulled them in wagons. Everything about them looked... foreign. They wore babushkas tied beneath their chins. Long, loose dresses. Black shoes, the kind she remembered her grandmother wearing when she was a kid. One thing stood out -- the people on the street were almost all women. Very few men were out here. Were they all at work? Had to be.

She was nearly at the end of the block when she spotted the building where she was supposed to meet her contact. Four or five stories tall, old red bricks and windows that hadn't been washed in months. Maybe years. Were they unwashed on purpose so no one could see inside the building? Probably. The Bratva was a secretive organization. They didn't like sharing their business with anyone, even in this overwhelmingly Russian area of Brooklyn.

Apprehension crawled up Olivia's spine as she studied the building and the women on the sidewalk. Why was she here? What did the FBI hope to gain from her meeting with the Bratva members?

She wasn't sure. It had been a cold invite, completely out of the blue, and her instructions had been to talk to them. See if they could be convinced to be informants for the FBI. Leak details of upcoming operations, including upcoming crimes --

hijacking of shipped goods. Contract murders. Armed robberies. Shipping of trafficked women.

Olivia gripped the steering wheel tightly. Why would these criminals be interested in cooperating with the FBI? What did they have to gain? She couldn't think of anything. Unless they were being investigated, and knew it, although her boss Nelson hadn't said anything about pending subpoenas. But unless the FBI had dangled pardons for these criminals, there would be no sharing of information. Why would they be interested in that? What did the Bratva have to gain? Nothing that Olivia could see.

But she'd been assigned to come here and talk to them, so that's what she'd do.

Opposite the Bratva building, she saw a small parking lot behind a butcher shop. She didn't see any signs that it was restricted parking, so she swung into one of the spots and turned off her car. Before she exited, she touched the Glock in the holster beneath her left arm, and her backup gun in an ankle holster. Both there. Secure.

After checking her guns, she opened the car door and stepped into the humid heat of the September day. The asphalt was clearly ancient -- broken and cracked, with chunks missing. Weeds grew up from the cracks, some of them a foot tall. Clearly not a frequently used lot. But then, most of their customers were probably local.

Olivia looked around but saw no signs prohibiting parking. No signs listing the price of parking. She shrugged. She'd ask in the butcher shop.

The back door of the butcher shop was open, and the pungent smell of raw meat swirled in the air. Her stomach churned as the smell rolled over her. Even if she hadn't been a pescetarian, the smell would have sickened her. Was the meat on the edge of spoiling in the summer heat? She swallowed hard, trying to avoid taking a breath.

Glancing in the back door, she didn't see anyone working there. Must be out front, waiting on customers.

She hurried around to the front and stepped inside. The same smell washed over her, and she resisted the urge to turn and walk out the door. A man stood behind the counter, wrapping a piece of meat for a customer.

He looked over at her, his gaze suspicious. "Can I help you?" he asked in a heavily accented voice.

Olivia forced herself to smile. "Is it okay to park in the lot behind your store?" she asked.

The man frowned. "You have business here?"

Olivia nodded toward the building across the street. "Yes. In there."

The man glanced at the building, then studied Olivia. His gaze drifted over her way too slowly, and his lascivious leer was impossible to miss.

"You have business in that building?" he asked, nodding toward the red brick structure across the street.

"Yes," Olivia said.

He nodded slowly. "For my friends with business across the street, parking is free," he said. "I will keep an eye on your car."

"Thank you," Olivia said. "I appreciate that." Thank God she'd brought a bureau car instead of riding her Harley. She guessed it wouldn't last long in this neighborhood. The Bucar was a drab older sedan. Brown. Not the kind of car that attracted thieves.

The butcher nodded at her. "It will be there when your business is completed."

"Thank you again," she said, managing a smile.

She hurried out of the butcher shop, waiting until she was away from the door to take a deep breath. Once on the sidewalk, she looked for Jake Dunbar, ignoring the flutter in her chest at the thought of seeing him again. According to her boss Fred Nelson, Dunbar was her backup.

He wasn't on the street, but she hadn't expected him to be. He'd stand out as much as she did in Brighton Beach. She wondered where he'd hidden himself but was reassured by Nelson's words. "If you need help, send Jake a text. He'll respond right away."

Before crossing the street, Olivia pulled out her phone and found Dunbar's contact information. She tapped out a text, then scrolled through her phone to find the room number. 310.

She added that to the text, then slid the phone into her pocket. The fact that Dunbar was backing her up was... reassuring. She knew him, had worked a couple jobs with him. Big, muscular, broad shouldered. He'd be an intimidating presence if this meeting went sideways.

Reassured by the weight of her Glock, she looked both ways then crossed the street. She approached the building as warily as she'd approach a poisonous snake. Before opening the door, she tightened her fingers on the door grip. You can do this. You're smart. Clever. And used to dealing with bullies -- Nelson had been her boss for a while.

Her hands were damp as she gripped the handle of the heavy door. She had an instinctive moment of panic -- don't go inside. You don't know where your backup

is. Everything about this assignment feels... wrong. Poorly planned. Risky. Dangerous .

Olivia squared her shoulders. This was her assignment. She needed to do this. And once she found the meeting, she'd handle it quickly. Professionally. Then she'd get the hell out of this building and out of Brooklyn.

Stepping inside the building, she saw that it was open in the middle, both sides lined with what looked like small offices. This space was an atrium, but that sounded way too fancy for what she was looking at. The glass on the roof was as dirty as the windows on the outside. The floor was scarred tile, with chunks missing in random places. There were offices on this ground floor, as well, but she couldn't see any numbers on the doors. The heavy air held scents she couldn't identify, bitter, nasty. She swallowed hard to get rid of the lump of dread in her throat.

She started up the flight of stairs on the right side, but when she reached the second floor, the numbers on the door were odd numbers. She needed to be on the other side of the building. She started down the stairs before she noticed that the floor circled the atrium. So she walked to the end of the building, curled around the open atrium, and ascended the stairs on the other side of the building.

Even numbers on the door. Good. She was on the right side.

She ascended one more flight, then walked down the narrow balcony until she found room 310. Swallowed hard. Drew a deep breath. Blew it out and knocked on the door.

After a long moment, someone inside said something that was probably in Russian. Since she had no idea what he'd said, she opened the door slowly and stepped into the room.

Eight or nine men lounged on two couches and a few chairs. The youngest was just a kid. A teenager, maybe sixteen or seventeen. The oldest looked in his forties. The rest of the men were youngish, twenties or early thirties.

Olivia turned to face the older man, keeping her back to the door. “Mr. Petrenko?” When he nodded, Olivia said, “I understand you might be interested in working with the FBI to your benefit and ours.”

Petrenko stared at her for what felt like hours but was probably less than a minute. His icy cold glare was alarming. Unnerving. It sent a spear of dread down her spine. The hostility in his dark brown eyes set every alarm bell in her head shrieking at her to get out! Now!

She slid her hand into her pocket, twitching to send that text and summon Jake Dunbar. But as threatening as he appeared, Petrenko hadn't actually said anything at all.

Finally he said, “What is the FBI offering for our cooperation?”

“In exchange for information about your rivals' plans, we are willing to assist you with importing goods into the country.”

“You will divert our goods around customs?” he asked, frowning.

“We don't have the authority to divert goods around customs,” she said. “But we can provide escorts for your goods. Make sure they don't end up in the hands of your rivals.”

Petrenko frowned. “None of our rivals would touch our goods. They know what would happen if they did. They fear our retribution.”

The back of Olivia's neck tingled, and she knew the men on either side of her were staring at her. Ready to respond to any signal from their boss to deal with her.

"Then what would you require to work with the FBI?" she asked, managing to keep her voice steady. Even.

"I don't believe we are interested in working with your FBI. We have our own justice. Our own retribution for those who steal from us." His dark eyes studied her, and Olivia saw her utter contempt in his eyes. "My son will escort you out."

Olivia still had her hand in her pocket, and she pressed send on the text message. Hopefully, Dunbar would be waiting in the lobby.

The kid stared at his father for a long moment, and a message was exchanged. Unfortunately, Olivia couldn't decode that message. But she knew there was nothing good for her in that exchange.

She looked at Petrenko. "Thank you for your time. I appreciate your frankness. I'll carry your message back to my boss, Donald Nelson."

Petrenko's eyes flickered at the name, but he didn't say anything. He merely nodded. "Sacha will escort you to the street."

"Thank you, but that's not necessary. I can find my way out."

"I insist," Petrenko said. He nodded at who she was sure was his son. "See the agent to the street."

The kid stared at his father for a long moment. Waited, as if hoping for a reprieve. Finally he stood up. Opened the door for Olivia and exited the room behind her.

Olivia did not want this kid at her back. She suspected his father meant for him to kill her, and she wasn't going to give him the chance. So when they got to the stairs, she stepped to the side. Waved her hand. "Lead the way."

The kid cleared his throat. "Ladies first," he said in unaccented English.

"That's very gentlemanly, but I'd prefer you go first. You know the stairs better than I do. I don't want to make a misstep."

He frowned at her, and Olivia stared back. Finally he shrugged and began running down the stairs. Olivia followed him, moving as fast as she could. Once they were on the ground floor, he waved for her to precede him out the door.

She strained to see if Dunbar was out there, but the windows were too dirty. She couldn't walk out in front of this kid if Jake wasn't there. So she waved him out the door. "I'll be right behind you."

He stared at her for a long moment, but when she didn't move, he shrugged. Reached beneath his shirt, and Olivia realized he had a gun hidden there.

Moving fast, she kicked him in the balls, and when he crumbled to the floor, kicked him again in the head. His head bounced against the hard surface with the dull thud of a watermelon.

Without looking back, Olivia dashed out the door and across the street, dodging cars in both directions. The kid crawled out the door and shouted behind her, but she didn't slow down, didn't look back. She pulled out her Glock as she ran. She knew she'd be taking a huge risk if she ran along the sidewalk. She wasn't sure if the kid could hit a moving target, and she didn't want to find out. So she sprinted for the butcher shop's door. The butcher was behind the counter, and he looked up when she burst in. Frowned, as if he hadn't been expecting to see her. Did everyone around

here know she was supposed to be killed?

She ran behind the counter, into the back of the shop and out the back door. She'd curled her hand around her car keys, and clicked to unlock the door as she ran. Tore it open and fell inside. She pulled the door closed and made sure it was locked, then started the car and sped out of the tiny parking lot.

To her right, she saw the kid Sacha standing on the sidewalk, his father next to him. Sunlight glinted off the gun in Petrenko's hand, and she pressed harder on the accelerator. She turned left, the car skidding toward the sidewalk, then straightened the wheels and pressed the accelerator to the floor. The car leapt ahead, and she drove several blocks, watching her rear-view mirror the whole way. No cars appeared behind her, so she turned left and headed for the Verrazano Bridge.

"It's a simple meeting," her boss Nelson had said. "See if we can make a deal. We'll ease the way for them, they'll give us information we need. Should be an in-and-out kind of thing. You can go up to Brooklyn, get back in time for your date tonight."

Feeling uncomfortable with Don's gaze fixed on her, she'd said, "Yeah, well, I don't have a date tonight, Don."

He'd shrugged. "Just as well. In case you're held up by extended negotiations."

Her hands gripping the steering wheel too tightly, Olivia finally spotted the bridge in the distance. She wanted to floor the accelerator, get out of Brooklyn as quickly as possible. But she didn't want to draw attention. Didn't want to be stopped by a cop. So she took several deep breaths and drove the speed limit until she was over the bridge and finally onto I-95. When she was headed for Washington D.C., she allowed herself to take a deep breath. Another. After thirty miles, her heart rate finally slowed.

She watched in her rear-view mirror to make sure no one was following her, but saw

no signs of a tail. Still, her hands gripped the steering wheel tightly until she was close to Washington D.C. When she finally pulled into the parking lot of her apartment complex, she frowned. Jake Dunbar should have been waiting on the sidewalk for her signal. But she'd seen no sign of him. Where the hell had Jake Dunbar been?

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:42 am*

Four months later

Jake Dunbar opened the door to The Trailhead, holding it for Noah to walk into the building. He glanced at the bar, a long wooden span that ran from close to the front door to the swinging doors that led into the kitchen. When he spotted Noah's wife Anne disappearing behind those doors, Jake turned to Noah. "Your wife's in the kitchen?"

"Yeah, her day to cook dinner," Noah said easily. "Have a seat at the bar and order whatever you want. I'm gonna say hello to Anne," he said, walking behind the bar to the swinging doors that Jake assumed led to the kitchen.

Jake had just ordered a beer from Hiram when the front door opened again and a woman and another man walked in and slid onto stools at the bar. Jake recognized Tom Larson and Olivia Williams, both former FBI agents.

Noah stepped out of the kitchen and smiled when he saw the newcomers. "Hey, Livvy. Tom. Haven't seen either of you for a while. How're you doing?"

Livvy swiveled to face Noah. "Yeah, now that you don't live at the Blackhawk Security compound, it's like you've forgotten about the rest of us who work there."

Noah slammed a hand over his heart. "No way, Livvy. Impossible to forget about you."

Olivia rolled her eyes. "You always were a sweet talker, Noah."

Noah shook his head and nodded at the man beside Olivia. “How’s it going, Tom?”

“Good,” the other man said. “Wish you were still one of the trainers at Blackhawk Security, though. Been a while since I’ve had a good smack-down.”

Noah shrugged. “I’m always available to deliver a smack-down. All you have to do is ask.”

“You think I still can’t take you?” Tom asked, one eyebrow cocked. “Maybe I’d be the one dishing out the punishment.”

Noah snorted. “In your dreams, tough guy.”

As they were talking, Jake Dunbar stood up from his seat at the other end of the bar and ambled toward the group. “Hey, Olivia,” he asked with a smile. “Been a while since I’ve seen you. How’re you doing?”

Olivia swiveled to stare at Jake and froze. Her eyes went as cold as winter snow, and Jake would have sworn ice coated his skin. “Damn it, Dunbar” she said, making his name sound like a curse, her voice prickly as a desert cactus. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Jake looked around, wondering if there was another Dunbar in The Trailhead. When he saw no one, he realized she was talking to him .

He frowned, shocked and, yeah, irritated, wondering where her attitude had come from. “Having a beer. Just like you’re probably gonna do.”

“You just happen to be in Helena? At the same bar I’m in?” Olivia scowled at Jake. “This is my town, and this is my bar. You’re not welcome here, Dunbar.”

Jake raised one eyebrow. “That’s pretty ballsy, Livvy.” He jerked his head toward the bartender. “Last I heard, Hiram over there owns this place. You don’t wanna see my face? Go ahead and leave. No one’s stopping you.”

“You’ve got a lot of nerve, Dunbar. If you can face me after what you did, you’re even worse than I thought you were.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Jake asked, frowning.

“You know damn well what you did,” Livvy said.

Jake shrugged. Held out his hands, palms up. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, Williams. So either leave or sit down there and fume all you want. I’ll be sitting with Noah in one of the booths. Ignoring you.”

He turned to Noah. “I’m gonna grab a booth. Company at the bar isn’t up to its usual high standards.”

Noah bumped his shoulder to Jake’s. “Yeah, do that. Nick shows up most days, and you can talk to him without it being all official and serious.”

Jake shot his gaze toward Olivia. Then looked back at Noah. “Sounds good. I’ll keep an eye out for him.”

As Jake slid into a booth, he watched as Olivia turned away and leaned on the bar. Her dark red curls cascaded down her back as she leaned forward to say something to Hiram. He smiled and nodded, then moved away from her. Grabbed a glass and pulled a dark, foamy Guinness from the tap and set it in front of her.

Jake snorted as Noah joined him. “No wonder she didn’t want to leave. This is probably the only bar in town that sells Guinness.”

Noah grinned. “You’d be right about that. This is Bud and Coors country. And Moose Drool. The tourists love ordering that one.”

Livvy turned her head to talk to Tom, and those dark red curls of hers bounced on her back. Made him wonder what they’d feel like if he ran his fingers through them.

Jake snorted at the unexpected thought. He’d rather pet a rattlesnake than tangle his fingers in Livvy Williams’ hair.

Noah leaned closer to him. “You have any idea what the hell’s going on with Livvy?”

“Hell, no,” Jake said, letting his gaze drift toward Livvy and those red curls again. Those curls had figured in a lot of his fantasies since she’d taken the Blackhawk Security job. “I’ve got no idea what she’s ranting about. Clearly, a bug crawled up her ass, but I have no clue why.” He shook his head. “Damned odd. Before she left, she had a great reputation with the Bureau. Bright, tough, hard-working. All the mucky mucks had big plans for her. Then she quit to work for Blackhawk Security.”

Noah tilted his head. “You know why?”

“No idea,” Jake said immediately. “I didn’t even know she’d left the FBI until I got here and found out she was working at Blackhawk Security. But I doubt the Bureau fired her. Last I heard, she was on the fast track there.”

He shrugged. Swiveled to face Noah, trying to put Olivia Williams out of his mind.

Noah was studying him, and Jake frowned, waiting for his friend to speak. Finally Noah said, “Don’t let Livvy drive you away.” His voice vibrated with irritation. “Not sure what her problem is, but she’s not in charge here.” His gaze darted to Olivia, then back to Jake. “If she objects to your presence? Tough. She can leave. You came a long way to take Nick’s statement. At least wait and have a drink with him.”

The two of them stared at each other for another few moments, then Jake turned and drank a gulp of his half-finished beer. He flicked a glance at Olivia, who was glaring at him, steam coming out of her ears. After a long moment, he nodded. Turned to Noah. “You know, you’re right, man. I have as much right to be here as she does.”

Determined to ignore Olivia Williams, Jake wrapped his hands around the glass, then lifted it and took a long pull. Noah leaned closer to him. “You really have no idea what that was about?” he murmured.

“Not a clue,” Jake said, shaking his head. “I have no idea what she’s ranting about.”

Noah studied him for a long moment. “You’re serious,” he finally said. “You really don’t know why Livvy’s so pissed at you.”

Jake shrugged. “I mean it. No idea.” He frowned. “But she was always a little jumpy around me. No idea why.”

“She’s been working for Blackhawk Security for maybe four months,” Noah said. “She’s a damn good trainer. Good bodyguard, too.”

“She was a damn good FBI agent,” Jake said. “Or at least I always heard she was. But she clearly went off the rails somewhere.”

Noah touched Jake’s arm. “Maybe you need to talk to her. Figure out what’s going on. That was a really odd reaction to seeing you here in The Trailhead.”

“Yeah.” Jake shrugged one shoulder. “I have no idea what she’s talking about. I thought I’d developed a good relationship with Livvy when she worked for the Bureau.” He scowled. “But talk to her? Hell, no. I value my balls too much.”

Noah’s mouth flirted with a laugh, then he frowned. “She’s been a great addition to

Blackhawk Security,” he said, glancing toward Olivia. “Steady. Reliable. Talented. I have no idea why she lost her shit just now.”

“You and me both, man.” Jake shook his head. “We worked together on a few cases when she was with the Bureau, and I thought we’d had a good working relationship. We even went out a few times. She had a great reputation at the Bureau. I remember that.”

“I know Mel and Dev, the owners of Blackhawk Security, were thrilled to get her,” Noah said. He took a long drink of his beer, then set the glass down. Frowned as he darted a glance at Olivia, then looked back at Jake. “Aren’t you at least a little curious about that odd reaction from her?”

“Course I am,” Jake said. “But I don’t want to dig into it. Pretty sure that would piss her off even more.” He shuddered and picked up his beer. “Let sleeping dogs lie. I’ll be here a couple more days, then I’ll never see Olivia again.”

“But won’t you always wonder what she was talking about? Won’t it be a pebble in your shoe you can’t shake loose?”

“Hell, no. I know I didn’t do anything wrong. Know I didn’t screw up somehow. Whatever’s in Olivia’s head is made-up shit.”

Noah leaned a little closer, and his gaze bored into Jake’s. “Livvy’s always been a straight shooter. I’ve never known her to make shit up. If I were you, Jake? I’d want to find out what she thinks you did. God knows how many other people she’s told about whatever she imagines you’ve done to her.”

Jake scowled. Opened his mouth. Closed it again. Finally sighed. “Maybe you’re right,” he said with a sigh. “Maybe I do need to talk to her. But not tonight. I just spent my day listening to a guy talk about his father killing his brother. Listening to

the tape he had, with his father giving the order to have his own son killed. Watching the video where a guy beats Doyle's brother to death. What Nick Doyle had to say, and what I saw and heard on those tapes made me sick to my stomach."

"You gonna be able to prosecute Bobby Doyle?" Noah asked.

"Hell, yes," Jake said. "With what Nick has, it should be a slam dunk." He scowled. "As long as someone doesn't leak it to Bobby Doyle."

"You're the only one besides Nick and his father, and now me, who knows what's on that tape," Noah said. "So that shouldn't be a problem, as long as you and Nick keep your mouths shut."

"I can't speak for Nick. But I'm not saying anything to anyone."

"Neither am I," Noah said. "And based on the shit that went down here a few weeks ago, when Bobby Doyle tried to kill Nick and his fiancée Celia? Bobby Doyle isn't talking to anyone but the guards at the Henderson County Correctional Facility." He shook his head. "And I'm guessing they just laugh at that shit from Bobby, anyway."

At the other end of the bar, Olivia Williams and Tom Larson were getting ready to leave. Olivia didn't glance toward the booth he shared with Noah, and Jake pretended he didn't see Olivia leaving. But he could feel Olivia's gaze burning into his skin. He needed to talk to her. Find out what it was she thought he'd done.

A few minutes later, Olivia and Tom exited the bar, and Jake blew out a breath of relief. He was pretty sure Noah did, as well. Noah slid out of the booth and jerked his chin at Jake. "Talk to Olivia. Find out what she's talking about. It's better than flying blind."

Jake stared at his beer for a long moment. Finally nodded. "Yeah, you're right. I need

to know what's going on. And Olivia has some explaining to do."

"You wanna talk to her here? Or at the Blackhawk Security compound?" Noah asked.

Jake thought for a long moment. "Here," he finally said. "Feels like neutral ground."

"I agree," Noah said. "Call Olivia and set it up."

Jake studied him for a moment. Nodded his head. "I'll do that."

Jake paced near the bar, glancing at his watch every few minutes. Finally, when about twenty minutes had passed, he turned to Noah, who was sitting across from Hiram.

"Did I give her enough time to get back to the Blackhawk Security compound?"

"Should be plenty of time. When I was working there, I could make it in less than fifteen minutes."

Jake blew out a breath. Then he turned to Noah. "You have her phone number?"

"Yeah." Noah pulled out his phone. Tapped on his contact list and set the phone in front of Jake. "Use my phone," Noah said. "She might not pick up if she sees your name. And put it on speaker. I want to hear what she has to say." He grimaced.

"Should be interesting."

Staring at Noah's phone, Jake squared his shoulders. Punched in Olivia's phone number. It rang four times before Olivia answered.

"Hey, Noah. What'd you need?" she said.

"It's not Noah. It's Jake Dunbar. We need to talk, Olivia. You need to tell me what crawled up your ass and died. I have no idea what you think I did, but I can assure

you, I've never done anything to make you hate me like you do."

For a long moment, there was silence on the line. He couldn't even hear Olivia breathing. Finally she said, "That's rich, Dunbar. I'm sure you know very well what you did."

"If I made a mistake, I'll own it," Jake said immediately. "Always have, always will. But I never did anything to cause that, that hatred you seemed to feel for me today. So are you going to have the balls to look me in the eye and tell me what you think I did? Or are you going to walk away like you did fifteen minutes ago?"

The only sound on the line was the crackling of the connection. For a moment, Jake thought Olivia had hung up on him. Finally she cleared her throat. "I'll be happy to refresh your memory, even though it pisses me off that you could have forgotten such a huge thing. I could have died, Dunbar, and it would have been your fault. But it'll have to be tomorrow, because I leave the next day for a job. If you can't make it tomorrow, I'll call you when I get back to Helena."

Jake frowned. Was Olivia shining him on? Trying to avoid a meeting?

If so, nothing he could do about it. "Okay. I'll meet you at The Trailhead tomorrow. Seven work for you? If not, give me a call when you're back at the Blackhawk Security compound. Not sure how much longer I'll be in Helena, but call me anyway. If I'm gone, we can settle this with a Zoom call."

"Not a big fan of phone calls" she finally said. "I like to look someone in the eye when we're talking."

"Easy enough with Zoom," Jake said easily.

An uncomfortably long silence sizzled over the line. Finally Olivia said, "Tomorrow

at seven works for me. I'll see you at The Trailhead."

The call ended with a loud crunch, as if she'd just slammed her phone onto a hard surface.

"Pretty ballsy move, Dunbar," Noah said, elbowing him in the side. "You really think she's gonna make a Zoom call to you?"

"She said she'd be here tomorrow.," Jake said. "If she doesn't show? I doubt she'd Zoom with me. But if she does bug out, I'll know there's nothing there."

He frowned. "Although I always thought Williams was a straight shooter. Said what she thought and didn't make wild accusations against other agents." He shrugged. "Guess I'll find out tomorrow what kind of shit is stuck in her head."

Noah smoothed his hand over his face to hide his grin. "Wouldn't recommend saying that to Livvy," he said. "She's got a temper and she knows how to chew people a new one. Maybe let her talk first. See where she's coming from."

"Since I have no idea what she's talking about, you're damn straight I'll let her say her piece before I respond."

One side of Noah's mouth quirked up. "I know Olivia. It should be a great show tomorrow night. You think she'd be offended if I brought popcorn?"

Jake shook his head. "Don't poke the bear, Noah. I kind of like my head right where it's at."

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:42 am*

The following night, Jake was talking to Nick about his testimony and telling him, in broad, general terms, how the FBI was going to handle the case against his father. Jake assured Nick that his father wouldn't get out of the Henderson County Correctional Facility before his trial, and that any phone calls or visitors he had would be monitored.

But when the bar went silent, Jake turned in the booth. Olivia Williams had just walked in. Nick tapped the table to get Jake's attention and said, "I'll send Olivia over here." He slid out of the booth, but Olivia reached the table before he could intercept her. "Booth's all yours," Nick said. "I'm heading into the kitchen to talk to my fiancée." Nick nodded at Jake and Olivia, then pushed through the swinging doors into the kitchen.

Olivia scowled at Jake, then stared at the booth, as if she was afraid it would bite her. Jake took another drink of his beer as he watched her, then set it on the table. Everyone at the bar swiveled on their chairs and watched Olivia walk across the bar toward Jake. Noah leaned across the bar and murmured something, and everyone turned to face the bar again. No doubt every single one of them would be straining to hear whatever he and Olivia had to say.

Jake watched Olivia slide onto the seat across from him. She folded her hands on the table and stared at Jake, and he saw nothing but anger in her eyes.

"You want a beer?" he asked her.

"Thanks, Dunbar, but I can buy my own beer," she said, her mouth curling into a sneer. "I don't need anything from you."

Jake shrugged. "Suit yourself." He curled his fingers around his own glass of beer, irritated that he'd let Williams' snarky rudeness rattle him. Shifting on the bench seat, he said, "Helps to have something to hold onto. Unless you use it as a weapon. Which I wouldn't recommend. Hiram has standards. He gets real angry if someone throws a beer. They're banned for life."

"Thanks for the tip, Dunbar." Olivia snorted. "I don't need to throw glasses in a bar to make my point. But I'd be willing to make an exception for you."

Just then, a waitress came over. "Can I get you something, ma'am?"

"I'd like a Guinness, please," Olivia said.

"Coming right up," the young woman said with a smile.

Jake leaned back in the booth. "You wanna tell me what got your knickers in a knot? Or do you want to wait for your beer?"

"I'll wait. It'll be good to have something to hold onto. Or to throw at you. Depending on how the conversation goes."

Jake took a drink of his beer. The silence was heavy as he waited for the waitress to set Olivia's glass of dark beer on the table. "But you might want to keep in mind this little tip. This is the best bar in Helena. If you lose your temper and throw that at me, you'll have to find another bar. And since everyone at Blackhawk Security drinks here, you'll be drinking alone."

"Not planning on throwing anything," Olivia said. But her fingers whitened on the glass, making Jake wonder if she was thinking about it.

"Good to hear." Jake set his beer on the table and folded his arms across his chest.

“So, okay, tell me what you think I did to piss you off so much.”

“There wasn’t any ‘thinking’ about it,” she said, slashing air quotes a little too close to his face. “It’s what I know you did.”

“Spill it,” Jake said. His hands curled into fists on his lap.

“I was undercover,” Olivia began. “Bargaining with the Russian Bratva. Our boss, Donald Nelson, said you were my backup. Said you’d be outside the building I was going into. And that if I got in trouble, I was supposed to send you a text. I had that text all written out and waiting on my screen so I could hit send and it would immediately go to you.”

Jake frowned at her. “You were in D.C.?” he asked.

“Hell, no,” she said. “I was in Brighton Beach. You know, where all the Russians are.”

Jake leaned back and stared at her. “I’ve never been in Brighton Beach in my life. Nelson never said anything to me about the Bratva or backing you up. What was the date that I supposedly screwed up?”

Olivia pulled out her phone and stabbed at the screen. “May 7 th . This year.”

“You sure about that date?” He pulled out his own phone.

“Positive. Not like I would forget the case that almost got me killed.”

Jake’s hand tightened around his phone. Pulling up his calendar, he scrolled to May 7. Stared at his schedule for a long moment. “On May 7, I was in Tennessee, testifying at a kidnapping trial,” he said. “I was one of the agents who recovered the

kidnapped kid.”

He turned the phone around and showed it to Olivia. “I was several states away from Brooklyn on May 7.”

Olivia stared at the screen for a long moment. “Did you just put that on your calendar today? After I agreed to talk to you? When you realized you’d screwed up?”

“What?” Jake scowled at her for a long moment. “Hell, no, Williams. Are you always so paranoid?” He turned his phone around and tried to make an entry for May 7. “The damn phone won’t even let me do that. And even if it would, I had no idea what date you were talking about. Nelson couldn’t have sent me as your backup on May 7. He knew I’d be in Tennessee. That trial had been on my calendar for months.”

Olivia stared at him, frowning, as if she needed a moment to think through the events of that day. “Are you sure you were in Tennessee that day?” she finally asked. “Why would Nelson tell me you were my backup when you were several states away?”

Shaking his head, Jake stared at Olivia for a long moment. Finally he said in a low voice, “Excellent question, and I have no answers. Just more questions.” He leaned closer to her. “Since you thought you needed backup for that meeting, how did you manage to escape from the Bratva?”

Olivia stared at him a moment, her gaze boring into his, as if looking for answers there. Finally she said, “I told them I’d take their concerns to my boss and get back to them. I had no plan to do that, of course, because they never really said what they wanted.” She frowned. “I had no idea why Nelson had sent me there. It made me wonder why he’d sent me all the way to Brooklyn for what felt like a nothing meeting.”

“So how did you get away without any backup?” Jake asked.

“There was a kid there. Young, maybe sixteen or seventeen. The guy in charge, who I think was his father, told him to walk me downstairs.

“The kid said something in Russian to the older guy. The older guy nodded. Then the kid left with me. I made him walk down the stairs in front of me, and I had my gun on him the whole time.

“As we approached the door to the street, he pulled a gun. Didn’t take a genius to know he was supposed to kill me. So I kned him in the balls, and when he was bent over, I kicked him in the head. He dropped to the floor. I dashed out of the building and ran across the street. Ducked into a butcher shop and went out the back door. Bolted for my car, feeling lucky to be alive.”

“Wow,” Jake said, shaking his head. “No wonder you were pissed off at me. I’m pissed off at me, and I didn’t even know I was supposed to be there.”

When a tiny smile flitted across Olivia’s face, Jake had to stop his automatic fist pump. “And clearly you got away from Brighton Beach in one piece.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t stop shaking until I was out of New York.” She frowned. “You must have seen my text. Didn’t you wonder about it?”

“I did, yeah,” Jake said. “But I figured you must have sent it to me by mistake. Hit the wrong contact.”

Jake shook his head. “I’m real sorry you had to deal with that. But I had no idea I was supposed to be your backup. Nelson never said a word to me. But even if he planned to, he knew I’d be out of town.” Without waiting for Olivia to respond, he leaned a little closer to her. Lowered his voice. “Do you remember Cliff Kingsley?”

“Of course I do,” Olivia said immediately. “That case was all anyone at the Bureau

could talk about for weeks. And it was one of the reasons I went to work for Mel and Dev at Blackhawk Security. They were the people who took Kingsley down.”

“Yeah, they were.” Jake leaned across the table, after looking around and making sure no one was sitting close enough to hear them. “Kingsley was working for the Russians,” he said, his voice a low murmur. “It all came out after he was arrested. The Bureau tried to keep it quiet, but I have some good friends who are higher up the food chain. Apparently, the Bureau had suspected for a while that there were Russian assets in the ranks. After Kingsley was exposed, one low-level guy was arrested, but the powers-that-be always thought there were more of them. But after Kingsley and the other guy were arrested, any other Russians went deep, and no one was able to sniff them out. And Kingsley wasn’t talking.”

Olivia stared at him for a long moment, frowning. “Are you saying that Nelson might be a Russian asset?”

“No idea.” Jake shrugged. “But it’s not as preposterous as it sounds. Kingsley didn’t flip on anyone, because he knew talking would sign his death certificate. And I know Diana Redfield, the FBI director, was certain he wasn’t working alone. But other than that one low level guy, no one’s ever been identified.”

“And Nelson telling me you were supposed to be my backup practically assured that I’d be killed if anything went wrong,” Olivia said.

“Exactly.”

Olivia took a drink of her Guinness, and Jake watched as her throat rippled. Then she put her glass on the table. “But why try to have me killed? I don’t know anything about Russian assets in the Bureau. I knew Cliff Kingsley, but we didn’t work together. I was just as shocked as everyone else in the Bureau when he was arrested.”

“No idea what happened there, either, Olivia. But apparently someone was worried about you. Someone thought you knew more than you did. Maybe whoever Nelson reported to told him not to send backup for you. That’s why he gave you my name as your backup when he knew I’d be out of town -- hoping you’d be killed and couldn’t report to anyone else that your backup didn’t show up.”

Olivia frowned. “I did tell Nelson that my backup didn’t show up. He said he’d look into it. It wasn’t too long after that he told me you’d resigned. I figured it was because you hadn’t shown up that day.”

Jake leaned toward her. Trying to make her see that he was being honest. Telling her the truth. “But I hadn’t resigned,” Jake said, frowning. “And that was a problem for Nelson and whoever he’s working with, because you were still working for the Bureau, too.” He tilted his head. “Did anyone pressure you to leave? Hint that your career wasn’t going anywhere since you’d screwed up that assignment?”

“No,” Olivia said slowly. “No one ever even mentioned it. But I felt as if I had a target on my back. Like everyone was talking about me. When I’d walk into a room, everyone immediately stopped talking. And I was concerned about my next undercover job -- afraid that the same thing would happen. That whoever was supposed to back me up wouldn’t show. I saw the handwriting on the wall, and I finally left. I’m really glad I did. I love working for Blackhawk Security.”

Jake put his hand over Olivia’s and was shocked to feel a spark fly from his hand to hers. He snatched his hand away and curled his fingers into his palm. “I’m glad you resigned, as well,” he said. “Because if you hadn’t, you’d probably already be dead. A tragic fatal accident.”

“So why are you still working for the Bureau?” Olivia asked.

“Because until you showed up here at The Trailhead, I had no idea there were issues

at the Bureau. No idea you'd been set up." Jake's nails dug into his palm. "Might have to re-think that plan."

"Maybe you do," Olivia said. Her throat rippled when she swallowed, and he wanted to trace that muscle with his finger. Before he could act, Olivia leaned closer to Jake. "Are you going to keep working there?"

He raised one eyebrow. "Someone has to figure out who those other Russian assets in the Bureau are. Besides Nelson, of course. Because someone had to tell Nelson to send you into that meeting with no backup. There must be something you know that you don't realize you know."

Olivia sucked in a breath. "Yeah, since you're still an FBI agent, you have to figure that out, but you can't do it alone." She swallowed hard. "And you can't ask around," she said, fear filling her eyes. "You can't tap people on the shoulder and ask, 'Are you a Russian asset?' That'd be a good way to end up in a shallow grave somewhere."

"I think I can be a little more subtle than that," he said, rolling his eyes.

She reached across the table and grabbed his wrist. Her fingers tightened on his skin, sending heat through his nerves. "You can't trust anyone at the Bureau," she murmured.

The sensation of her fingers on his arm made him shiver. He fought the impulse to run his fingers over the place she'd just touched. Finally managed to say, "There are a few people I trust. Men and women I've worked with."

"Would you have trusted Cliff Kingsley?" she asked.

Jake tilted his head as he studied her. "Maybe," he said, blowing out a breath. "But

probably not. I never liked Kingsley. He always gave me the creeps. He liked to sneak up on people.” Jake shook his head. “Anyone who likes to sneak around like that? Makes you wonder why. What’re they trying to hide? Or overhear?”

“Yeah,” Olivia said. She let his wrist go, and he missed the pressure of her fingers on his skin. “Kingsley gave me the creeps, too. But I always thought it was because I was a woman and he had that... that predator vibe. He was always one step too close when he was talking to me. Pretty sure he did it to other women, as well.”

She tilted her head to study him. “You sure you’re still comfortable working for the Bureau?”

“To be honest, I’ve been thinking about getting out,” Jake said. “I’ve been an agent for fifteen years. Wouldn’t have a great pension, but I’d look for another job. And after hearing about how you were set up? About how you were almost killed? I might make the leap sooner rather than later.”

“I bet Mel and Dev would give you a job in a heartbeat,” Olivia said.

“Wouldn’t do that to you,” Jake said. “Force you to look at my ugly mug every day.”

Olivia waved her hand in the air. “Now that I know I was set up and you had nothing to do with it, I’d be fine working with you.” She leaned closer to Jake. “But before you quit, maybe you should work on finding out who the Russian assets in the Bureau are.”

“Yeah, that needs to be dealt with and I’d like to do it,” Jake lowered his voice, as if someone might overhear him. “But I’d need a partner, and I have no idea who can be trusted right now.”

“I think Diana Redfield can be trusted,” Olivia said.

Jake laughed. “Yeah, pretty sure she can be. But she’s not a field agent. She’s not going to dig around in the mud with me. She’s more of a big picture person.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Olivia said. She leaned closer to him. “I were you? I wouldn’t trust anyone at the Bureau to have my back right now,” she said.

“Hell, no,” Jake said immediately. “If one of my best Bureau friends offered to back me up, I’d turn him or her down. Only way to protect myself is to not trust a soul in the Bureau.”

Olivia sighed. “Kind of tough to do,” she said. “Most jobs, you work with a partner.”

“Yeah,” Jake said. “I know.” He tilted his head to study her. “Maybe I should talk to Mel and Dev and convince them to send someone to back me up. Low key. In the shadows. And by someone, I mean you.” He took a deep breath and leaned closer to her over the table. “You know more than anyone at the Bureau about what’s going on. You’re already up to speed. I don’t want to waste time convincing another agent that the threat is real. You already know the threat is real and how dangerous it is.”

“That’s a great idea,” Livvy said. “You make the request and I’ll make sure Mel sends me. In fact, why don’t we both talk to Mel and Dev before you have to go back to Washington? Lay out the facts for them. Convince them the threat is real. That Russian assets are hidden in the Bureau, and sooner or later, an agent is gonna be killed because of them.”

Jake stared at Olivia for a long moment. “That’s not a completely awful idea,” he finally said. “Why don’t you check with Mel and find out when we both could talk to her?”

“I’ll do that.” Livvy said. “It shouldn’t be too hard to convince them that you need backup that you can trust. They both know what happened in Brighton Beach, so it

should be easy to persuade them.”

“Sounds good.” Jake nodded at the people sitting at the bar, who were all watching them. “Go head and toss that beer in my face,” he said. “Otherwise, our audience is gonna be disappointed.”

“I’m afraid they’re going to have to suffer,” Olivia said, taking a pull of her drink. “No way am I wasting good Guinness on you.” One side of her mouth curled into a smile. “Much rather drink it.”

“If we end up working together, I’ll probably piss you off more than once or twice, so you’ll have plenty of other chances,” Jake said.

“Something to look forward to,” Olivia said, draining her glass. “I’ll talk to Mel and Dev and find out when we could meet with them. I’ll be in touch.”

Jake watched her walk toward the bar, carrying the empty beer glass and some bills. Her black boots tapped on the wooden floor, catching his eye. They ended just above her ankles. Olivia pushed through The Trailhead’s door, and a few minutes later, he heard the distinctive sound of a Harley outside the bar. No one could mistake that rumble that sounded like potato, potato, potato for anything else. What the hell? Williams rode a Harley?

Apparently, the woman had hidden depths.

Depth or not, he needed to stay away from Olivia Williams. But he’d just invited himself to work with her.

What the hell was wrong with him? Did he have a death wish? Because working with Olivia to find the Russian assets in the Bureau would be a very dangerous job, professionally.

And maybe personally, as well.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:42 am*

As he sat in the lounge area of the Excelsior, Jake glanced at his phone. Almost four. Olivia's job had fallen through, and should be here in an hour, and he was feeling twitchy. Unsettled. He knew it was because he hadn't run in a while. Hadn't worked on the machines in the Excelsior Hotel's workout room. He'd been too busy, but he needed to move. Work his muscles.

So he ran up to his room, threw on a pair of running shorts, a tee shirt and a pair of running shoes. Walked out of the hotel and jogged through town. When he was finally on the road out of Helena, the one that passed the Blackhawk Security compound, he got onto the shoulder and began to run instead of jog.

By the time he'd gone five miles, he was drenched in sweat. Just the way he liked his workouts. He glanced at his watch -- with any luck, he'd have time for a shower before he met with Olivia.

He had three miles left to get back to the Excelsior when he heard a motorcycle behind him. Pretty sure it was a Harley, but he didn't look over his shoulder. That was just asking to stumble over a rock on the edge and fall on his ass. Probably in front of Olivia.

Scowling, irritated that he'd even thought about not looking like a fool in front of Olivia, he ran a little faster. Not like he could outrun a motorcycle, but at least he wouldn't look like he was dogging it.

The motorcycle was getting closer and closer, and he heard it slow down. Finally it glided to a stop about fifty feet in front of him. Livvy turned on the saddle and flipped up her helmet's faceguard. "Thought that looked like you, dogging it into Helena."

“The hell I was dogging it. I was going at a good clip until you forced me off the road.”

“Hah. You were already on the edge of the road, running on the stones. Don’t you know that’s not good for your knees? All that uneven surface?”

Jake slowed down as he reached Livvy, who was balancing her motorcycle with both feet planted on the ground. His gaze went right to those too-hot black ankle boots. “Better the uneven ground than getting mowed down by a bike or a car.”

Olivia snorted. “Like someone couldn’t see you, running along the road? You’re as big as a moose out here.”

“Not quite, Williams.” Jake bent at the waist and sucked in a deep breath. “You run into a moose on that thing? You’ll know you’ve hit something big. You run into me? I’d go flying off the road.”

Her gaze scanned him from head to toe, lingering on the sweat darkening his shirt and running down the sides of his face. Finally she said, “You interested in a ride back to town?”

He patted his head. “Would have been, but you only have one helmet. I wouldn’t ride one of those donor cycles without a helmet.”

“Hah,” she said, swiveling on the seat to unlock the storage compartment. “I always carry an extra.” She pulled out a bright pink helmet and extended it toward him. “Here you go. Put in on and hop on behind me.”

Jake studied the helmet in Livvy’s hands. “Pink, huh?” He glanced down at his green running shorts. “Afraid I’d clash. Have to pass it up.”

Livvy rolled her eyes at him. “You afraid of pink, Jake? Too bad you’re not confident in your masculinity. That must be a tough burden to carry.”

Jake’s lips twitched. “You think I’m afraid of pink? Gimme that thing.”

He jammed it onto his head, but it was way too small. It perched on his crown like a giant bird.

“Oh, for God’s sake.” She snatched the helmet off his head and adjusted something in the webbing inside the helmet. “Here,” she said. “Try it now.”

He put it on his head, and it fit perfectly. Sighing, he pulled the chin strap tight and slid onto the seat behind her. “Let’s go.”

“You know you have to hold on to me,” she said. She grabbed one of his hands and wrapped it around her waist. “Other one, too,” she said, sounding way too chipper about this. Like she was really enjoying tormenting him.

“Yeah, yeah. I’ve ridden on bikes before.” He twined his other arm around her waist, looked for the footrests and said, “I’m good to go.”

“Okay, then. Hold tight.”

His fingers tightened into the sweater she wore, pressing into her abdomen. She was clearly fit -- her abs were firm. Hard. And he wondered what they would taste like if he put his mouth on them.

Wondered how she’d react to his mouth on her belly. Would she moan? Suck in her breath? Would she writhe beneath his mouth?

Ollivia? She’d try to knock his block off.

What the hell was he thinking about Livvy's belly for, anyway? Time to get his mind off Olivia and the way she'd taste. She pressed the accelerator and the bike leapt forward. He tightened his grip on her as the air streamed over his helmet. Cool air kissed the edges of his cheeks that weren't covered by the face guard. The bike rumbled with that distinctive Harley sound, and he found himself pressing even closer to Olivia.

The ride was over far too soon as she pulled into the parking structure at the Excelsior. She found a spot to park and turned off the engine. Kicked down the stand and waited for Jake to get off the bike. Then she threw her leg over the seat and slid off.

Livvy was a lot more graceful than he'd been, but at least he hadn't embarrassed himself by falling onto the concrete floor. He unbuckled the helmet and handed it to her, and she arranged both helmets in the storage compartment. Then she pocketed the key and began walking toward the hotel door.

He trotted after her to open the door -- his mother would smack him if he let a woman open a door herself. Once they were in the lobby, he turned to her and asked, "Wait down here for fifteen minutes or so? I need to shower."

She raised one eyebrow. "You don't want me to wait in your room?"

"Hell, no, Williams. I'm afraid that seeing my naked chest would make you lose control of yourself. I'll be back in fifteen minutes or so." He headed toward the bar, glancing over his shoulder. "What can I get you to drink while you wait?"

"Iced tea," she said.

"Really? Nothing stronger? You'll probably need it, talking to me."

“I’ll take my chances, Dunbar. Iced tea is good. I’ve gotta ride back to the compound.”

“You got it.” He asked the bartender for a glass of iced tea, and the guy pointed Jake toward a beverage machine against the wall. Jake drew a glass of iced tea, grabbed a couple of packets of sweetener, and took them over to Olivia.

“I’ll be right back down,” he said.

“Take your time,” she said, pulling her phone out of her pants pocket. “I’ll be fine.”

Jake raced through his shower, threw on clean clothes and hurried down to the lounge. Livvy was sitting in a corner booth, scrolling through her phone, her iced tea half empty on the table. He slid into the other side of the booth as one of the attendants put an array of covered dishes on the buffet table.

“You want something to eat?” he asked. “They serve snacky stuff in the evening.”

“I don’t need you to buy me dinner,” she said.

He rolled his eyes. “Get off your high horse, Livvy,” he said. “You don’t want anything from me. I get it. But the food is free for guests. And their guests. I’m hungry, so I’m gonna get something to eat.”

He slid out of the booth without looking at Livvy again. She was taking this ‘enemies’ thing way too far.

He filled a plate with salmon sliders, salad and some roasted cauliflower. When he turned to sit down, he was surprised to see Livvy fixing a plate for herself.

Evil Jake wanted to gloat when she sat down with a loaded plate, but he merely

nodded at her. He was surprised to see she'd chosen almost the exact same things as he did, exchanging green beans for cauliflower.

They ate in surprisingly companionable silence until their plates were empty, then they both went up for dessert. Jake ordered a glass of wine from the bartender.

When he sat back down, he caught Livvy eyeing his wine. "You want a glass?" he asked.

"If I do, I'll get it myself," she said.

"Be my guest," he said. "But I wouldn't be buying it for you. The Bureau would. And I'd say they owe you a glass of wine after the way Nelson hung you out to dry."

She held his gaze for a long moment, then sighed. "Yeah, I suppose they do. In that case, I'd like a glass of cabernet."

He nodded. "Good choice. I'll be right back."

Once he handed Livvy her wine and slid into the booth again, he asked, "Did you talk to Mel and Dev about working with me in Washington?"

She swallowed a sip of wine and nodded. "I did. They're all for it. And Mel will give the Bureau a break on the price, since Blackhawk Security has stolen a number of their agents."

"How're they gonna put that on an invoice?" he asked.

"Mel's calling in a favor from Redfield. It was Mel and Dev who sniffed out Cliff Kingsley. Anytime one of Mel's agents works for the FBI, Mel gives them a nice discount."

“Okay. Sounds like that’s above my pay grade, but I’m glad they have an arrangement with Redfield.” He leaned back in his chair. “Have you thought about where you’re gonna stay in Washington?”

Livvy shrugged. “I’ll find a hotel close to your apartment,” she said. Text me your address, and I’ll book something close.”

Jake studied her for a few moments. She looked tired, and he wondered if she’d been on a job. “I’ve been thinking about where you should stay,” he finally said. He glanced around and leaned closer, even though there was no one close enough to eavesdrop. “I don’t like the idea of you staying in a hotel,” he said, lowering his voice. “This whole situation has me spooked, and I don’t spook easily.” He described the way other agents had either gawked at him or avoided him like he was poison. “We don’t know who at the FBI is a Russian asset, other than Nelson, which means we have no idea where the threat will be coming from. I think it would be smart for you to stay at my apartment.”

Livvy opened her mouth to say something, and Jake held up a hand. “Hear me out before you jump down my throat. I have a two-bedroom apartment, and it has two bathrooms. So you’d have your own space. I’ll give you the code to get into my building and the code for my front door. That way, no one will know you’re in town. I assume you’re flying with a fake ID?”

“Absolutely,” she said. Her mouth quirked up in a smile. “Mel and Dev keep a stash of fake papers -- SSN’s, driver’s licenses, even a few birth certificates. When we need to go incognito, we use one of them. I’ll be Patricia Coombs when I’m in D.C. So even if they’re monitoring flights, there’ll be nothing to send up a red flag. And I transfer planes in Chicago, so they won’t see anyone arriving from Helena.”

“Great,” Jake said, exhaling with relief. He didn’t want Olivia to have a target on her back before she even arrived in Washington. “But I still think you should stay with

me. We'd have one place to defend, and two people to do it. As far as I know, I'm not on anyone's radar at this point. But Nelson has told me he's going to put me on some undercover work." He frowned. "He hasn't said what it would be, though, and that's a red flag, I think. All the other times I've gone undercover, he tells me I'll be undercover and spells out the details up front. Not this time. He said, and I quote, the details are being worked out."

Olivia frowned and rested her arms on the table to lean toward him. "That could be interpreted a lot of different ways."

"Yeah," Jake said. "It could be. But to be safe, I have to assume the worst. So I'm glad you're gonna be there to have my back." He studied her for a long moment. "I'd rather have you backing me up than another FBI agent. At least I'd know you weren't being paid to take me out."

Her cheeks reddened, as if she was surprised by the compliment. Then she smiled. "I promise I won't be in Tennessee that day."

Jake shook his head. "I know it wasn't my fault, but I'm really sorry I wasn't there to help you on that case."

She shrugged. "I survived. All's well that ends well. That's the important thing. And I'm so glad I talked to you. Otherwise, I would've had no idea that Nelson had set me up that day."

Jake leaned across the table. "Neither of us is gonna get hurt on this job," he said. "I'll have your back, and I trust that you'll have mine."

Livvy nodded. "Yeah. Not sure I'll ever completely trust anyone at the Bureau again. Good thing I don't have to work with them."

“Except with me.”

“Yeah, well, I’m pretty sure you won’t throw me under the bus,” Livvy said.”

“Good to have a goal,” Jake said, holding her gaze. “Get you from pretty sure I won’t throw you under the bus to certain that I won’t.”

“We’ll work on that while I’m in D.C.” Livvy said as she stood up. “Gotta get back to the compound. I’ll see you in D.C.”

“I’ll text you my address. You text me your flight details. See you in a few days.”

“I’ll be there.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:42 am*

Five days after he'd talked to Livvy, Jake was back in D.C., still waiting to hear about his upcoming undercover job. He'd been listening to chatter at the FBI office and hadn't heard anything about Russian assets or undercover jobs that had gone south. But it felt as if everyone at the Bureau had heard about Livvy's disastrous undercover job and was now looking at him. It wasn't hard to read their expressions. What the hell had happened to Livvy? And was Jake part of the problem? Someone had clearly leaked the fact that he was supposed to have been her backup and hadn't shown up. Now his fellow agents were holding their breath, waiting for another disaster -- one that wouldn't have the same happy ending as Livvy's ordeal.

Which had to be his imagination, because why would anyone be suspicious of him? When he was supposed to be backing up Livvy, he'd been in Tennessee, testifying at a trial. And more recently, he'd been in Helena to take a deposition from the son of a mobster, which had nothing to do with Russia. He avoided Nelson, other than to nod at him as they passed in the hallway. But Jake was jacked up. Hyperalert. Watching everyone in the building, looking for someone who passed him in the hall too often. Someone he saw more often than he should -- in the hall. The cafeteria. The parking lot. At the deli he went to a couple times a week for a sandwich. Looking for signs someone was watching him.

Wondering if the people who crossed his path a little too often were Russian assets. Which he knew was ridiculous -- no one was going to wear a sign that said 'I'm working for Russia'. Everyone was merely doing their job, which made it almost impossible to sniff out a traitor. As far as he knew, he was the only one who knew what had happened to Livvy -- other than the person or persons who'd betrayed her and set her up.

As Jake finished the paperwork from his most recent assignment, Nelson slid into the chair beside his desk. “How’re you doing, Dunbar?” he asked.

“Good,” Jake said. “I’ll have the paperwork from the Ganson case ready by the end of the day. I’ll leave it on your desk for your signature.”

“Great,” Nelson said, shifting in Jake’s guest chair. He took a deep breath and said, “I have the details for your undercover job,” he said. His gaze slid away from Jake.

“Yeah? What’ll I be doing?”

“You’re gonna meet with a group of Bratva members in Brooklyn,” he said, his gaze darting to Jake’s before quickly looking away. “They’re looking for an enforcer, and I thought you’d be a good candidate to send them. You’re big. Intimidating. And I’ve seen how menacing you can be while you’re working. I think you’ll fit all their requirements.”

“What exactly are they expecting me to do?” Jake asked. He resisted the urge to wipe his damp palms on his thighs. This sounded like a dangerous, likely lethal assignment.

“Collect protection money from store owners. Approach new store owners to coerce them into paying for protection. Rough up any store owners who resist.”

Jake frowned. “We’re the FBI. We don’t actually rough up people who won’t work with us.”

“You just need to make it look like they were roughed up. Give them a black eye. Something everyone will see so they know you’re serious.”

“You expect me to actually hurt people?” Jake asked, disbelief in his voice.

Nelson shrugged. "You wanna make an omelet? You gotta break a few eggs."

Jake held his boss's gaze, horrified by what Nelson wanted him to do. Unless the plan was for Jake to die before he could do any enforcing. Or reporting to Nelson's boss what Nelson expected him to do. The possibility of an early grave was looking more and more likely.

Clearing his throat, Jake said, "When and where is this meeting supposed to take place?"

"I'll contact my source and get that for you in a few days."

"Okay. And when are they expecting me to show up?"

"Our source gave them a range of dates, one to two weeks from now." Nelson smiled. "You're finishing up a job for your previous employer."

"Who would be...?" Jake frowned at Nelson. This sounded like the perfect formula for getting whacked by suspicious Russians.

"A rival group in a different part of Brooklyn. Not Brighton Beach. An area the Bratva is trying to expand into."

"So not only am I roughing up store owners, but I'll be suspected because I'm not local."

Nelson shrugged. "Yeah, that's a downside. The upside? You won't have any history with these guys. So you can basically be whoever you want to be."

"And what does the FBI expect to gain from this undercover operation?" Jake asked.

“Information,” Nelson said smoothly. “Insights into how the Bratva operates. And opportunities to flip members and turn them into informants.”

Jake frowned at him. “Has anyone from this group approached the FBI? Offered themselves as an informant in exchange for dismissing charges against them?”

“No, that’s part of your job. Find those guys. Try to flip them.”

Jake’s stomach twisted into a knot. Thank God Livvy would be there to back him up. Because he was definitely going to need it with this shit show. Pretty much everything Nelson said had danger signs flashing in bright red.

“Okay, Nelson. I’m on it.”

Nelson smiled at him. “Good to hear, Dunbar. Check in daily while you’re undercover.”

“Will do, boss,” Jake said, watching Nelson walk out of his office.

Next up on his personal agenda -- figuring out why Nelson wanted him dead.

Jake left the office early. He needed to think through this assignment and figure out how to handle it. How Livvy could best back him up. And he needed to do some research on this new Bratva group.

He went to the library and looked up the name of the Bratva clan he’d be infiltrating. It was an actual group, a small social club in Sheepshead Bay. He dug into them, found they were active in all the usual Bratva niches -- occasional contract killing, loan sharking, prostitution, construction management, money laundering, robbery.

Further research revealed that this group was particularly violent. They were

suspected of many murders that had never been solved. And Jake was pretty sure Nelson hoped to add his murder to that list.

Putting all his source material back where he'd found it, Jake headed home. He parked his car and took the elevator up to the fourth floor. He had just touched the first key on his keypad when he heard a sound from inside his place. A floorboard squeaked in the kitchen. He'd never fixed it -- he figured it was an early warning system. And today it had done its job.

Sliding his Glock 17 out of his underarm holster, he held it in his right hand as he typed in the code to unlock the door with his left hand. The door had a small squeak, which he'd also never repaired. Another early warning system.

When he heard the door unlock, he pushed it open and stepped into his apartment. The noises he'd heard before had stopped. His apartment was completely silent.

But Jake could feel the presence of another person. Was it the very faint sound of someone breathing too fast? The soft brush of clothing against a counter or a chair? The slide of a foot over the hardwood floor?

He'd go through the kitchen into the living and dining area. That way he'd be alerted if someone broke for the front door.

Holding his gun in a tight grip, pointed in front of him, he stepped into the kitchen. No one there. So he slid over the floor to the dining area. Was just about to step into the open space when Livvy appeared in the doorway, her own Glock extended in front of her. "Get on the floor," she yelled. "Right now!"

His shoulders dropped and he lowered his gun. Replaced it in its holster. "Livvy? What are you doing here? I wasn't expecting you today."

Livvy, her ashen face now bright red, blew out a breath and holstered her own weapon. “Jesus, Dunbar! You scared the crap out of me.”

“Likewise,” Jake said, swallowing hard. “I thought you weren’t coming for two more days.”

“Got away early. Figured we could use the time.”

“Yeah,” Jake said. “We’re gonna need it.” He shrugged off his sports coat and hung it in the hall closet. “You want a beer? I sure as hell need one today.”

“Yeah, a beer sounds good.”

He glanced over his shoulder at her. “Sorry I don’t have any Guinness. I was gonna get some tomorrow.”

“Don’t bother,” she said. “Canned and bottled Guinness doesn’t taste the same. I’m fine with whatever you’re having.”

Jake pulled two bottles of Yuengling out of the fridge, opened them both and handed one to Livvy. “Let’s sit down,” he said, motioning toward the table in the eating area. Then he held one finger to his lips. Watched Livvy until she signaled she understood.

He pulled his bug detector out of his desk and turned it on. Began running it over every piece of furniture, everything hanging on the wall, every cabinet in the kitchen. When he’d finished checking the apartment, he stowed the device in his desk again and turned to Livvy.

“I started doing that when I got home from Helena,” he said. “Your story was disturbing on so many levels.”

“Good. That’s smart. Glad you thought of it.” Gripping the bottle with her right hand, Livvy studied him for a long moment. “You look... unsettled. Uneasy.”

“Yeah, that’s one way of putting it.” He took a long pull of his beer and set the bottle on the table. “I talked to Nelson today.” He drew a shuddering breath. “He’s basically sending me on a suicide mission.”

“What the hell?” Livvy frowned at him. “What do you mean?”

“It’s the Bratva,” he said. “But not in Brighton Beach. This is a group in Sheepshead Bay.”

“Holy shit.” Livvy set her bottle on the table with a thump. “Those guys are all psychopaths. Even the Brighton Beach Bratva are scared of them. What are you supposed to do?”

“Meet with them. Then I’m supposed to go to small businesses. Strong-arm them into paying protection money to the Bratva.” He shook his head. “Nelson suggested that I blacken a few eyes if they didn’t want to pay the protection money.”

“Get out of town!” Livvy stared at him, the bottle lifted halfway to her mouth. “You know that’s expressly forbidden by the Bureau.”

“Oh, yeah. I know. But Nelson didn’t give a damn.” He took another glug of beer. “I figure he expects me to be dead before I can report back to anyone at the Bureau.”

“What did you do to get on Nelson’s shit list?” Livvy asked.

Jake shrugged. “No idea. Maybe he knows I met with you in Montana. That’s the only thing I could think of. Do you even know if Nelson knows where you’re working?”

“I’m sure he does. He’s the kind who does his homework. He knew you were in Helena to talk to Nick and Celia, and he knows Blackhawk Security is there. Maybe that spooked him. Maybe he was afraid you’d talked to me. Or someone else at Blackhawk Security who might know what happened to me.” She set her beer bottle on the table with a hollow thump. “You think he’s just being proactive? Getting rid of anyone who might be a problem for him?” she asked.

“Possible.” Jake took another sip of beer. “Doesn’t make me any less dead if we don’t figure this out.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Livvy said. He liked how confident she sounded. How certain she was that they’d suss out Nelson’s strategy and come up with a plan to blow it up.

Livvy shook her head slowly. “There’s nothing even a little subtle about his plan. Nelson is sending you out to be killed.”

“Yeah, I figured as much,” Jake said, his gut twisting into a knot.

Livvy leaned closer, locking her gaze with his. “We need to talk to Diana Redfield,” she said. “Tell her what Nelson wants you to do, including the stuff about knocking those small business guys around.”

“That’s probably a good idea, but what does that get us?” Jake said. “We don’t want Nelson wrapped up too soon. We want to figure out who his buddies are in the Bureau. And in order to do that, we can’t let him know we’re looking into him. Make sure he thinks I’m on this undercover job. On my way to an early grave.”

“We can come up with a story for Nelson,” Livvy said slowly. “Figure out a way Nelson and the unsubs might signal their plans. And you, being the smart, intuitive agent that you are, smelled a rat. Backed off and watched them. Figured out what their game was. And how to stymie them. When you don’t die, Nelson will freak out.

Might even take matters into his own hands. If he does that, we have him. Because from now on, other than when you're at headquarters, we're attached at the hip."

Jake nodded slowly. "Yeah, that sounds like a good plan. Maybe I tell Nelson that I'm doing some surveillance work in Sheepshead Bay. Watching the address I'm supposed to go to. Seeing who goes in and out. Figure out how many people are usually there. The kinds of things any undercover person would want to know before they risk their neck."

"Do you have the address you're supposed to go to?" Livvy asked.

"Nelson hasn't given it to me yet. But he'll have to do it soon. I'm gonna tell him that I'm going to do surveillance. See what's what. He wouldn't expect me to go into a job cold, without checking it out first."

"Yeah, you're right about that." Livvy took another gulp of beer. "How about I try to set up a meeting with Diana for tomorrow? Maybe dinner somewhere away from the district? A restaurant where FBI agents wouldn't usually go?"

"That sounds like a great idea," Jake said. This whole 'assignment' sat in his stomach like cannonballs. "It's not that I want to bitch to Diana about what Nelson's doing. I just want her to know what's up." He studied Livvy for a moment, reassured by her calm facade. She wasn't freaking out, and he liked that in a partner. "I think, with what Nelson said to me today, after what he did to you, Diana'll realize he's a problem. A likely Russian asset. And she has the authority to look into his family. See where he was born. Where his parents were born. Check his bank accounts. See if he has unexplained money somewhere."

Jake swallowed another mouthful of beer. "I like the way you think, Williams. Yeah, see if Diana can meet us somewhere for dinner. Or even lunch. Somewhere that agents don't usually go."

Livvy leaned back in her chair. Smiled. “I’ll call her right away. Maybe I can catch her before she leaves tonight.”

“Sounds good,” Jake said. “And it feels like we’re taking away Nelson’s control. I like that. I want to keep him on his back foot. Off balance. Maybe he’ll make a mistake. Give himself away.”

“We can only hope,” Livvy said.

Jake finished his beer and set the bottle on the table. “Go ahead and call Diana. Let’s get the ball rolling.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:42 am*

After mentally preparing for the coming conversation, Livvy opened her phone's contact list. She hit the entry for Diana Redfield, put the phone on speaker and listened as Diana's phone rang.

Finally, Redfield answered. "Director Redfield," she said, her voice crisp and confident.

"Director Redfield, this is Olivia Williams. I was an FBI agent before I left to work for Blackhawk Security. I..."

Redfield interrupted. "Hi, Olivia. I remember you. I hope you're calling to see if you can get your old job back."

Olivia's shoulders relaxed. "Sorry, I'm not looking to return to the FBI. I'm very happy at Blackhawk Security. But I'm in Washington D.C. right now, working as a backup for Jake Dunbar. He's with me, and you're on speaker."

There was a long moment of silence on the line. Finally Redfield said, "Mel called to arrange to have you backup Jake. But she didn't tell me why one of our agents isn't backing him up."

Olivia's toes curled in her socks. "That's a very good question, and it's one of the reasons I called. Jake and I need to talk to you about some concerns we have."

There was another long beat of silence. Finally Redfield said, "Can't Agent Dunbar go to his supervising agent with his concerns?"

Olivia cleared her throat. “No, he can’t. His supervising agent is...” She took a deep breath. “We believe he’s part of the problem.”

She heard Diana suck in a breath. After a long moment, she said, “Yes, we definitely need to meet.”

Livvy said, “We were hoping we could meet with you tonight, for dinner, somewhere outside the D.C. area. Neither Jake nor I think it would be smart for other agents to see us talking to you.”

The line was dead silent, as if all the air had been sucked out of this room and Diana’s. Then Diana said, “This sounds extremely serious.”

Livvy cleared her throat. “Jake and I both believe that it is. And since we don’t know who’s safe, we decided we needed to talk directly with you. We both trust you and believe you have the best interests of the Bureau at heart.”

After clearing her throat, Diana said, “Thank you for that. And you’re right. I’m responsible for all aspects of the FBI, including its reputation. I’m not about to let anyone damage our standing in the law enforcement community.”

“We don’t want that either, and I was certain you’d feel that way,” Livvy said, letting her shoulders relax. “That’s why I called you.”

“I don’t like the idea of a restaurant,” Redfield said. “Too many wagging ears anywhere in or near D.C. Instead, why don’t you and Agent Dunbar come over to my house tonight? I can’t promise a gourmet meal -- what you’ll probably get is pizza. But it’ll be secure and safe, and you’ll be able to talk freely without worrying that someone’s listening in.”

“That sounds perfect.” Olivia exhaled and let her shoulders relax. “Instead of texting

me your address, why don't you tell me now? I'll write it down."

"That's smart, Olivia. Here goes. Are you ready?"

As Redfield spoke, Jake shoved a small notebook and pen toward her, open to a blank page. "Go ahead, Director."

Redfield recited an address, and Olivia scribbled it down. "Got it," she said. "What time would you like us to show up?"

"How about seven?" Redfield said. "That's after the worst of the traffic, and it'll let you watch for anyone tailing you."

"We'll definitely do that. I have a rental car, so we'll use that in case people know what Jake drives."

"Very good," Redfield said. "I'll see you at seven. And for God's sake, be careful!"

"We will, ma'am. See you tonight."

Livvy ended the call and swiveled to face Jake. "I think that went very well," she said. "Redfield didn't sound skeptical or suspicious." She picked up her beer and took a pull. "She sounded like she actually believed me."

"Why wouldn't she believe you?" Jake said. "You were an excellent agent when you worked here and you left for a very good reason -- you feared for your life."

"Yeah, but I never told her that. I just told her I had a great opportunity with Blackhawk Security and I was going to take it."

"I'm guessing tonight she'll ask for an explanation about why you left."

“And I won’t hesitate to tell her.” Livvy took another gulp of beer. “Won’t pull my punches, either. I came far too close to dying in Brighton Beach, and if I hadn’t been really lucky, I would have died.”

“I think it’s time you told her exactly why you left,” Jake said.

Livvy swallowed. Drew a deep breath, then nodded. “Yeah, we have to tell her our stories tonight -- my experience in Brighton Beach, and what Nelson wants you to do in Sheepshead Bay.” She grimaced. “I realized after I left the Bureau that I should have given her all the dirt. Should have told her exactly what happened to me in Brighton Beach.”

Jake shrugged. “Yeah, you probably should have. And it wouldn’t have blown up on me, since I had a solid alibi for why I wasn’t in Brighton Beach, backing you up. Testifying at a trial -- especially a high-profile trial like that one -- holds up every time.”

“Why was it so high profile?” Livvy asked.

“The perp, who we caught when we stormed the house where the kid was being held, was a local police officer, a lieutenant. The shit hit the fan twenty-nine ways from Sunday. The perp tried to pin it on another guy, someone who’d kidnapped a kid a couple years earlier. But it turned out that guy was in prison when the kidnapping took place.”

“Oops,” Livvy said with a grin. “Rule number one if you’re gonna finger someone else for your crime? Make sure he’s not in prison.”

“Yeah. After that little tidbit, along with the kid’s testimony, which was rock solid, the lieutenant’s fate was sealed. No doubt about the outcome of the trial.”

They stared at each other for a moment that stretched a few beats too long, until Jake jumped up. “Let me show you where your room is,” he said, speaking too quickly. “You probably want to, ah, freshen up. Or something.”

Livvy’s lips twitched. She’d never seen Jake off balance, and was enjoying it. Instead of saying something snarky, which was her usual go-to, she said, “Yeah, that’s probably a good idea.”

Jake led her to the spare room and waved her in. He pointed to the hall bathroom and said, “This is your bathroom. There’s another one in my bedroom.”

“Thanks, Dunbar,” she said. “I’ll put my stuff away, then we can talk about our approach to Diana.”

“Sounds good,” he said.

Livvy watched him swipe his hands down the thighs of his jeans -- clearly he was nervous about this.

She was just as nervous, but she wasn’t about to give him any indications of that. To make sure she didn’t, she closed the door in his face, then drew a deep breath. My God . She hadn’t been able to take her eyes off Jake since he walked into the kitchen with that Glock in his hand.

What the hell was wrong with her? She knew better than to get involved with a fellow agent -- even though she wasn’t an FBI agent any longer. But they were working together on this, and any personal connections could be disastrous. So as she unpacked her suitcase, she shoved Jake out of her head and thought only about what she was going to say to Diana tonight.

\* \* \*

After several uncomfortable hours in Jake's apartment, while they struggled to find topics of conversation that were neutral and unrelated to their cases, they left the apartment and climbed into Livvy's car. After she entered Diana Redfield's address into her navigation system, she glanced over at Jake as they pulled out of his parking lot. "You're not going to kick up a fuss about me driving?" she asked

He swiveled to face her, frowning. "Why would I? It's your rental car. I figure anyone who can handle a Harley can drive a Chevy."

She glanced at him, then looked back at the road. "It doesn't damage your masculinity to ride in a car driven by a woman?"

He looked at her with a puzzled expression, as if wondering what planet she was from. "Hell, no," he said. "Your car, you drive. And it made perfect sense to take your car, since it's a rental and unidentifiable as belonging to either of us."

Wow . She hadn't expected that from the ultra-masculine Jake Dunbar. "Apparently you have hidden depths," she murmured. She kept her eyes on the road, although she looked into the rear-view mirror frequently.

Jake draped his arm over the back of his seat and swiveled to face her. "I think what you meant to say is that you're shocked I'm not a sexist pig asshole."

An unexpected laugh erupted from her throat. "Yeah, I guess that sums it up."

"I'm the oldest of five kids. The rest of them are girls. I learned really early not to underestimate my sisters. Not to pretend I was right because I was the boy." His mouth curled into a grin, and she liked that smile on Jake. The one that said he was proud of his sisters. "My sisters are all awesome, and I don't say that because they're my sisters. They're brilliant, accomplished women."

“Good to know that about you,” Livvy murmured. “I’ll look forward to meeting them some time.”

He shot another glance at her. “Unlikely,” he said. “They’re spread all over the country.”

“My loss,” she said with a shrug.

Jake glanced at his side-view mirror. She’d seen him doing that regularly. “Watching for a tail?” she asked.

“Yeah. Don’t see anything yet. No cars sticking close behind us. No one hanging back but keeping a couple cars between us. Once we turn off this main highway, it’ll be easier to spot a tail.”

Ten minutes later, he said, “We’re getting closer to Redfield’s house. I’ve been watching the map, and I think we should turn left soon. That’ll take us into her neighborhood, but it won’t immediately scream that we’re going to the Director’s house. And if anyone’s hanging back, it’ll force them into the open.”

“Good plan,” Livvy said, slowing down and signaling a turn.

She drove into a subdivision with largish houses on generous lots. The yards were well-maintained, the lawns mowed, and the plantings at the front of the houses both elegant and decorative.

Two blocks in, there were no cars behind them, so she made a right turn. She took a roundabout route to Redfield’s house, confident that they hadn’t been followed.

She parked around the corner from Redfield’s street, several houses down from the corner. When they slid out of the car, Livvy tucked her arm into Jake’s elbow, letting

him hold the bottle of wine they'd picked up close to his apartment. Anyone watching would think they were a couple going to a dinner party.

Diana's house was a white Colonial with black shutters. The plantings in the front yard were colorful flowers, but everything was low to the ground. So no one could hide behind bushes, Livvy realized. Smart. She'd bet the plantings in the backyard were the same -- low and open, leaving no hiding places.

Jake rang the doorbell, and moments later, Diana Redfield opened it. She was a tall, slender woman, probably in her late thirties or early forties, with short blond hair and green eyes.

"Welcome," she said with a smile, as if they were actual friends coming over for dinner. "Come on in."

They stepped into the house, which was decorated with what appeared to be antiques and furnished in a way that complemented the colonial exterior. Jake handed Redfield the bottle of wine. "In case someone was watching. To make it look like we were merely dinner guests."

Redfield smiled. "Good thinking." She waved them into the dining room, which had three place settings. "Pizza should arrive shortly. One veggie and one pepperoni. Have a seat while I open this bottle of wine."

She disappeared into what looked like a kitchen, and Jake and Livvy took seats on one side of the table.

A few minutes later, Redfield returned with three wine glasses and the opened bottle of wine. She set the glasses in front of each place setting, then slid into a seat on the other side of the table.

“Before we say anything, you need to know that my house is swept daily. So you can be sure no one’s listening in to our conversation. Please speak freely.” She glanced from Livvy to Jake. “And please don’t sugarcoat anything. I want to know what you think is going on, and I don’t want you to hide any truths from me to protect me.” She slashed air quotes around the ‘protect me’.

Livvy glanced at Jake, and he gave her a short, tiny nod. As if saying, ‘Perfect’.

“Which of you wants to start?” Redfield said.

“Livvy should start, ma’am,” Jake said. “Her incident was disturbing on so many levels. She almost died. It’s what triggered our suspicions.”

“Call me Diana,” Redfield said. “We’re colleagues, or at least we used to be,” she said with a nod at Livvy. “Tell me what’s happened to have you so alarmed.”

Livvy glanced at Jake and gave him a tiny nod, which he returned. ‘You tell your story, then I’ll tell mine,’ was reflected in his eyes.

Drawing a deep breath, Livvy began, “I was sent on an undercover job several months ago in Brighton Beach. To a Bratva group.”

One of Diana’s eyebrows rose. “Bratva? I wasn’t aware we had any operations involving the Bratva.”

Livvy shrugged. “I wasn’t either, but those were my orders, so I went to Brighton Beach. Did some surveillance for a couple of days, then made my approach.” She glanced at Jake, and she knew he’d realize she was asking permission to tell his part in the story.

Jake nodded. “Tell the director everything.”

“Before I left, my supervisor told me that Jake would be my backup. Even gave me very specific instructions to have a text ready on my phone and send it immediately if I was concerned about my safety.”

Livvy took a deep breath. “Which I was. Very quickly. I had been told that this group of men were interested in working with the FBI. But that was the farthest thing from the truth. They had no interest in working with us, and that was clear from the beginning of our conversation. They had no idea why I was there, although they did acknowledge that my supervisor, Don Nelson, had contacted them.”

Livvy swallowed, and she felt Jake reaching for her hand beneath the table. She curled her hand around his -- retelling her story was rattling her more than she'd realized it would.

“I managed to get away from the meeting, but I knew I'd been very lucky. The man in charge sent his teenaged son out of the building with me. I kept him in front of me, but I was extremely wary. When we got to the bottom of the stairs, he began to reach beneath his shirt. As if he had a gun concealed there. So I kicked him in the, ah, privates. When he dropped to the ground I kicked him in the head. Then I opened the door and ran like hell to my car and tore out of Brooklyn.”

Diana looked at Jake. “And your backup never showed up?”

Livvy inhaled and nodded at Jake. He nodded back, as if he understood completely. This part of the story was his.

“The day Livvy met with the Russians, I was in Tennessee for a trial. The trial was for a kidnapping we'd investigated and resolved six months earlier. We recovered the kidnapped child and arrested the perp, and because I was part of the team that broke into the house and saved the kid, as well as arresting the perp, I had to be there.”

Diana looked from Jake to Livvy, then back to Jake. “Were you ever told you were supposed to be Olivia’s backup for this meeting in Brooklyn?” she asked.

“No, ma’am,” he said. “My boss never told me I needed to back Livvy up. That trial had been on my calendar for months. And my boss, who was also Livvy’s boss, knew very well that I’d be testifying at the trial on that date and unavailable for backup duty.”

Diana’s mouth tightened, and she looked from Jake to Livvy. Back to Jake. “I see,” she finally said. “From the expressions on your faces, there’s more.”

Jake nodded slowly. “Yes,” he said. “A week ago, my boss, who’d been Olivia’s boss, as well, told me he was sending me on an undercover operation. Since Livvy had already told me what had happened to her, I was immediately wary. Concerned.” He pressed his lips together. “And rightly so.”

He told Diana what Nelson had told him -- to rough up the reluctant shopkeepers he was trying to convince to pay protection money to the Bratva. About what Livvy had told him about that particular group of the Bratva -- how dangerous they were. “Thank goodness Livvy got permission from Blackhawk Security to be my backup for this job.” He clenched his teeth. Swallowed. “After what happened to Livvy, there was no one at the Bureau that I trusted to protect me. No one I was certain would have my back.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:42 am*

Just then the doorbell rang. Diana, her face grim, said, “That’ll be the pizza. Hold on a moment.” But Livvy noticed that she checked the peephole in the door before she opened it.

Then Diana opened the door and took the two boxes, handed the delivery person some folded bills, then shut the door and clicked both locks. Put the boxes on the table, then slid into her seat. “Please continue, Jake.”

He shrugged. “Not much more to say at this point. I haven’t gone to Sheepshead Bay for the meeting. I’m going to do a few days of surveillance before I do anything. And Livvy is going to back me up.”

Diana, who’d been leaning across the table to listen, leaned back in her chair. “Who is your supervisor?” she asked Jake.

He held her gaze. “Same supervisor Livvy had when she worked for the Bureau. Don Nelson.”

“I’m going to assume that the two of you have discussed this. Any conclusions?” Diana asked.

Jake nodded at Livvy, since she’d actually met with some Bratva members. He hadn’t yet had that pleasure.

She nodded back as if they were perfectly in sync. Like she knew exactly what he was going to say. His chest constricted, and he blew out a breath.

Livvy glanced at him again, then looked back at Diana. “Jake and I have discussed this,” she said. “Jake is concerned that Nelson might be a Russian asset.” She swallowed. “I’ve heard about what happened when Cliff Kingsley was arrested. Mel Melbourne and Devlin Smith were the ones who took Kingsley down. I’ve talked to them, and they’ve said they were sure there were more Russian assets at the Bureau, but that they hadn’t found anyone after Kingsley was arrested. They had no idea who they might be, other than the one person who’d been arrested shortly after Kingsley was caught.”

Diana looked at both of them, her mouth tight. “I suspect your fears about Don Nelson are on target,” she said. “We knew Kingsley wasn’t the only one, but after he was arrested, any others went deep. Stayed in the background. Didn’t cause any trouble that we could use to catch them.”

She glanced at the pizza boxes, pulled them toward her and opened them. “Help yourself. The pizza’s getting cold.”

As they ate, Diana said, “I’ll talk to my counterpart at the NSA. See if he can set up a sting operation to lure Nelson into the open.” Her jaw twitched as if she were holding herself in check. “I can’t do it, because that would tip Nelson off that I’m suspicious. Any Russian asset at the Bureau has a lot of information sources. But another agency? No one from the FBI would have access to their information or plans.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Livvy said. “We didn’t want to ask for help from any of the agents at the Bureau, because we have no idea if Nelson’s working alone.” She frowned. Glanced at Jake, who nodded to her, like they had some kind of psychic connection and he knew exactly what she was thinking. “Neither of us think Nelson’s the only one at the Bureau,” she finally said. “But since we have no idea who the others might be, we didn’t want to ask around. That would be guaranteed to send any Russian asset burrowing deep underground. We figured you’d have some ideas, as well as resources that we don’t have.”

Diana clenched her teeth, and rage flashed in her eyes, quickly hidden. “Jake, keep your mouth shut. If Nelson pushes you to go to Sheepshead Bay and meet with a group there immediately, stall him. Tell him you don’t do anything undercover until you’ve done due diligence. Then leave. You and Olivia go to Sheepshead Bay and check out this group. Keep me in the loop.” She glanced at Livvy. “Olivia has my personal phone number. She’ll give it to you. Use it if you need to reach me, anytime. Day or night.” She turned and walked into what had to be her home office. Opened what sounded like a safe, closed it again and came out holding two credit cards. “Take these and use them in Sheepshead Bay. In case Nelson is tracking you via your agency card.”

“Thanks, Diana,” Jake said, taking one and handing the other to Livvy. “We’ll leave tomorrow for Sheepshead Bay to check out the group there. Once we suss it out, I’ll probably take the meeting, but Olivia will back me up.” He clenched his teeth together. “I’m pretty sure Nelson’s plan was to have this group kill me. I won’t let that happen.”

“And neither will I,” Livvy said.

Diana put her hands on the table. “Thank you for bringing this to my attention,” she said. “If I get more information, I’ll let you know. It would be helpful to know who the other Russian assets are.”

“Yeah, it would,” said Livvy. “But bottom line? We don’t trust anyone at the FBI right now.” She forced a smile. “Present company excluded, of course.”

Diana’s smile was forced. “Keep me updated,” she said. She leaned across the table. “And please, please watch your backs. Watch each other’s backs.”

“Already planning on that,” Jake said as he pushed away from the table and held out his hand to Diana. “Thank you so much for listening to what we had to say,” he said.

“And believing us,” Livvy added.

Diana narrowed her eyes. “My FBI agents are the best law enforcement team in the world,” she said. “I will always trust them.” She pressed her lips together. “Until I get proof that I can’t.”

Olivia nodded. “With a little luck, I think we’ll be able to get you that proof,” she said.

Diana’s gaze shifted from Livvy to Jake. Back to Livvy. “If you two can’t do it? I’m not sure who could.”

With murmurs of thanks, Jake reached for the front door. Snatched his hand back before he could open it. Diana murmured, “Good thinking, Jake. Better not to go out that door, in case someone’s watching.”

She nodded toward the kitchen. “Go out the back. I’ll show you the best way to get back to your car.”

Livvy wanted to look out the window, see if anyone was in a car outside Diana’s door. But instead, she walked toward the kitchen with Jake.

Diana stopped at the door that led into the backyard. “Cut through my yard, then the one to the left.” She glanced at them. “Is that the street where you parked your car?”

“Yes, it is,” Livvy said.

“Good.” She smiled. “The neighbors in that yard kitty corner to the left? They’re out of town. No one’s staying at their house. All the neighbors keep an eye on it for them. Cut between it and the house to the right of that one, then you’ll be on the street where you parked your car. Get in and get out of the neighborhood. And watch for a

tail on your way back home.”

“We were doing that on the way here,” Jake said. “Didn’t spot a thing.”

“Hope it’s the same going home.” She nodded at each of them. “Call me every day, so I know you’re okay. And stay safe.”

“We’ll keep each other safe,” Livvy said.

Diana’s gaze touched on Livvy’s face, then on Jake’s. “Yes. Please do that.” She lowered her voice. “Thanks for trusting me with your concerns.”

“No one else we’d go to,” Olivia said.

“Thank you for your trust,” Diana said. “It means a lot to me.”

They both nodded at Diana, then began running through the backyards until they came to the space between the two houses Diana had pointed out. When they reached the edge of the houses, they waited for a long moment. Listened. When they heard nothing, they cautiously scanned the street.

Seeing nothing, they walked to Livvy’s rental car. Slid inside and locked the doors. Then they headed back to Jake’s apartment. As Livvy drove, Jake kept watch in the side mirror for anyone following them.

When they reached Jake’s apartment and he unlocked the door, Jake stepped inside and signaled for Livvy to pull out her gun and go into the kitchen and living room. Pulling out his own Glock, he walked toward the bedrooms. He checked both bathrooms, and when he saw that Livvy was in her bedroom, he checked his own bedroom.

“All clear,” he said as he stepped into the hall. He swung open the folding doors to the hall closet and peered between the coats. “No one here,” he said.

Livvy stepped out of her bedroom, and they walked into the living room. After double-checking that the front door was double locked, Jake went to his desk and pulled out the small device he’d used earlier. He flipped a switch and the display turned green.

Touching his finger to his mouth, signaling silence, he walked through his apartment, passing the wand over every frame on the wall, every piece of furniture, every lamp. It took him a while to complete the exhaustive search, but finally he clicked off the device. “We’re clear,” he said.

“I started doing that when I got back from Helena,” he said. “Your story was extremely disturbing, and I no longer trust anyone at the FBI besides Diana. I want to make sure no one’s bugged my place. Since it’s been a while since you worked for the FBI, I don’t think anyone will have connected us, but I’m not taking any chances. I do it every time I come home.”

“I never thought I’d be telling an FBI agent that it was smart to check for bugs every time he came home,” Livvy, said, slumping in her chair. “But it damn well is.” She drew in a deep breath and looked around Jake’s place. “You’ve got a great apartment, but I can’t wait to get out of here and over to Sheepshead Bay. A haven of serenity compared to D.C.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Looking forward to hearing what the NSA comes up with. Although I’m guessing that Nelson and whoever he’s working with at the Bureau are smart enough to use burner phones.”

“I’m sure they are,” Livvy said. “Just as I’m equally sure NSA’ll be able to work around the burners.” She grinned. “They are the NSA, after all.”

“Thank God. We need some help at the FBI, and they’re just the group to do it.” He sighed. “The sooner we get out of here and go to Sheepshead Bay, the happier I’ll be.” He rolled his eyes. “And I never thought that working with a Bratva group who’s primed to kill me would beat working out of FBI headquarters. At least we know the Bratva guys in Sheepshead Bay are our enemies.”

Livvy’s mouth lifted in a grin. “You live an exciting life, Dunbar,” she said.

“Yeah,” he said. “Just not the kind of excitement I was expecting when I signed up with the FBI.”

He glanced at Livvy, who had huge dark circles under her eyes. “I’m gonna go to bed. You must be exhausted after the long flight and then the meeting with Diana,” he said. “But if you want to stay up and unwind, that’s fine with me. I want to be ready for whatever happens tomorrow.”

Livvy nodded slowly, as if it took all her strength to keep her head steady on her neck. “Yeah, me too. I’m beat. I’ll see you in the morning,” she said.

“I’m gonna be out of here early, so don’t worry about getting up before I leave. I’ll be home by midday, I think.”

Livvy rolled her eyes. “Out of the frying pan and into the fire,” she muttered.

“Yeah.” Jake waved as he walked toward his bedroom. “See you tomorrow, Livvy.”

“Yeah. Be careful at headquarters tomorrow.”

“Careful’s my middle name,” he said.

\* \* \*

Jake got to his office early enough the next day that there were very few agents in the building yet -- which suited him just fine. He went into his office and rummaged through all his drawers, all his files, looking for anything sensitive. He didn't want to leave anything that could serve as a weapon or be handed over to the Sheepshead Bay Bratva to be used as a tool against him.

After he jammed all the paperwork he wanted to remove into his briefcase, he sat down and opened his computer. When he first suspected that Kingsley wasn't the only Russian asset at the Bureau, he'd put a keylogger on his computer to track anyone who logged in. To see what they were looking for and what they'd found.

He'd checked it every day and found nothing. But this morning, he had a hit. Someone had used his ID and password to log in.

His stomach tightening with anxiety, he carefully logged out and shut the computer down. He wished he'd installed a camera in his office so he could see who was snooping around, but it wasn't too late to do it now.

He wanted to run out and buy one immediately but knew that wouldn't be smart. He needed to wait. Go out to lunch and get a camera then. Stay late tonight, or maybe come back after everyone was gone. Install the camera then, and make sure it was well-hidden.

He'd bring Livvy back with him. She could keep a lookout while he installed the camera. And she'd probably have other good suggestions, too.

He was shocked at how natural it felt to go to Livvy for help. Despite their rocky first encounter at The Trailhead, when she'd wanted to take off his head, they'd developed a good working relationship.

But before he told Livvy what was going on, he had to talk to Nelson. Tell him he

was leaving for Sheepshead Bay to do surveillance on the area and the building he'd be walking into.

Before the meeting, he and Livvy would check out the meeting room during the night. Look for hiding places for Livvy. Easy escape routes. Potential traps. Everything a good agent did before an undercover job.

So he drew in a deep breath, stood up, and left a few tells behind -- a hair he'd pulled from his head, dropped onto his keyboard. He tilted the keyboard to the right, leaving it slightly askew. Then he walked down the hall to Nelson's office. But he locked his own office door first. Not something he'd ever done at the Bureau during the day unless he was going on an assignment. But now? Until they'd found all the other Russian assets at the Bureau, it was SOP -- standard operating procedure.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:42 am*

When he got to Nelson's door, it was closed. He could hear Nelson talking, so instead of knocking, he edged closer, trying to make out who he was talking to, and what they were saying.

Nelson was talking to another man, but they spoke so softly that their conversation was almost impossible to decipher. He stood close to the door anyway, trying to at least hear a few words.

Before he'd gotten anything, a chair scraped across the floor in Nelson's office. Jake immediately stepped back across the hall, and by the time the door opened, he was leaning against the paneling, scrolling through his phone.

Fred Windsor emerged and reared back when he saw Jake. "Dunbar. What are you doing here?"

Jake frowned at Windsor. That was none of his damn business. But instead of saying that, he answered, "Windsor. How're you doing?"

Windsor stared at him a moment, then nodded and walked quickly down the hall toward his own office. Jake watched him go, wondering why Windsor had been so jumpy. So nervous.

Could he possibly be one of Nelson's fellow Russian assets? Because of Windsor's odd behavior, he'd call Diana and give her a heads-up about the guy. Tell her she might want to take a look at him, too.

Just then Nelson turned in his chair and saw Jake leaning against the wall. "Dunbar.

You waiting for me?"

Jake pushed away from the wall. "Yeah. Your door was closed, so I figured you were in a meeting. Just need to talk to you for a few minutes."

"Sure," Nelson said. "Come on in."

Jake threw himself into Nelson's guest chair, still warm from Windsor's ass.

"What's up?" Nelson said.

"Wanted to get some info from you. I'm going to do a little surveillance at the place where I'm meeting the potential sources. I need the address and the room number where we're supposed to meet, and the name and phone number of the agent who'll be my backup."

Nelson stared at him for a long moment, then finally nodded. "Great idea," he said, but his expression said the opposite. Why didn't Nelson want him doing that surveillance? It was a good question, but Jake figured he wouldn't get an answer.

Nelson opened a desk drawer and pulled out a slip of paper. Handed it to Jake. "This is the address." He tapped the paper. "Street address and office number."

"Great," Jake said, studying it for a moment, then sliding it into his wallet. "And my backup?"

"It's gonna be someone from the Brooklyn FBI office," he said. "I'll text you the name and his or her phone number when I get it."

"Sounds good." He leaned back in the chair and watched Nelson. "I'm gonna take off this afternoon," he said. "Find a hotel in Brooklyn, then get the lay of the land. Watch

the building for a few days to see who goes in and who comes out.” He gave Nelson an easy smile. “Not sure it’ll tell me anything, but the more information I get, the better prepared I’ll be.”

“Yeah,” Nelson said, his voice flat. “The more information the better when you’re going undercover.”

Jake stood up. “I’ll keep you in the loop,” he said as he exited Nelson’s office.

After returning to his office and unlocking the door, he checked his tells, which were exactly as he’d left them. Leaving them in place, he grabbed his briefcase and walked out the door. Locked it again, then exited the building.

As soon as he was in his car, he pulled out his phone and called Livvy. She answered after one ring. “Jake. What’s up?”

“You know anything about spycams?” He explained about his keylogger and finding that someone had logged into his computer. “I’m on my way to an electronics store to buy a camera that I can install in my office, somewhere it won’t be too noticeable. I need some recommendations.”

A long silence hummed low on the line. Finally Livvy said, “Wow. That’s shocking. I didn’t think the FBI spied on their own people.”

“I didn’t either. But I suspect Nelson or one of his Russian buddies are behind it. I want to have proof of who’s doing it before I take it to Diana.”

“That’s a great idea, but you need to let her know as soon as you identify the perp,” Livvy said immediately. “Logging into another agent’s computer is a big deal. An even bigger deal is whoever did it must have used your ID and password. And I’m assuming you don’t leave that lying around. They had to get it from someone in IT.

So someone in that department is involved, as well. And Diana needs to know about it.”

“Yeah, I plan on calling her. But I want to get the cameras installed before we leave for Brooklyn. That’s my first priority. After that’s done, I’ll call Diana.”

“Okay. Good,” she said. Cleared her throat. “I’ve used spycams on a few jobs. These are the ones I’d recommend.” She listed several brands and models. “All of them are small, which makes them easier to hide, and they can be accessed remotely. I’d get a few of them, and put them in different places in your ceiling. Different angles. And put one in front of your desk, so you can clearly see the face of the person who’s hacking into your computer.”

“Excellent suggestions,” he said. “My first thought was that I’d wait until this evening, and we’d do it together. But I’d like to get out of town this afternoon. Being in my office is making my neck itchy, especially after I found someone had hacked my computer. Having the spycam won’t stop the hacking, but at least we’ll know who’s doing it.”

“Definitely half the battle,” Livvy said. “We could do it on our way out of town, if you want my help,” she said.

“I’d love your help, but do you really want to be seen at the FBI building? That would raise a shitload of questions that neither of us wants to answer.”

“You’re right,” Livvy finally sighed. “I got carried away because I’m so anxious to nab these guys and get rid of the problems in the Bureau.”

“Yeah, I get it,” Jake said. “But you’ll see all the surveillance tapes. When we catch these guys, it’ll be your work as much as mine.”

“It’s not the credit I’m worried about,” Livvy said quietly. “I want to have your back. Protect you from this shit show.”

Jake’s heart stuttered for a moment. “Thanks, Livvy,” he finally said. “That means a lot. And I want to protect you, too. You’re not risking your reputation, because you were smart enough to get out of the Bureau before all this crap came to light. But you’re risking your life. God knows what Nelson has planned for me at that meeting in Sheepshead Bay.”

“Grab a few extra cameras, and we’ll plant them in the room where you’re supposed to meet these guys. Forewarned is forearmed and all that.”

“Great idea,” Jake said. “I’m gonna pick up the cameras then come back to the building and install them. I shouldn’t be too long. Once I’m home, we can take off. Get out of D.C. and take a deep breath.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Until we get to Brooklyn and have to go up against the Bratva. But at least you’ll have backup this time.”

“Yeah.” A whip of regret snapped through him. He wished he’d been able to back up Livvy when she was in danger six months ago. “See you soon,” he said as he hung up.

He drove to the store where he’d bought the keylogger, parked and walked inside. There were only a couple of other customers, and they were looking at different tools. Jake spotted the woman who’d helped him with the keylogger and walked over to her.

“Hey, Alana,” he said, glancing at her name tag. “I was in here a couple of weeks ago and you helped me pick out a keylogger. Now I need some spycams to see who’s logging onto my computer.”

“Sure,” she said. “Follow me.”

Part of one wall was lined with tiny cameras. Thank God he’d talked to Livvy, because he would have had no idea where to begin. “One of my colleagues recommended these three brands,” he said, rattling them off. “They need to be small, easy to install and not obvious. And I need to be able to access them remotely.”

Alana nodded. “So you want something with storage in the camera and remote access, right?”

“Yeah,” Jake said. “Do you have anything in one of those brands that’s small enough to easily hide but also has decent storage?”

“Where are the cameras going to go?” she asked.

“In the ceiling around my desk,” he said.

The woman turned to study the display. Finally reached for one very tiny camera. “I think this would work well for you.” She glanced at him. “It’s not the cheapest option we have, but I think it’s just what you need.”

Twenty minutes later, Jake had paid for the cameras with the credit card he’d gotten from Diana and walked out the door with six of them and very specific directions on how to install them. Besides the cameras, Alana had sold him a screwdriver specifically fabricated to easily install the cameras, and a box knife that would cut cleanly through the ceiling tiles without leaving signs that they’d been disturbed. The cameras came with a booklet on how to install them and how to access them remotely.

Leaving two of the cameras in his glove box, Jake headed back to his office building, eager to get them installed and get out of town. Once he was in the building, he was

relieved that he didn't see a soul on the way to his office. Unlocking the door and stepping inside, he locked it again and went to work.

Thirty minutes later, four cameras were installed -- two that would face the computer, so he'd know what the hacker was looking for, and two on the other side of the computer that would reveal the face of the person.

He made sure he picked up all the debris from the installation, including the tiny bits of ceiling tile he'd had to cut out. Once he opened the app on his phone that accessed the camera feed, he could see his own face very clearly on the screen of his phone.

Nodding, he grabbed the bag with his trash and stuffed it into his briefcase, along with the instructions for the cameras. Alana had assured him they had batteries that would last at least six months, probably closer to a year.

Jake made a face as he spotted a few more pieces of ceiling tile on the floor. He stuffed them into the bag. If they didn't get this solved within a year, he and Livvy and the FBI were in trouble.

When he got back to his apartment, he heard Livvy pacing back and forth. When she heard the door click open, she stopped and drew her gun. Edged close to the wall, then peered around the corner. Blew out a relieved breath when she saw him and reholstered her Glock.

"Thank God," she said, her shoulders relaxing. "I was picturing all kinds of awful scenarios, including Nelson catching you installing those cameras."

"Nope," he said. "Got them in, got the mess cleaned up, then took off." He plopped his briefcase on the table and drew out the bag of trash from the installation. "Got two more to take with us for the office where we're supposed to meet these guys. I'll drop this trash in the garbage on the way out, so no one knows who dumped it there."

“Good.” She narrowed her eyes. “Have you called Diana yet?”

“No. I was focused on getting those cameras installed, then getting back here.” He sucked in a lungful of air. “First full breath I’ve taken since I walked into the building with those cameras.”

“Give her a call now so we can get going,” Livvy said. “Being in D.C. is making me nervous. I want to be driving away.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Me, too. I’ll call her right now.” He pulled out his phone and touched Diana’s contact information. She answered almost immediately. “Director Redfield,” she said in a very business-like voice.

“Madame Director, this is Jake Dunbar,” he said. “Do you have a moment to talk?”

“Of course I do,” she said. He heard the wheels on her chair moving over the floor, then the click of her door shutting. The snap of the lock engaging.

“What can I do for you, Jake?” she asked.

“Livvy and I are at my apartment and we’re getting ready to leave for Brooklyn. I wanted to let you know that I installed a keylogger on my work computer about a week ago, and when I checked it this morning, someone had been in my computer.”

Redfield sucked in a breath. “Any idea who it was?”

“Not a clue,” he said. “But I bought some spycams and installed them before I left the office this afternoon. I left an old computer there -- I wiped it of any important information, leaving only old files on it, before I stuck it in a drawer. If anyone tries to access it while I’m gone, they’ll see nothing important and I’ll have their face on the spycam app.”

“Nicely done, Jake,” Diana murmured. “Let me know if you get any hits on the spycams, and if you do, who tried to access your computer.”

“I’ll do that. And I’ll keep you in the loop with this job.” He cleared his throat. “I’m not sure this is significant, but when I went to speak to Nelson this morning, he was meeting someone in his office with the door closed. I know that doesn’t necessarily mean anything, but his door is seldom closed. I waited, and Fred Windsor finally walked out of the office. He acted nervous. Wanted to know what I was doing there. Instead of answering, I asked how he was doing, and he walked away. The whole interaction felt...odd.”

Finally Diana said, “An odd question doesn’t mean Windsor is guilty of anything, but I’ll poke around in his phone records and assignments.” She sighed. “I’m clearing a block of time to dig into Nelson, and I’ll add Windsor, as well.” After a beat of silence, she said, “I know I don’t have to tell you to be careful, but please be cautious. Wary. You have no idea what these Bratva members are planning.”

“No, I don’t. But I bought some extra spycams, and Livvy and I are going to install them in the room where I’m scheduled to meet these men. So we’ll get some idea of their plans.”

“Good,” Diana said. “That’s very good. And let me know if someone accesses your computer and who it is.”

“Will do. Take care, Diana.”

“You, too, Jake.” The phone disconnected.

He turned to Livvy. “You hear all that?”

“Yeah.” She rubbed her palms down the thighs of her jeans. “I’m all packed. You

want to throw your stuff in a suitcase so we can get out of D.C.?”

“I’m on it. Won’t take me long,” he said as he headed down the hall to his room.

“We’ll be out of here in fifteen minutes.”

It was closer to thirty, after Jake and Livvy left tells all over the apartment. Finally they tossed their bags into the trunk of Jake’s car, put their briefcases on the back seat, and drove out of the parking lot.

Jake looked over at Livvy and found her watching him. “We’re gonna do this, Livvy. I’ll take that meeting, you’ll have my back, and maybe we’ll figure out what Nelson is up to.”

“I think what Nelson is up to is making sure you’re dead,” Livvy said bluntly. “But I’m here to ensure that doesn’t happen. So let’s go see what Sheepshead Bay is like.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:42 am*

Livvy's shoulders tensed as they drove past Brighton Beach in Brooklyn, and she swallowed hard when she glimpsed the dark bricks of the building she'd had her meeting in. Jake glanced over at her, and she finally took a breath. "That building over there? The one with the dark bricks and the dirty windows? That's where I had my meeting with the Bratva."

Jake glanced toward where she was pointing, and she saw his hands tighten on the steering wheel. "Thank God we're not going to Brighton Beach."

"Yeah," she said, sliding her suddenly cold hands beneath her thighs. "I do not want to revisit the scene of that almost-crime. Or worse, run into any of the men from that meeting."

"Hell, no," Jake said. "I don't want even the slightest chance of you running into any of those guys."

"Me neither," she said with a shiver. She felt Jake's gaze on her, so she glanced over at him.

He grimaced when he caught her eye. "If someone else had taken that meeting? They'd be dead right now."

Livvy nodded slowly. "I was lucky," she said.

"I suspect it was more than just luck," he said, glancing at her from the corner of his eyes. "You were smart and aware of your surroundings. I also suspect you're very good at reading people."

“Yeah,” she said. “And what I saw in the eyes of those men? My death.” She swiveled on the seat. “You know that Nelson’s not going to give you a name or a phone number for the agent who’s supposed to back you up.”

“I’m sure he won’t,” Jake said. His jaw tightened. “It would serve Nelson right if I refused to take the meeting without a backup.”

“It would,” Livvy agreed. “But you already know he’s not going to hook you up with an agent from New York. He might give you a name and phone number, but there won’t be an actual person on the other end of the line. Or if there is, it’ll be some random person who’s not connected to the FBI.” She grimaced. “Or worse, it’ll be one of the guys he’s sending you to meet with.”

“I didn’t even think of that,” Jake said, and his mouth curled into a smile. “Not sure Nelson’s smart enough to think of that, either.”

“Do not underestimate him,” Livvy said, leaning toward him. “He wanted me dead, and for some reason he wants you dead, too. If he is a Russian asset, he’s flown beneath the radar at the FBI for a while.”

“Yeah, I’ve already figured that out. The question is, why does he want both of us dead?” He glanced over at Livvy. “Do we know something we don’t know we know? Have we both seen something we’re not aware of? Overheard someone talking about something dangerous to Nelson’s cover?”

“God only knows. And we could speculate for days and not be able to figure it out. Do you remember all the random conversations you’ve overheard?”

“Of course not,” Jake said. “Bet you can’t, either.”

“No, I don’t. But there has to be some reason that he sent me to talk to the Bratva,

and he's now sending you to talk to them, as well. Just two different groups in different places."

Jake shot a quick glance at her. "The possibilities are endless," he said. "Maybe we saw him with someone he shouldn't have been meeting with -- like someone from the Russian embassy. Or maybe he thought we overheard an incriminating conversation he was having."

"Yeah," Livvy said. "Way too many things that might have spooked Nelson. Which is why we need to get those cameras installed in that office tonight. The guys you're meeting with might know what Nelson's been up to."

"Good thing we got here early," Jake said. "Our meeting is far enough away that no one would think we'd even be in Brooklyn yet. So they'd probably feel free to talk about their plans without worrying about being overheard."

Livvy frowned. "Yeah, that's all true." She glanced over at him. "But what if they're speaking Russian?"

"Damn it!" Jake clenched his teeth. "I never thought of that. It's possible." Jake slapped his hand on the center of the steering wheel. "You speak Russian?"

"Of course not," Livvy replied. "If I did, Nelson wouldn't have tried to get me killed by Russians. He'd know I would understand everything they were saying. He'd send me to a different group that spoke a different language."

Jake glanced over at her, and she saw his hands tighten on the steering wheel. "If we need to, we can play the recordings for someone who speaks Russian." he said, biting out the words. "Have them translate for us."

"Yeah, good plan so far. But where do we get a translator?" Livvy asked.

“Nowhere in Brighton Beach,” he said immediately. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “Maybe a college. Find a professor who teaches Russian. Ask him or her to translate it for us.”

Livvy shook her head. “We can’t do that. Because what if the person we choose has ties to the Bratva? And how would we even know?”

“We wouldn’t,” Jake said, clenching his teeth. “Got any other ideas?”

Livvy drummed her fingers on the armrest. “I can call Mel at Blackhawk Security. I’m pretty sure she doesn’t speak Russian, but I bet she knows someone who does. She spent time in Afghanistan, and there were a lot of Russians skulking around that country. She might know someone who picked up the language.”

“Okay, I like that idea. And Mel would know if the person was trustworthy.”

“Yeah. She would.” She swiveled in her seat to face him. “We may not need a translator, anyway. Maybe they’ll speak English.”

“When they talk to me? Yeah, they’ll speak English.” Jake shook his head. “But talking to each other? I’d be shocked if they didn’t speak Russian. As far as they’re concerned, you never know who might be listening. Best to speak Russian when you can.”

“Okay,” Livvy said, slumping in her seat, beginning to feel overwhelmed by the logistics of this job. “When we get to our hotel, I’ll call Mel. Let her know what we’re doing and see if she knows anyone who’s even semi-fluent in Russian.”

Jake’s mouth thinned. “The closer we get to Brooklyn, the more complicated this assignment is getting.”

“Yeah,” Livvy said. “It is.” Her heart thundered in her chest, and she slid her hands beneath her thighs to keep them from trembling. “But we’re thinking ahead to any problems that could come up and planning how to handle them.” She grinned at him. “We’re gonna kick Nelson’s ass because we’ll be so much more prepared than he expects us to be. He probably figured that he could send you out to talk to the Russians, neglect to find you a backup, and arrange for them to kill you. Easy, peasy, another problem solved.”

“Yeah, that’s probably his exact plan. But we’re going to be two steps ahead of him the whole time,” Jake said, a muscle twitching in his jaw. “We need to figure out why we’re a problem. And when we hear what the Russians have to say, find out what they want, I hope we’ll be a few more steps closer to taking Nelson and all his Russian buddies down.”

Just ahead of them was the hotel where they had a reservation. When they checked in, Livvy leaned across the counter and smiled at the young man who was accessing their reservation. “Is there any way we could get a room that has a southern exposure?” she asked with a smile. “We stayed here on our honeymoon, and that was the view we had. We want to recreate that stay.”

The young man grinned at them. “Sure, but the rooms on that side of the building all have two queen beds. None of the beds are kings.”

Livvy smiled at him. Leaned a little closer, as if preparing to tell him a secret. “That’s fine. We like to be close together when we’re in bed.”

The young man’s face turned beet red. “Ah, sure.” He looked down at his screen and typed fast. “I’ve got a room with a great view.” He typed for a few more moments, then said, “Do you have a credit card I can use for the account?”

“Of course,” Livvy said, pulling Diana’s card out of her wallet. “Here you go.”

When the kid passed her a form to sign, Livvy scribbled her signature so fast that it was illegible. The kid pushed a packet with two keys across the counter to her.

“Thank you so much,” Livvy said, leaning against Jake. “We really appreciate it.”

“No problem,” said the kid, carefully not meeting Livvy’s gaze. “Have a nice stay.”

“Oh, we certainly will,” Livvy said with a smile.

The kid blushed again and nodded at her. Jake curled his arm around her waist and led her toward the elevator. Livvy leaned into him, feeling the strength of his muscles against her body. She didn’t look back, but was pretty sure the kid was watching them.

When they stepped into the elevator, they were the only occupants. As soon as the door closed, Jake let her go and moved a few steps away. He smiled at her. “Nicely done,” he said. “And I like that you used Diana’s credit card. If Nelson’s looking for me, he won’t find me registered in any of the hotels.”

“That’s why I was so quick to pull it out,” Livvy said. “I didn’t want you to use a card issued in your name, because I wouldn’t be shocked if Nelson tried to find you, so he could tell his buddies in Sheepshead Bay where you’re staying.”

Jake stared down at her, and she saw concern in his eyes. Wariness. “Yeah,” she said. “Since I got away last time, he doesn’t want to take that chance with you. If you somehow manage to avoid getting killed at your meeting, he’d want his Russian buddies to know where to find you.”

When they reached the room, they found a generic hotel room with two queen-sized beds and a small sitting area. The view from the window looked out at Brooklyn, and Jake pulled a pair of binoculars out of his bag. Studied the mapping app on his phone,

then lifted the binoculars to his eyes. “I’ve found the building, I think,” he said after a moment. “Good view from here.” He turned and handed her the binoculars. “Take a look. It’s that tallish building about three blocks away. Abuts a slightly smaller building. Depending on where the room is, that other building might have possibilities as an escape route.”

“Yeah,” she said, studying the two buildings. “We’ll check it out when we plant those bugs tonight.”

Jake lifted her suitcase onto the luggage rack, then put his own on one of the small tables in the seating area. “You want to go get something to eat and check out the neighborhood?”

“Sounds good,” Livvy said.

Jake had changed out of his suit and into a pair of jeans and a sweater before they left his apartment. Livvy was dressed casually as well, in jeans and a shirt, covered by a jacket, so they wouldn’t stand out among the sea of residents and tourists moving along the street.

They walked three blocks to the heart of Sheepshead Bay and noticed that the streets were lined with small businesses, many of them sporting signs in Russian. They found a fast-food outlet almost directly across the street from the building where Jake’s meeting would be held, and stopped for lunch. Grabbing a table by the window, they watched the stream of people coming and going from their target building while they ate. They didn’t say much, because neither wanted to be overheard.

Finally they dumped their trash and walked out the door. Livvy curled her arm through Jake’s elbow, and his only response was a tightening of his muscles. They relaxed after a moment, but she glanced over at him, wondering why Jake was acting

so squirrely around her.

She wasn't about to ask him, though. They both needed to focus on this job and nothing else. And the last thing she wanted to do was distract him before his meeting.

When they got back to the hotel, neither of them spoke until they were back in their room. Finally Livvy pulled her arm away from Jake's and took a few steps back.

"So," she said. "What did you think?"

"Of the building?" He frowned. "We're going to have to be focused on this job," he finally said. "It's a tall building, and my meeting's on the third floor. No way out other than the street level entrance, as far as I could tell. We'll head over there tonight, late enough that most, if not all the people will be gone from the building. Less foot traffic on the streets. Pretty sure we can get into the building with a lock pick. Then we'll find the room and plant the cameras. Scope out the exits and hiding places for you. Prepare as best we can for that meeting." His jaw twitched. "Then we pray that everything goes smoothly two days from now."

"And if it doesn't?" Livvy asked Jake, who was now pacing the floor.

"Then we wing it." He slowed. Glanced over at her. "But by then, we should have a good idea of what this group has planned for me. I'm not going into that meeting blind."

"No. Only an idiot would do that. And you're far from an idiot," Livvy said.

Jake raised one eyebrow. "Wow, Liv. You sound like you almost like me."

She shrugged, but a faint red tinged her face. "You're bearable," she finally said.

“High praise, coming from the woman who hated the very sight of me back in Helena.”

“That was before we talked,” she said. “I’ve revised my opinion.”

“Good to know,” he said. He wasn’t going to push his luck and ask her what her new opinion was. Time to change the subject. “You mind waiting until we’re back to eat something?”

“No, let’s wait,” she said immediately. “I want to be able to move quickly. React quickly. Hard to do with a full stomach.”

“My thoughts exactly. But I wanted to give you a choice.”

“Let’s keep an eye on that building for a while. You have a second pair of binoculars?”

“I do,” he said, opening his luggage and pulling out another pair. “I want to see what the traffic is like in and out of the building.”

“Yeah, me too.” They pulled two chairs over to the window and lifted the binoculars.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:42 am*

Jake and Livvy watched the building from the safety of their room, and people began to leave around five. By six, the groups exiting the building had dwindled to almost none. It was still light out, but as the sun began to sink behind the buildings of Manhattan, fewer and fewer people exited.

Finally, when they hadn't seen anyone come out of the building for at least fifteen minutes, she looked over at Jake. "Go time?"

His throat rippled as he swallowed, and he glanced over at her. "Yeah, I think it's time. We don't want the streets to be completely empty, because then we'll stand out. So let's get moving."

"Sounds good," she said. Jake put the two cameras into a smallish backpack, then added the installation directions and the screwdriver. She put her gun into its inside-the-waistband holster on her left side, and draped a loose jacket over it, making sure it was zipped enough to hide the gun. It was loose enough to allow quick, easy access to her weapon, and she noticed Jake had done the same. She hoped to God neither of them would need to draw their gun.

Once their guns and equipment were hidden, she tugged a black knit cap over her auburn curls and shoved her long hair into the hat. Both of them wore dark clothes.

"Time to move," Jake said. "There are still people on the street, and we want to get there before it's completely deserted. We want to blend in instead of stand out."

"I'm ready," she said.

Jake's gaze swept over her, and it felt as if he'd brushed his hands down her body. Shivering, she tried to ignore the sensation, but her skin itched like it was too tight.

"After we're done, we'll have dinner at a restaurant in Sheepshead Bay. It'll make us look like tourists."

"Dressed all in black?" Livvy scoffed. "We'll look like what we are -- cat burglars."

"Hell, no, we won't. Especially if we get rid of these," he said as he snatched the hat off Livvy's head and stuffed it into the backpack, along with his own hat. It felt as if he'd tangled his fingers in her curls for a moment, and she shivered at the sensation. Then he stepped away. "Now we look like New Yorkers," he said.

"Yeah, I've heard they wear a lot of black."

"They do," Jake said. "Trust me on this, Livvy," Jake said, slinging the pack over his shoulders and shoving his arms through the straps. "No one should give us a second look."

"I don't know about that," Livvy said. "I feel as if we'll stand out like sore thumbs."

"We've got this, Livvy," Jake said, adjusting the way the pack sat on his back. "New Yorkers? Dressed in black? A dime a dozen in Brooklyn."

"I hope to God you're right," she muttered. She drew a deep breath and headed for the door.

Jake grabbed her hand and tugged her away from it. When she turned to face him, he asked, "You have your gun?"

She patted the waistband of her pants. "Exactly where I need it. You have yours?"

“Yep. I’m good.” He studied her for a long moment, then finally said, “You know you don’t have to do this, right? I can get into that building, do the recon, and get out by myself. If you’re nervous about this, don’t join me.”

She stared at him for a long moment, not sure if she was grateful or insulted. Insulted won. “Of course I’m nervous,” she said. “We’re breaking into a building. And if we’re caught, we have no excuse for being in a locked building at this time of night.”

One side of Jake’s mouth curled up. “Really? The woman who rides a Harley is nervous about a simple B and E? I’m shocked, Williams. Shocked, I say. I’ve never seen this cautious side of yours.”

“Yeah, well, breaking and entering a Bratva building has a lot more risk than riding my bike,” she shot back. “At least when I’m riding, I’m in control. Of everything.”

Jake’s teasing smile faded. “I can do this by myself, Livvy. You don’t have to come.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Of course I’m nervous. And I’m sure you are, too. But the whole point of this B and E is figuring out good hiding places,” she said, irritated that Jake was putting her on her heels. “And planting those cameras, which will go a lot more quickly with two people. So, no. I’m not gonna back out. I’m just registering my objections.”

“Objections heard and appreciated,” Jake said. “But I’ll be fine by myself.”

“You’re an idiot if you think this is a one-person job,” she retorted. “At the very least, I can keep watch while you install the cameras.”

“All right. If you’re sure you’re in, let’s stop bickering and get moving.”

As they got into the elevator and the doors slid closed, Jake grinned down at her.

“And remember to act like second honeymooners on our way out of the lobby. We want anyone watching us to buy into our cover.”

“I can act as well as you can,” Livvy retorted. “You concentrate on looking like an adoring husband.”

“And you’ll be my devoted wife, right?”

Livvy snorted. “In your dreams, Dunbar.”

Jake slapped his hand over his chest. “I dream about you every night, Williams,” he said, trying to look all googly-eyed.

Livvy burst into laughter. “You look like a... a myopic monkey,” she said.

Jake swiveled to face her. “Nothing myopic about my vision when I look at you, Livvy. I’m completely smitten,” he said as the doors slid open.

He tucked his arm around her waist and led her to the door, grinning to himself at the pole-axed look on her face. She didn’t recover her composure until they were on the street.

“Smooth move in there, Dunbar,” she said, taking a step away from him.

“I thought so,” Jake said, pleased with himself. Livvy was way too self-possessed. He hadn’t seen her shaken very often. “Anyone looking at us saw a pair of honeymooners. That’s all they’ll remember.”

“I hope to God you’re right,” she muttered.

They chose a street that allowed them to watch the front door of the building they’d

be slipping into. In the three-block walk, Jake didn't see anyone exit the building. Opening the door and walking inside would be risky -- they had no way of knowing who might be watching.

Leaning close to Livvy, he said, "I'm gonna try and make it look like I'm using a key. You act like what we're doing is perfectly normal. Don't look over your shoulder. Don't shuffle your feet or touch your hair. Your attitude should be, 'we have every right to go into this building. We have business here.' Okay?"

"Yeah, I can handle that," she said. "You're unlocking the door. We have business inside."

"Right." He nodded toward the building. "You been watching?"

"Yeah," she said. "No one in or out."

"It'll take us seven, eight minutes to get there. We want to walk at a normal speed. Not hurrying, not hesitant. If we don't see anyone else exit the building, we're probably good."

As he spoke, the door opened and a man stepped onto the sidewalk. Both of them slowed, watching the man carefully.

He was dressed in a uniform of some sort. Baggy pants. An open jacket. When the wind whipped his jacket open, they could see that he wore a jump suit. A dark color.

Jake frowned. "Maintenance man? That's my guess," he whispered to Livvy.

"Yeah," she said after a moment. "I agree. Look at his shoes. Heavy-duty boots, probably with steel toes, like someone on his feet all day, carrying heavy stuff, would wear."

Their steps slowed as they watched the maintenance guy lock the door, then yank on the handle to make sure it was secured. Then he turned a corner and disappeared from sight. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach. If they'd been a couple minutes earlier, they'd be breaking into the building while the maintenance guy was heading toward the door.

"You think he was the last one in the building?" Jake asked.

"We'll find out, won't we?" she said, blowing out a breath to steady her nerves. "I'd think the maintenance guy would make sure the building was secure and empty before he left."

"I agree," Jake said. "Let's pretend we're window shopping along here," he said. "We'll keep an eye on the building, but I'm not expecting anyone else to come out."

"Or go in, I hope," Livvy said.

He slanted a look at her. "Yeah."

By the time they reached the building, the sun had set over Manhattan. There was enough light to see, but dusk slid inexorably over the city. When they stepped up to the door, Jake already had his lock pick out. It only took seconds for him to unlock the door, and he opened it wide, waved her in, then followed her into the lobby. He quickly closed the door and locked it again, then drew her off to the side, away from the glass doors.

As they huddled against a wall, out of sight from the street, Livvy strained to hear any sounds from the building. She heard nothing. No voices. No machines running. Saw no lights in any of the offices. After ten or fifteen minutes, when they hadn't heard a thing, Jake touched her elbow. Jerked his head toward the stairs, and she nodded.

They moved quickly up the first flight of stairs. By the time they reached the second floor, no one on the street could hear or see them. He bent and put his mouth to her ear. “We’re on the third floor. Room 320.”

She nodded, and they started up the next staircase. It was darker up here, with the light fading outside. A few ceiling lights glowed, enough to illuminate the stairs and the office doors. There was an eerie feeling to the deserted building. It made her want to get into the office, get the cameras installed, and get out. But of course she didn’t say anything to Jake. She wasn’t afraid of the dark, but darkness could hide too many things.

She had no sense of being watched, and from the way Jake headed up the stairs, he didn’t think so, either. When they reached the third floor, he found 320 quickly. Before he inserted the pick into the lock, he pressed his ear to the door. Listened for a long time. Finally he inserted it into the lock and eased the door open.

The room was pitch black. Jake eased the door closed and pulled out his phone. Turned on the flashlight and used it to scan the room.

Livvy was surprised at how similar this room was to the room where she’d had her meeting. Couches lined the walls, and there was a single desk in the corner. There was a window in the room, but it was covered with a dark shade.

Livvy crouched in front of the door and used her own phone flashlight to study the sill. It looked as though the threshold was a tight fit to the sill, and would prevent any light from leaking under the door. She turned to look at Jake. “Does that shade seem lightproof?”

“I think so,” he said. “I can’t find any gaps in it.”

“The sill and threshold look tight, too. I think it’s safe to turn on the light.”

“That’d make this installation go more quickly,” he said.

“And that’s exactly what we want: to get those cameras installed, check out escape routes and get out of here.”

“Yeah.” He fiddled with the backpack strap. “I don’t know about you, but the silence is creepy.”

“I agree. Let’s get to work.”

She flipped on the lights, and they both had to shut their eyes for a moment. But as soon as they were acclimated, Jake pulled the desk chair into the middle of the room. “Where should we put the cameras?” he asked her.

“How about one above the door, the other above the window?” Livvy said, her eyes studying the room. “That way, we get a picture of the whole room. And if someone’s sitting at the desk, the camera near the window should easily pick up his voice. Especially since he wouldn’t think he was being recorded.”

Jake scanned the room, then nodded. “I agree.” He dug into the backpack and found the knife to cut through the ceiling tiles. It took less than ten minutes to install the first camera. Then he carried the chair toward the door and repeated the steps. In less than a half-hour, the cameras were installed, the debris cleaned up, and the room looked exactly like it had when they walked in.

“We good here?” Livvy asked as Jake looked around the room. The back of her neck itched, and she wanted to get out of this building.

“Yeah. Let’s go,” Jake said, closing the backpack and slinging it over his shoulders again.

They turned off the light, giving their eyes a chance to get used to the darkness. After a few minutes, Livvy pressed her ear against the door. She froze, then turned to Jake. “There’s someone in the building.”

Jake came over and listened. “They’re on the first floor,” he said. “Their voices are echoing off all that glass. Let’s get out of here.”

They stepped into the hall and closed the door as quietly as possible. Then they looked around. No way could they go down the stairs if someone was on the first floor.

Just around the corner from the office was another door. Livvy opened it and peered in. Along the back wall was a line of meters. Judging by the numbers, one for every office on this floor. The side walls held shelves with office supplies, articles of clothing and, on the top shelf, weapons. Handguns, long guns, knives.

“In here,” she whispered. “They’re coming up the stairs.”

Jake slid into the closet and pulled the door closed slowly and silently. It was pitch dark in the closet, but Livvy pulled out her gun. She heard Jake’s clothes rustling, and figured he’d pulled his Glock out, as well. Then she whispered, “I think we could slide under the bottom shelves. They might still see us, but at least we’d have time to react.”

Jake crouched in front of one of the shelves. Livvy heard his clothes rasp against the floor as he squirmed into the space. “I’m in,” he whispered. “Get under the other shelf.”

Livvy dropped to her knees and felt around for the shelf. She wedged herself beneath the bottom shelf, then gripped her gun tightly. Just in case.

Voices came closer. Footsteps on the stairs echoed in the empty building. The intruders made no effort to be quiet -- Jake assumed they were confident the building was empty.

Instead of continuing up the stairs, the men's footsteps echoed on the wooden floor, made the slats beneath them vibrate slightly. Jake held his breath, hoping they weren't going into the office he and Livvy had just vacated. But they kept going down the hall, and it sounded as if they stopped about halfway down. A door opened. Closed a few seconds later.

He heard the muted sound of voices talking but couldn't make out any words. Couldn't even tell if they were speaking English.

He and Livvy were trapped in this tiny closet until those men left. Unless there was another way out of the building. He remembered he'd seen a large window beside this door, and he wondered where it went. He squirmed out of the space beneath the shelf and slid over to Livvy.

"Gonna go take a look at that window. See where it goes. See if there's a way out there."

She grabbed his wrist and held tight. "Maybe it'd be smarter just to wait here until they're gone."

"Could be a long time. God knows what they're doing here," Jake whispered. "It'll only take a moment to look at the window."

Without waiting for Livvy to answer, he stood up and pressed his ear to the closet door. Couldn't hear a thing. So he eased the door open slowly enough that it didn't squeak. Listened again, and when he heard nothing, he slid through the opening.

The window was a large hinged one with a latch on the wall. He eased the latch open and slid outside. Closed the window almost the whole way, then realized he was on the edge of the wall. There was a gap of about a foot between this window and the building next door, so he dropped down lightly and walked to the other side of the roof. Behind a large air conditioning unit, he found a chain ladder with steel rungs between the two chains.

Jake looked up at the building and saw the darker shapes of fire escapes zigzagging from the windows. Then he looked over the side. There was an alley on that side of the building, so he picked up the chain ladder and lowered it slowly down the side of the building. It stopped a couple of feet above the alley.

Exactly what they needed. He walked across the roof and listened at the window for any signs of the men but heard nothing. About halfway down the building, one of the offices was lit up. That had to be where the men were.

Easing the window open again, he crept to the closet and opened the door slowly. "Come on," he whispered. "I found a way out."

Livvy's clothes rustled against the floor, then she stood up and hurried toward him. Once she was in the hall, he eased the door closed silently. Then he took her hand.

"Out this window," he said.

Once they were out of the building, he pushed the window closed as far as possible, leaving only a tiny gap.

"There's a ladder on the other side of the roof. Part of the fire escape system. We can climb down it, then get the hell away."

Taking her hand, tightening his fingers around hers, he led her toward the other side

of the roof. Pointed out the ladder. "I want you to go first," he said. "Once you're on the ground, I'll come down. Then we'll get the hell out of Dodge."

"Okay." She swung one leg over the edge of the roof and grabbed the chains on either side of the ladder, then started down slowly, one step at a time. When she was almost at the bottom, Jake reached for the ladder. But before he could grab it, a man on the other side of the roof said, "What the hell is this window doing open?"

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:42 am*

C crouched behind the air-conditioning unit, Jake heard someone laugh. “Some of the young guys come out here to smoke pot,” a man said. “Figure no one’ll be able to tell, but the dumbshits don’t realize they reek of it when they come back in.” He snorted. “Everyone does it now, but if we were ever caught with that stuff? Our old men would beat the crap out of us.”

Jake wanted to look over the edge of the building to make sure that Livvy had made it safely to the bottom, but he didn’t dare move. He didn’t want any flashes of movement to alert the men on the other side of that window that someone was out here.

“Lock it up so we can get out of here,” another man said. “And pay attention to the kids. If one of ‘em is smoking that shit at work, crack their head.”

Keeping completely still, Jake listened as one of the men closed the window and secured the latch. Then he heard the rumble of multiple feet on the metal staircase.

When the sounds were far away, he swung over the edge of the roof and grabbed the chain ladder. Descended as quickly as he could. When he reached the bottom, he jumped to the cracked cement of the alley, and Livvy grabbed onto his arm.

“You okay? You think anyone saw you?”

“Didn’t sound like it, but they found the unlatched window.” He snorted. “Blamed it on the young guys going onto the roof to smoke weed. Thank God they didn’t think to check the roof to make sure it was clear.”

“Yeah,” Livvy said with a shiver. “Let’s get out of here.”

They’d gone halfway down the alley when Jake heard a group walking down the sidewalk. He recognized one of the voices as the guy who was speculating about the pot-smoking kids. So he grabbed Livvy and swung her around until her back was pressed against the wall. Then he cupped her face in his hands and pressed his mouth to hers.

She stiffened against him, and he slid his mouth to her ear. “Play along. I recognize one of those voices as the guy who noticed the window wasn’t closed.”

She sucked in a breath, then she twined her arms around his neck and curled into him. She tangled her fingers in his hair, caressing his head. The sensation of her fingernails on his scalp made Jake suck in a breath and go instantly hard. With thoughts of discovery the last thing on his mind, he took her mouth, kissing her lips then sliding his tongue along their seam. She opened for him, and he entwined his tongue with hers.

By the time he heard the men walk past the alley, Jake’s heart was beating like a drum and his cock was getting all kinds of ideas. He pressed closer, and he felt Livvy do the same. She curled one leg around his, and they were tangled together completely.

Based on the tap of their shoes on the sidewalk, the men were passing the mouth of the alley. But either they didn’t look down the dark space, or they were used to seeing people making out in the dusky light. He kept kissing Livvy until he couldn’t hear the footsteps any longer.

Reluctant to end the kiss, he sucked her lower lip into his mouth. Ran his tongue over the soft inside of her lip, shocked when she moaned quietly. Like this was real and not merely a staged performance for the men. As his tongue tangled with hers, it felt

damn real to Jake, as well. When Livvy's hands tightened around his shoulders, gripping him as if she was into this as much as he was, he forgot all about the Bratva guys and focused only on Livvy.

When he realized he was kissing Livvy as if he'd die if he couldn't have her, he sucked in a breath. This had become too damn real. The realization was like a bucket of cold water splashed over him.

Stepping away from her, he shoved his fingers through his hair. "I, uh, think they're gone. Either they didn't notice us, or they're used to people using this alley to make out."

Livvy wrapped her arms around herself like she was suddenly cold. "Yeah. Let's get out of here. I don't want to be anywhere near this building if those guys decide to come back and check us out."

"Yeah. You're right." He put his hand on her back to guide her out the alley, and for a moment it felt like she leaned into him. Then she edged away until there was at least a foot of space between them.

"Let's not discuss anything about this until we're alone in our room," she said, swallowing hard. "I don't want any flapping ears to overhear something they shouldn't."

"Absolutely," he said, clearing his throat. "Do you still want to go to a restaurant?"

Livvy shook her head slowly. "No. I just want to be back in our room. Behind a locked door." She sucked in a breath. "I could hear guys talking, but I couldn't hear what they were saying. I was expecting them to find you any moment. I actually had climbed the first few rungs of the ladder before they closed the window. When I didn't hear anything else, I figured you were safe." She blew out a breath. "Let's just

order room service.”

“Sounds good to me.” he said. He glanced down at her. “You want to pick up some beer or wine on the way back?”

She shrugged. “If we see a place, sure. But I don’t want to linger in this neighborhood.” She finally smiled. “I’m afraid people will see the guilty look on my face.”

He studied her for a moment. “No guilt,” he finally said. “But you do look frazzled.”

She elbowed him in the side. “You wanna see frazzled, bud? Look in a mirror.”

He draped an arm over her shoulder, surprised when she didn’t shake it off. Maybe she’d been as shaken as he had been.

He nodded to a neon sign in the middle of the next block. “There’s a liquor store. We’ll get some wine.”

They picked up a chilled bottle of sauvignon blanc, then turned for the hotel. By the time they reached the block the hotel was on, it was full dark. The streetlights and the neon signs on the shops kept the area well-lit, but the alleys were black holes between buildings. Jake picked up the pace. He’d draped his arm over Livvy’s shoulders, and he felt her shivering. She was nervous, and it was contagious. Even though they were a mere block away from the hotel, he wouldn’t feel safe until they were in their room.

When they walked into the lobby and the elevator arrived, he was pleased there was no one else waiting for it. He guided Livvy into the car, pressed the button and only relaxed once the car began moving upward. The first stop was their floor, and Jake had to restrain himself from running to their room.

When they were finally inside, with the door locked and the safety lock engaged, he set the bottle of wine on the table and collapsed onto the couch. Livvy slid onto the chair that was diagonal to the couch, flopped against the back cushion and blew out a long breath. “How’re you doing?” she finally asked.

“Recovering,” he said. “Thank God we got the cameras installed and got out of the room before that group of men reached their floor.” He shivered. “Although being trapped in that tiny closet was no fun.”

“And seeing you disappear onto that roof was no fun, either,” she muttered.

One side of Jake’s mouth curled up. “We work well together, Livvy. Thank God you’re backing me up on this assignment.”

“I’m glad I can do it,” she said. Frowning, she added, “Depending on what we hear and see from those cameras, there may not be a meeting after all.”

Jake studied her for a long moment. “You saying we might just shut this thing down if we hear something we don’t like on the recording?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

Jake started to speak, and she held up her hand, palm toward him. “No decisions until we listen to the tape tomorrow and the next day. Because I’m guessing they’ll discuss their plans ahead of time.” She leaned toward him. “On my job in Brighton Beach, after I got away from that kid and his father, I thought about what had happened. I realized it had been set up ahead of time. The kid knew what he was supposed to do, even though he acted like he didn’t want to do it. And his father was insistent.” She frowned. “Like it was some rite of passage to kill a law enforcement person.”

Jake leaned toward her. “You’re lucky to be alive,” he said.

“I know damn well I’m lucky. But my point is, I’m sure those guys I visited had talked ahead of time and planned out their strategy. I saw the father and the kid exchange looks. Saw the kid’s reluctance and the father’s insistence. Which was why I didn’t let the kid get behind me. If he was gonna try to shoot me, he’d have to do it to my face. And I was right. He didn’t want to do it.”

“So we’ll spend tomorrow listening to any conversations they have. Plan our moves accordingly,” Jake said. He slapped his hands on his knees. “Let’s order dinner. I didn’t think I’d be able to eat anything, but I’m starving.”

“Me, too,” Livvy said. She handed him a menu.

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After they ordered dinner, Livvy unscrewed the cap to open the wine. She found two wine glasses and poured. When she handed Jake his glass, her fingers brushed his, and he stilled for a moment. Then he sucked in a deep breath. Nodded at her. “Thanks.”

“I’ll put it in the fridge to keep cold,” she said, irritated that she sounded breathless. Even more irritated that the quick brush of her fingers against Jake’s made her heart stutter in her chest. She didn’t want to be attracted to Jake Dunbar, but she was. She liked her life exactly the way it was, and Jake would be a distraction that could blow her careful plans to smithereens. She’d planned on getting established in her career before getting seriously involved with anyone. Once she was on solid footing at Blackhawk Security, once she knew if it was a long-term job or just a way station on the way to something else, she’d have plenty of time to find someone and fall in love

But when she glanced over at Jake and found him watching her, a tiny voice in her head laughed at her. Go ahead and plan out your life , it said. I’ll get some popcorn and enjoy the show .

As if Jake hadn't been affected at all by that quick brush of her fingers against his, he took a sip of his wine and set the glass on the table. If she hadn't been watching very carefully, she'd have missed the way his hand shook slightly as he set his glass down.

She huffed out a breath. At least she wasn't the only one who'd felt that zing of electricity shoot from her hand to Jake's.

What to do about it?

She'd do what she'd always done with uncomfortable feelings -- ignore them. If she ignored them long enough, they always went away.

On the other side of the table, Jake took a too-big gulp of his wine. He coughed, setting the glass on the table. His hand shook, and for a moment, Livvy was sure the wine was going to tip over.

Jake reached out and steadied the glass, and she drew a deep breath. The silence between them had become... charged. Almost uncomfortable. So she said, "Nice save."

He shrugged. "Don't want to waste good wine. Which this is, by the way. You must have had it before."

"Yeah, I like it a lot. It's a great wine for its price." She mentally rolled her eyes at herself. Was she really this awkward around Jake? This self-conscious? She'd never been before. Once they'd discussed what had happened in Brighton Beach, she'd felt perfectly comfortable with him.

Until that kiss in the alley tonight. It was supposed to be fake. A show for the men walking past the alley. But it sure as hell hadn't felt fake. Her heart had been jack-hammering in her chest from the moment he'd put his mouth on hers. She'd been

breathless. Shaky. Had to hold onto Jake to keep herself upright. And when he'd curled his arm around her and drew her closer, pressed her against him, his hard length pressing into her belly had made it clear that Jake was affected as well.

Enough of this trip down memory lane. Re-living what had happened in that alley could be nothing but trouble for her. Maybe for Jake, as well, based on what she'd felt when he'd pressed her against him.

She took a too-big gulp of wine, coughed a couple of times, then set the glass on the table, irritated when she realized her hand was shaking. As the silence grew increasingly uncomfortable, neither one of them spoke. A sudden knock on the door released the almost unbearable tension.

"Dinner," Jake said, jumping to his feet. "I'll get it."

He didn't wait for an answer as he grabbed his wallet and pulled out some cash. He hurried to the door, opened it and said, "Thanks so much." He shoved the money at the kid delivering their dinner, then pulled the rolling table into the room and shut the door a little too hard. Made sure the door was locked, then wheeled their dinners over to the table where they'd been sitting.

Lifting the lids from the plates, he set them on the little rolling cart and handed her a plate of roasted salmon, asparagus and a mashed sweet potato. Then he put the lid covering his dinner on top of hers, revealing a steak, green beans and a baked potato. Fish for her, steak for him. So sue him for eating red meat.

Livvy's mouth twitched as she glanced at his steak, but she didn't say a thing.

They ate silently for several minutes, until the silence felt too... heavy. Too fraught. Finally, Livvy said, "More wine?"

“Yeah, that sounds great,” he said, even though his glass was still a quarter full. She turned and pulled the bottle out of the refrigerator and handed it to him. His fingers brushed hers as he took the bottle, and an electric shock zinged through her body.

When he handed it back, she poured more wine into her own glass, even though, like his, her glass still held wine. Then she swiveled and put the bottle back in the refrigerator.

They’d eaten most of their dinners when Jake cleared his throat. “What time do you figure those guys get to the office?” he asked.

Good. Business. That’s what they needed to break this uncomfortable, awkward silence between them. She swallowed the bite of salmon she’d just eaten and set her fork on her plate. Studied him for a long moment. “They may be different from the Brighton Beach guys I met with,” she said carefully. “But I did some reading after that debacle and apparently the Bratva guys have a routine. They leave their houses and meet their... their gang members, for lack of a better word, at nine or so. They go to a coffee shop, have coffee and pastries, then head to their offices. They’re usually in place by eleven or so. According to a couple of articles I read about them.”

Jake nodded slowly. “That jibes with what I’ve read.” He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket, unfolded it and scanned it. Then handed it to Livvy. “This is what Nelson gave me. Not much besides the address and room number, but at the bottom, he’d scribbled that they’re in the office by eleven. So we should start listening for the recording at ten o’clock or so.” His smile was strained. “They may have a lot of things to discuss. We don’t want to miss any of it.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Livvy said. She set her silverware on her plate, her appetite suddenly gone. She really, really didn’t want to watch Jake walk into that room. God only knew what he’d find there. Those men could shoot him the minute he walked through the door. If she wanted to ambush someone? That’s what she’d do. Strike

before they could compose themselves.

She wanted to beg him not to go -- not to meet with those men, but knew that he had to do it. It was his job, and he'd always been very careful to play by FBI rules.

Livvy pushed her plate away, unable to eat another bite. Jake had done the same thing.

Drawing a breath, he said, "You done there?"

"Yeah." She pressed her hand against her stomach. "I'll have more of an appetite when this is over."

"Me, too," Jake said. He stood up and put the plates back on the rolling cart, then moved it into the hall. Closed and locked the door.

"You want to watch TV?" he asked. "I'm going to bed. It's been a really long day."

"I'm turning in, too," Livvy said, eyeing the two queen-sized beds. A part of her wished they'd gotten a room with a king-sized bed. It would have been plenty big for both of them, but tonight, she wanted to be close to Jake.

And that was a problem. Jake was the very last guy she should want to be close to.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:42 am*

Pale sunlight leaked beneath the blinds and Jake, still half asleep, rolled over. He reached across the bed, but found nothing but cold sheets. Opening his eyes, he saw Livvy in the other bed, still sound asleep.

He flopped onto his back and swallowed hard. That had been a hell of a dream. He glanced at Livvy quickly, then dragged his gaze away from her sleeping, still figure. She'd apparently kicked at the sheet and blanket in her sleep, exposing the thin, worn T-shirt she wore. It didn't leave much to his imagination, and the realization that he was being a creeper made him drag his gaze away from the other bed.

Staring up at the ceiling, he counted the sprinkler heads to try and erase from his brain images from his dream -- he and Livvy twined together on his bed. He already knew how Livvy tasted. He wondered how soft her skin would be. Wondered if she'd shiver when he smoothed his palm over her bare skin. Wondered if she'd taste as good if his lips and tongue were somewhere other than her mouth.

He rolled onto his side, putting his back to Livvy, but it didn't help. He heard her breathing in the quiet room, heard her legs move against the sheets with a soft rustle. Heard the tiny sound she made, deep in her throat, as if she were dreaming of something sexy. Something arousing.

Enough . Jake slid out of bed, grabbed clean clothes and hurried into the bathroom without looking at Livvy again. He closed the door and contemplated locking it -- not to keep Livvy out, but to keep himself from stepping back into the room and sliding onto that bed with her. Wrapping his arms around her and pulling her against him.

Closing his eyes, he banged his head against the door. Livvy probably slept with her

gun. And if he slid into that bed with her? She'd probably pull it out and use it on him.

He turned the water on in the shower, setting it so cold it would probably shoot out ice cubes. Exactly what he needed to get control of himself. While the water got sufficiently cold, he brushed his teeth. Then stepped beneath the ice-cold spray.

Ten minutes later, shaking with cold but all thoughts of Livvy erased from his head, he stepped out of the shower. Dried off and got dressed, then drew in a breath and slid the bathroom door open as slowly and quietly as possible.

As he exited the bathroom, he tossed his dirty clothes into his suitcase on the table. Grabbed a clean pair of socks, sat on the couch and pulled them on, followed by his shoes. Then, without looking at Livvy in that bed, he pulled out his phone and began scrolling through his emails.

Livvy's sheets rustled, like she was moving around in bed. He forced himself not to look over at her. Desperate for something to do with his hands that didn't involve touching Livvy, he walked over to the coffee maker and programmed a cup for himself. He dumped in one of those little cups of creamer, then swallowed too quickly. It burned his mouth and all the way down his throat, but that was okay. It took his mind off Livvy.

"You must be desperate for coffee, gulping it down that way," Livvy said, her voice still raspy with sleep. "Didn't that burn your mouth?"

"Didn't notice," he said, refusing to turn around and look at her. He waved a hand at the bathroom. "It's all yours," he said. "I already took a shower."

"Thanks," she said. He heard the swish of the sheets sliding against her skin, then the almost silent padding of her feet as she walked to her suitcase. Clothing whispered as

she searched through her bag, then she walked past him, leaving the faint trace of her flowery scent behind. When the bathroom door slid closed, Jake dropped onto the couch. Gripped the coffee cup tightly in one hand as he navigated through his phone with the other. He saw the news stories but couldn't have said what they were about.

When Livvy opened the bathroom door again, a cloud of fresh-smelling steam wafted into the room. Surrounded him with the faint scent of Livvy mixed with the same soap he'd used. "Any more of that coffee?" she asked.

"I'll get you a cup. What do you like?"

"Nothing fancy. Plain coffee, plain cream."

"You got it." Without looking at her, he programmed the coffee maker, and when her cup was brewed, he carefully emptied a tiny container of cream into it. "One cream or two?" he asked without looking at her.

"Two, please," she said, and he heard her bed springs pling.

Moments later, also wearing shoes and socks, she sidled up beside him. He handed her the cup of coffee he'd prepared, and she murmured her thanks. Brought the cup to her mouth and moaned. "Oh, God, that's good," she muttered.

Jake closed his eyes, unable to look at her. Based on the sounds she'd made, she was really enjoying that cup of coffee. And that was something he definitely didn't need to see. He was having a hard enough time controlling himself around Livvy.

Clearing his throat, he said, "Want to order breakfast?"

"Hmm," she said, and he realized she was right behind him. "Maybe we should go out for breakfast. See if we can spot any of those Bratva guys, eating while they

strategize their day.”

He finally turned to face her. “You sure that’s a good idea? What if they know what I look like? What if Nelson sent them a picture? I’d rather they not know that I’ve got a backup with me.”

“I wouldn’t necessarily be your backup,” Livvy said. “When I met with my Bratva guys a few months ago, there were no women around. The women were in the butcher shop and the delis. They don’t expect women to be in positions of authority. I think it makes them... uncomfortable.” Her lip curled. “As if a woman in authority is a threat to them.”

Jake let his mouth curl into a half-smile. “In the case of the Bratva group you visited, you were a threat to them. Which is probably why you were able to get away without being hurt. Or killed. They weren’t expecting you to be proactive. Smart. Clever.”

Livvy shrugged. “Yeah, well, if these guys talked to my guys, they’d get the scoop from them. ‘Don’t turn your back on her. Watch her the whole time.’” She shook her head. “They see me with you? They’re not going to underestimate me, unfortunately.”

Jake digested what she’d said and finally nodded. “Yeah, you’re probably right. So I guess it’s room service for breakfast.”

“Yeah, unless the hotel has a dining room.”

Before she was finished talking, Jake was shaking his head. “Not going down to the dining room,” he said, his voice flat. “Too many eyes down there. For all we know, they’ve sent men to all the hotels in the area, watching for me. So they know where I am in case I get away from them.”

Livvy frowned. Opened her mouth to respond, then shut it again. Finally sighed. “You’re right. I wasn’t thinking strategically. The last thing we want to do is clue them in on where we’re staying. So I guess it’s room service.”

“Yeah.” Jake leaned closer. “This way, we’ll have in-room entertainment. We can listen to the feed from the cameras in the office while we eat breakfast.”

“You gonna take notes? Or do you want me to do it?” Livvy asked.

“I’ll take notes,” Jake said easily. “You listen for other sounds in the office. Things that might give us a clue to their intentions.”

“Yeah, I can do that.” Livvy drew a deep breath. “You want to order something?”

Jake grabbed the room service breakfast menu. Handed it to her. “You first.”

Five minutes later, Livvy ordered French toast with bacon for herself, and an omelet with a side of bacon for Jake. When she put the phone down, she said to Jake, “Twenty minutes.”

“That works,” he said. “While we wait, do you wanna get a look at the cameras I installed in my office? See if we have any action there?”

“Yeah.” Livvy’s face brightened. “Sounds like a great idea.”

Jake pulled out his laptop and opened the camera app. Moments later, he got four real-time videos of his office, one from each camera. No one was there. It looked exactly like he’d left it.

“I’m gonna scroll back to when I installed the cameras yesterday,” he said. “Look at every moment of the recording.”

“Yeah. Let’s see if Nelson or Windsor or someone else took the bait.” Livvy said. She slid onto the couch beside him, and he could smell the soap she’d used in the shower. As well as that tart, citrusy scent he always associated with Livvy.

Instead of allowing himself to be distracted by Livvy sitting so close to him, Jake focused on reviewing the video for any sign of someone in his office. He’d scrolled through the afternoon and into the evening, when one camera registered his office door opening. He looked at the timestamp on the video.

“See that?” he said. “Ten p.m. No one’s usually in the office at that hour unless there’s something urgent we’re working on. By ten, pretty much everyone is gone.”

“Not everyone,” Livvy said quietly as she stared at the screen.

As the door swung open, both Jake and Livvy eased closer to the computer, waiting to see who the intruder was. Her scent swept over him, but he was able to ignore it as they saw a man step into his office. The man kept his head down as he slid into Jake’s chair. Opened the drawer and took out the computer. Not until he looked at the computer screen could they see his face.

Livvy elbowed Jake. “Fred Windsor. You were right. Let’s see what he does.”

They watched him type in Jake’s ID and password, and the screen opened. Windsor reared back as he stared at a blank screen. Frowning, he pressed several keys. When nothing happened, he picked up the computer and turned it over, as if looking for a reason that it wasn’t giving up its content.

After about twenty minutes, when he wasn’t able to access anything, he slammed the lid down and shoved it back into the drawer. Then he stood up and stormed out of Jake’s office. He slammed the door closed, then opened it again, reached in and turned off the light, probably because he knew a light left on would raise questions

when Jake got back to his office. They watched for another twenty minutes, but he never came back. Neither did anyone else.

“You think someone could get a fingerprint from the doorknob inside your office?” Livvy asked. “He wasn’t wearing gloves.”

“I noticed that, too,” Jake said. “I’ll call Diana right now and tell her what we saw. Suggest she get someone over to collect fingerprints from my computer and door.”

“Great idea,” Livvy said. “You want me to call her while you shut down your feed?”

“Yeah, thanks. Go ahead.”

Livvy pulled out her phone, and Jake heard her talking to Diana. “Yes,” she said. “We just looked at the feed from Jake’s office. Fred Windsor was at Jake’s desk, using his computer.” She smiled. “He seemed quite frustrated when he couldn’t find any files on it.”

She listened for a long moment, then said, “Thank you, ma’am. We appreciate that. We have the video of Windsor breaking into Jake’s office, but fingerprints would really seal the deal.”

Livvy finally said, “We installed cameras in the office where Jake’s supposed to meet members of the Bratva team.” She listened for a moment. Finally said, “Yeah, we had an exciting twenty minutes or so. A group of men came into the building while we were still there. Fortunately, Jake found a fire escape ladder on the roof of the next building over. We used that to get away. We’ll monitor the Bratva meetings today and tomorrow. Make sure it’s gonna be safe for Jake to meet with these guys.”

She paused to listen, then nodding her head. “Yeah. If we don’t like what we hear, Jake’s not taking the meeting. We’ll keep you posted.”

Livvy ended the call, then looked at Jake. “She’s gonna get a fingerprint tech over to your office today. They’ll collect prints from the door and your keyboard. When they match Windsor’s, that should seal the nail in his coffin.”

Jake’s eyes held hers for a long moment, then he said, “I don’t think Nelson and Windsor could come up with all this by themselves. There’s got to be someone higher up the food chain who’s coordinating this.”

“I agree,” Livvy said. She bit her lip. “Nelson and Windsor couldn’t set this up by themselves. Frankly, they’re not that bright. There’s someone higher up who’s involved. The question is, how do we catch him or her?”

Jake leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, and sighed. “I have no idea. I suppose they could arrest Nelson and Windsor, press both of them for the name of the other people involved. But I’m pretty sure neither would give up their boss. They’re probably afraid they’ll be killed if they do.”

Livvy frowned. “Yeah. And they’re probably right. They squeal and they’re dead men. But Diana must have people who could tail them. Watch them 24-7. She could probably even get a warrant to bug their houses and cars. Put cameras with audio feeds into their houses. See who they meet with and what they discuss. Unless they’re super careful and only meet outside. In a public place.” She frowned. “Not sure what you do in that situation.”

“Not our problem to solve,” Jake said. “We’re pointing her in the right direction. Diana has to be the one who figures out how to keep tabs on them. How to ensure they’re caught with enough incriminating evidence to put them away forever.”

Livvy slumped back against the couch. “Knowing who’s behind it is good. But it still doesn’t tell us why you and I were targeted. What did we see or hear that made us targets.”

“No idea,” Jake said. “But I’m guessing that if Diana can get bugs set up in their homes and cars, if she can have agents tailing them, something will click. Because if we knew why they wanted to kill us, that would also tell us what they’re trying to hide.”

“Yeah,” Livvy said. “Easy to speculate. But until we have solid information, Windsor and Nelson are free to do whatever they want.”

“If anyone can get it done, Diana can,” Jake said.

Livvy shook her head. “She’s still got to follow the rules. And Windsor and Nelson don’t,” Livvy pointed out. “They can do whatever they want.”

“Diana has a lot of power,” Jake said. “I’m betting she’ll figure out a way to nail those two guys. And figure out who’s working with them.”

“I hope so,” Livvy said. She glanced at the clock on her phone. “Time to tune in to our other Russian buddies and see what they have planned for you tomorrow.”

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:42 am*

Jake put his computer on the table in front of the couch, then scrolled to the camera app and opened it. The office was empty, but the two cameras gave them a good view of the entire room. He glanced at Livvy, also studying the screen. “Now we wait,” he said.

She nodded slowly. She glanced at the phone. 10:45. “They should be arriving soon.”

His foot tapping the floor, Jake pulled a notebook out of his suitcase. It had a pen clipped to the first few pages, and he pulled it off. Began bouncing it on the table. The steady tap, tap, tap drove Livvy nuts. When she couldn’t bear it any longer, Livvy grabbed the pen from his fingers and held it out of his reach. “You’re gonna drive me crazy with that,” she said.

He looked from the notebook to Livvy. Back to the notebook. Sighed and flopped back onto the couch. “Sorry,” he said. “Nervous habit. The wait is making me impatient. Edgy. Are they gonna show up? Or are they out of the office, doing other things today? And if they are? What other things are they doing?”

Livvy stared at him, not allowing her mouth to twitch into a grin. “Maybe they’re out digging your grave in some abandoned lot.”

“Ha,” he said. He shook his head, but a smile flirted with his mouth. “Yeah, maybe they are. If they plan on killing me, they also need a plan to get rid of my body.”

Livvy leaned toward him and rested her hand on his knee. Even beneath his jeans, she felt the heat of his skin. The curve of his kneecap. “Don’t tempt fate,” she said, holding his gaze. “Or at least don’t give it any ideas. No one’s going to kill you,

because they'd have to go through me to get to you. And I'm not easy to kill. Anyone pulls a gun or another weapon on you? They have to deal with me first."

Jake's shoulders dropped, and he sucked in a breath. "Believe it or not, that's really reassuring," he said. "Knowing you'll have my back. Knowing I won't have to fight off these guys by myself."

Livvy scowled, the details of her own meeting with the Bratva still too fresh in her memory. "Yeah. I know what you're saying. What was Nelson thinking when he didn't send a backup for me?"

"He was thinking that he'd eliminated you," Jake said, anger flashing in his eyes. "That he'd gotten rid of one of the people he's, for some reason, afraid of."

"You can bet that this group will be a lot more well-organized," Livvy said. "Nelson's probably learned from his mistake." She furrowed her forehead. "Although I wonder how he's going to explain not sending you information about your backup?"

"He probably hopes it won't be necessary. If I'm killed, no one will know I didn't have a backup." Jake scowled. "Although if they were to succeed in killing me, there would be an investigation. There always is when an agent is killed. And it would come out that he hadn't arranged any backup."

Livvy eased back against the couch. Hooked one arm over the couch back. "His fatal mistake is that he thinks you're alone. He doesn't know I'm here, too, listening to the tapes and watching your back."

Jake shook his head slowly. "Right, but he has to have planned for the unexpected," he said. "And you showing up with me would definitely be unexpected."

"Yeah, it would. But..." She grabbed his wrist. "Someone just walked into that

office.”

Jake leaned forward, then moved to sit beside Livvy. Two men had walked in. One was middle-aged, with grey hair and an unshaven face. He was wiry but muscular, and he looked as if he could tear a man apart with his bare hands.

“Wouldn’t want to tangle with that guy,” Livvy said.

“Hell, no,” Jake replied. He didn’t take his gaze off the screen. Middle-aged guy took the chair at the desk, and younger and not quite as muscular guy sat on one of the couches.

Middle-aged guy said something to the other man, speaking what had to be Russian. Jake watched the two men’s expressions, looking for clues to what they were saying.

After another ten minutes, other men began drifting in. They all greeted the older guy, nodded to the younger one and sat on the couches. It looked as if they all had a usual seat -- either it was assigned to them, or they just chose the same spot every day.

By shortly after 11 a.m., the room looked full. Every seat was taken, and the men were speaking to each other in Russian.

The door opened one last time, and a young guy darted into the room. He leaned against the wall, nodding at the older man and all the other men.

Jake was surprised when the older man appeared deferential to the new guy. He nodded at the young man and sat up straight. Finally said, “Thank you for joining us, Petrov. We’ll welcome your advice on our job two days from now.”

“Is why I’m here, Alexei,” Petrov said.

“Good,” Alexei said. “So we begin.” He looked around the room, and it seemed as if he caught every man’s eyes. “We will speak English today, tomorrow and the following day. Our contact is not Russian. He won’t speak our language. So we’ll have to use his. Is that clear to everyone?”

He looked around the room, and every man nodded.

“Good,” he said. “So. First on the agenda. What do we do with the man from the FBI?”

The men began to murmur, but they were speaking softly. Livvy hoped the cameras would capture the words.

“Okay.” Petrov looked around the room. “No one else willing to speak up? When do we kill him?” he asked. “When he walks into the office? Or after we’ve spoken to him and negotiated with him?”

“I say when he walks in,” one of the younger men said. “As soon as he’s in the office and the door is closed, we kill him. Two shots to the heart while he’s still sizing us up.”

“That has the disadvantage of us not hearing his proposal,” Alexei said. “Maybe there’s something we can get from him.”

“That was not our orders,” Petrov reminded him. “The orders were to shoot him immediately. We want to avoid the mistakes our brothers in Brighton Beach made. They allowed the woman to leave, and Rostoman sent his son to do the killing. But the woman was able to manipulate the kid. Kept him in front of her. And when they got to the door, she took him down before he could kill her. We don’t want a scenario like that here. If we fail at this job, our contact will not be happy. He will stop giving us information on the shipments that are arriving. If we can’t divert the merchandise,

our profits will drop. Which means all of us make less money.”

The men looked around the room. Many of them appeared leery of Petrov’s orders. Finally, another man spoke. He was older than the rest -- possibly the same age as Alexei. “We should take this man somewhere, so we don’t have to clean up the blood in the office. You know the police have tools they can use to find bloodstains, even if it has been cleaned up. No reason we should be targeted, but better not to be caught by technology. Take him down to the Gowanus Canal. Tell him you want him to see one of our operations. Once you’re there, kill him. Throw him into the canal.”

The men all looked at one another, not sold on the plan. Finally, one man said, “How many men will we need to subdue one man?”

Petrov scowled at him. “We are not subduing him,” he said. “We’re showing him our operation. Getting his advice. When we reach the canal? Boom. It is done. We shoot him and he goes over the railing into the canal. Problem solved. Our contact is happy. We get tips about shipments coming in. Everyone wins.”

“Except the guy who gets killed,” one younger man muttered.

“Sergei.” Petrov swiveled to face the younger man. “Are you unhappy with the plan to kill this agent?”

“Not if he deserves to die,” Sergei said. “But we know nothing about him. Just that a man in a faraway city says ‘you kill this man,’ and we kill him? Are we acting as assassins for this American?”

Petrov stared at Alexei and gave him a nod. Alexei stood up. “Sergei, this man tells us when a valuable cargo is arriving. Tells us what is on the ship and where it will be. All we have to do is wait until the middle of the night, black out the cameras, and take cargo. Bingo! Money for us no one has to work for.”

Sergei stood up. “Maybe instead of being the assassins for hire for this man, we should be working for our money.”

Alexei stood as well. “Sergei, do you no longer want to be part of group? No longer make enough money to keep that wife of yours happy?”

“No, Uncle,” Sergei said, falling back into his chair. “I want to be part of the group. But your contact is using us to kill this man. A man, who, as far as we know, has done nothing wrong.”

“We don’t know what he’s done,” Alexei said. “Maybe he has done something wrong.”

“Then why aren’t the American authorities doing something about it?”

“Poor Sergei, the delicate flower,” another man said. “Will killing this man hurt your feelings?”

“Of course not,” Sergei said. “But it doesn’t feel right. I thought we were honorable men. Not hired killers.”

Another man stood up from one of the couches. “Come, Sergei. Let’s go outside and talk.”

Sergei stared at the man. “So you can kill me?” he said. “No, thank you.”

Livvy looked over at Jake. “Do you think we can save that kid?” she asked. “Because I think we’re looking at a dead man walking. I doubt he survives this day. And he would be a good source of info about the Bratva.”

“Yeah,” Jake said, still staring at the screen. “Maybe we need to get over to that

building and follow Sergei home. Try to recruit him. Or at least get him away from this group. Because right now? That kid's days are numbered. Only because he didn't want to kill an innocent man."

"We can wait in that fast-food place across the street until Sergei comes out. Follow him until we're sure no one's on his tail. See if we can flip him."

Jake nodded. "Not sure if he'll be interested," he said with a sigh. "But I think we have to try."

"I agree," Livvy said, standing up and reaching for her jacket. "Let's get going. We have no idea when this meeting's gonna break up."

"Right." He shrugged on his own jacket and said, "You have your gun?"

"Of course I do," Livvy said. "Whenever we're not in this room, I have my gun with me."

"Good. Then let's go."

They walked quickly to the fast-food place across from the building where the meeting was supposed to be held. Stepped inside, and Livvy kept watch while Jake went to buy food. When he returned with fries and ice cream, she said, "What if he's with a bunch of people?"

Jake ate a fry and frowned. "I'm guessing he won't be. He'll probably leave by himself before the rest of them. And I'm pretty sure one of them will follow him and kill him."

"Then we have to make sure we're between Sergei and his killer. You think he'll believe us?" Livvy said.

Jake shrugged. “He didn’t seem very happy in that group. Maybe he’ll be open to what we’ll offer.”

“Yeah.” Livvy sighed. “All we can do is try.”

They’d eaten half the fries and some of the ice cream when the door of the building across the street flew open and Sergei walked out. No one followed him, so Jake and Livvy dumped the rest of their food and stepped onto the sidewalk. Sergei was about fifty feet ahead of them, and still no one had exited the building behind him. As he turned a corner, he glanced over his shoulder. Studied them for a moment, then walked more quickly. Jake and Livvy picked up the pace and followed him more closely.

They’d reached another intersection, and Sergei, shoulders hunched, glanced over his shoulder again. Walked more quickly as he began to turn left. Livvy and Jake moved closer, one on either side of him, and Jake said, “Sergei, are you in trouble?”

The kid stopped walking and spun around to stare at Jake. “What are you talking about? And who are you?” he finally said.

“You left the building alone. Most of the men go in and out in groups. I suspect there’s a reason you’re alone.”

Sergei took another step back. Frowned. “How do you know I’m in trouble?”

Jake shrugged. “A wild guess. You don’t look happy. And your shoulders were hunched, as if you were... concerned about someone behind you.”

Livvy touched Sergei’s arm. “We’d like to talk to you, if you have a little time,” she said.

The kid frowned. “And you’re going to take me somewhere?”

“No,” Livvy said. “We can go to a restaurant. Or a park. Wherever you like. Just somewhere that your friends won’t see you talking to us.”

Sergei took a step back. His gaze flicked from Jake to Livvy. Back to Jake. “Who are you?”

“Two people who want to help you,” Jake said.

Sergei put more distance between himself and them. “How do you know I need help?”

Livvy took a chance. “We’ve been watching you for a while. I think you’re very unhappy in the job you’re currently doing.”

Sergei looked at Livvy for a long moment. Then he stared at Jake as he began to back away from them. “What if I am in trouble?” he asked. “How could you help me? And my wife?”

“We could find you and your wife a safe place to stay, to start,” Jake said. “Find you a job. Make sure you and your wife are protected.”

“Why would you do this?” Sergei asked, backing away from them.

Livvy caught Jake’s eye. Should they tell him we were recording the meeting? Tell him we know he was against killing an FBI agent?

Jake nodded once, slightly. His eyes said, “Yes, tell him.”

Livvy drew a deep breath. Gave Jake a tiny nod. Then she turned to Sergei. “You

know that law enforcement tapes a lot of meetings of men in your... group.”

Sergei sucked in a breath. “You recorded our meeting?”

“The meeting was being recorded,” Livvy said gently. “You wanted to do the right thing. The others in the room did not. We don’t want you to be killed because you wanted to do the right thing.”

“They would not kill me,” Sergei said. His voice was full of bravado, but his eyes held the knowledge that he knew they were right. His gaze darted from Jake to Livvy. Back to Jake. His larynx jumped when he swallowed. Sergei was scared.

“Maybe not today. Or tomorrow. But they’re never going to look at you the same way.” Livvy leaned closer. “What you did was very brave. We don’t want you to get hurt, or worse, because you stood up for what’s right.” She realized she hadn’t won Sergei over. But he was wavering. “You go home. Talk to your wife. If you decide you want our help, you can call my phone.” She recited her phone number, and Sergei narrowed his eyes. “That is not a New York area code.”

“You’re right about that,” Livvy said. “Just memorize that number, and if you and your wife decide you want help, call me. We’ll pick you up and take you someplace you’d be safe.”

She saw Sergei’s lips moving. Memorizing the phone number? She hoped so. “Talk to your wife,” she said quietly. “If you want our help, we’ll give it to you.”

Livvy looked around, afraid some of the people on the street might see them talking to Sergei. “Thank you for the restaurant suggestions,” she said in a loud voice. “We’ll give them a try.”

Sergei swallowed. Nodded. “You’re welcome,” he said. “Enjoy your meal.”

“We will,” she said. Then she and Jake turned and began walking away. When they reached a corner and turned around, Sergei had disappeared.

“You think he’s gonna call?” Livvy asked Jake.

He shrugged. “Fifty-fifty,” he said. “But I hope to God he does. If he doesn’t, he’s gonna end up in the Gowanus Canal.”

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:42 am*

Sergei walked quickly toward his house. Every time he reached a corner, he couldn't stop himself from glancing over his shoulder. Finally he huffed out a breath. Why would anyone be following him? They knew where he and Elena lived. It would be child's play to sneak into his house after he and Elena were asleep and shoot both of them in the head.

And the New York police? They'd chalk it up to Bratva violence. Wouldn't put much effort into investigating, because they knew no Bratva member would rat out his buddies.

A cold finger ran down Sergei's spine, and he walked a little faster. He needed to get home. Needed to talk to Elena.

Sergei recited the woman's phone number again, making sure it was committed to memory. Elena would still be home when he got there. They could talk about what had happened at the meeting, then discuss the woman's offer. Would his wife want to uproot herself from her community? Leave her parents? Her sisters? Move someplace new and unfamiliar?

No. He knew his wife well enough to understand that she was woven into the Russian community here. Her parents, siblings, nieces and nephews all lived near them.

Sergei swallowed. Elena was pregnant, but no one knew yet. The safety of the baby now had to be considered. If Alexei killed him and Elena, the baby would die, as well. Unacceptable.

Sergei walked faster. That space between his shoulder blades was twitching. As if

someone was watching him. It was not a surprise. It would be more shocking if no one was watching him. He didn't look over his shoulder. Couldn't show any awareness of surveillance. Right now, the only thing that was important was getting home to Elena. Telling her what had happened and relaying the offer from the woman and man. They would be safe. Protected. Shielded from Alexei's vengeance.

When he reached his house, he didn't hurry. He walked with the same deliberate speed he'd used since he left the office building. Walking up the front steps, he unlocked the door and stepped into the enclosed porch. Unlocked the door to the house, and stepped inside, making sure both doors were locked behind him.

Elena hurried out of the kitchen. "Sergei! What are you doing home before noon? Is something wrong? Did something happen?"

Sergei took his wife's hand. Twined their fingers together and drew her into the kitchen. He pulled out a chair from the table and eased her into it. "We need to talk, Elena."

She sucked in a breath and shoved her blond hair behind her ears. Grabbed both his hands. "Sergei, what's wrong? What happened?"

Elena could always read him, just as he could always read her. They'd grown up together, the children of close friends. So he slid his fingers between hers, and held her tightly. "We have a problem, Elena."

Her fingers tightened on his. "What happened?"

"I told you about this FBI agent who is supposed to meet with us tomorrow."

She nodded. "Yes, I remember."

“Apparently, his boss is sending him to us so that we can kill him and dispose of his body.”

Elena sucked in a breath. “What?” she whispered, her eyes wide with horror.

He nodded slowly. “Yes. That’s the purpose of this meeting. To kill him and dispose of his body.”

Elena frowned. “Why? What has he done?”

“Nothing, as far as I know,” Sergei said. He swallowed the lump of fear in his throat, but it didn’t go away. “There was a woman a couple of months ago. She met with some of our members in Brighton Beach. Apparently, they were supposed to kill her, but they failed. She outwitted the young man who was supposed to kill her and escaped. They are all horrified at being bested by a woman.”

“And now it’s your group’s turn to meet with someone and kill them,” Elena said, clearly grasping the problem.

“Yes. I made the mistake of asking why we were doing this. This man had never done anything to any of us. We were basically acting as assassins for a man buried deep in the FBI in Washington D.C.” He leaned closer to Elena. “Alexei let that slip a couple of weeks ago. He knew he’d made a mistake and he tried to hide it. But I saw him sweating. Nervous. No one besides me seemed to notice, but I think he wasn’t supposed to reveal that information.”

“Why?” Elena asked. “Why are you supposed to kill this man?”

“No one knows. The man Alexei deals with simply told us we had to kill him and dispose of his body.”

Elena frowned. “That’s not right, Sergei. If this man did something to bring dishonor on the FBI, that is one thing. But to kill him simply as a favor to the man Alexei deals with? That’s wrong.”

Sergei reached for his wife and wrapped her in his arms. “Yes, Elena. You are right. This is wrong. But the meeting is set for tomorrow.” He eased his wife away from his body. “The problem is, I spoke out in the meeting. Told them it was wrong to kill this man only because someone we’ve never met in person tells us to do it.” He sighed. “My father always tells me I’m too impulsive. That I speak without thinking. And this time, I got us both in trouble.”

“Because you don’t want to kill a man on someone’s orders?” She frowned. “Someone you’ve never met?”

“Yes.” He grabbed her hands. “Alexei wasn’t happy with me. I saw my death in his expression,” he whispered. “It might not be this week, or even next week. But he is going to kill me.”

“No!” Elena grabbed his shoulders. Pulled him against her. “I won’t let them kill you.”

Sergei wrapped his arms around his wife and held her tight, appreciating her loyalty. “There is a way out,” he said. “But I don’t think you’ll like it.”

“Tell me,” she demanded.

“After I left the meeting, a man and woman followed me away from the building. They must have been watching for me from the fast-food place across the street, because they were behind me by the end of the block.” He swallowed the lump in his throat. “They said they could help me. Help us. They offered to move us away from here and into a safer neighborhood.”

“Where would that be?” Elena asked.

“I didn’t ask them that. I was overwhelmed at what they said. But the man and the woman told me I’d be dead if I didn’t get away. They seemed to know exactly what had happened in the meeting today.”

“I don’t understand,” Elena said. “How could they know that?”

Sergei blew out a breath. “My guess? They were taping the meeting. It’s the only explanation.”

Elena put her hand on her belly. “What are you thinking, Sergei?”

“I’m thinking we should discuss this. I’m afraid they were right. If we stay here, I will be killed. Then you’d be left alone with our baby and no one to support you.”

“My parents would take us in,” she said.

“Is that what you want?” Sergei asked. “To let them kill me, then move in with your parents?”

“Of course not,” Elena said. “I don’t want anything to happen to you. But we need to talk about this. Decide if we stay here and risk you being killed, or move away. Unless we can think of another alternative.”

Sergei shook his head slowly. “There is no other alternative,” he said. “Let’s sit down and talk this through. See what our options are.”

“We can do that,” Elena said. “But I think we only have two options. Stay, and hope that they don’t kill you. Or leave and protect ourselves.”

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Livvy paced the hotel room, glancing at her phone every few minutes to check the time. The minutes crept by much too slowly.

“You’re making me dizzy,” Jake finally said. He stood up and grabbed Livvy’s hand. “Sit down and relax. Pacing isn’t going to make Sergei call any more quickly, or make him any more eager to accept our offer.”

“You’re right,” Livvy said, dropping onto the couch. “But the waiting is making me crazy.”

“Me, too,” Jake said. “Now we have two things to focus on -- my Bratva meeting tomorrow, and how to protect Sergei.” He leaned closer to Livvy. “I have some thoughts about tomorrow.”

“Yeah? You’re not going to walk into that office. Those men are just itching to kill you. If they don’t do it in the office, they’ll take you for a walk. Shoot you and dump you in the canal.”

“You’re right. Not gonna go that route. Because I’d be completely vulnerable, and I wouldn’t have any backup.” He leaned closer to Livvy. “I think I’ll change the meeting place. We’ll set it up for that fast-food place across the street from the building. That way, you’ll be able to be there, too. At a different table, but close enough to have my back. And if you see a threat, you can text me. Or if someone pulls a gun and aims it at me, you can take him out.” He smiled. “You brought a suppressor, right?”

“I did.” Livvy smiled. “I like this plan. It keeps you out of that office and lets me be present at the meeting to back you up. This way, you have a better than average chance of walking away from the meeting.”

“That’s the goal,” Jake said.

Livvy leaned closer to him. “It’s got to be a last-minute change of plans,” she said. “You call them the morning of the meeting. Tell them you’re not going to their office. You want to meet in public. And you choose the restaurant across the street from their building.”

“They won’t like it,” Jake said.

“Of course they won’t. You’ll be screwing up their plans. But I don’t see any way to keep you safe if you go to that office. There was a strong sentiment for shooting you as soon as you walk in the door. No way to defend against that. You step into the room, and boom, you’re dead.”

“Yeah. Not going to let them have the upper hand like that.” Jake swallowed the hard ball of anxiety in his throat. “Meeting in a public place is less risky, but still dangerous. We both have to be prepared to use our weapons.”

“I won’t hesitate. And I know you won’t, either,” Livvy said. “This is an us-or-them situation. I hope we can avoid firing our weapons, but we need to be prepared to use them.”

“You’re right.” Jake clenched a fist. “Shootouts in fast-food restaurants are way too dangerous. Too many civilians in the mix, too many chances for civilian casualties. But I’m not sure we have any other choice.”

“I don’t think we do,” Livvy said. “They’re going to be just as concerned about civilian casualties as we are. After all, this is their community. Dead Russian civilians would be a really bad look for them.” She clenched her teeth. “I’m guessing they’ll try to get you to go with them to the Gowanus Canal. That’s their way of taking care of you out of the public eye.”

“Yeah, but I’m not going anywhere with those guys,” Jake said. “I’m here to listen to their proposals. Take them back to Nelson.”

Livvy smiled. “You’re going to get some pushback,” she said.

“That’s fine. That’s why they’re called negotiations.”

“So we have a plan for tomorrow.” Livvy drew a deep breath. “I like this one a lot better than me skulking in that closet around the corner from the office. I’m no good to you there. At least this way, I’ll be able to actually do something if things go south.”

“Good.” Jake slapped his palms on the table. “When do you think we should call them?”

“As late as possible,” Livvy said immediately. “We don’t want to give them any time to set something up. You’re supposed to be there at ten, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then call them at 9:45. We can even be in the restaurant by then. Pick out our seats. Set it all up, so that when they walk in, there’s only one place they can sit.”

Jake nodded slowly. “Yeah. I like that idea.”

“You can ask them how many men will be there. So you know how many seats to save.” Livvy smiled. “Knowing how many men you’ll be facing gives you more power.”

“You’re right,” Jake said. He leaned toward Livvy. “You’re a genius, Liv,” he said. “I like this set up a hell of a lot better than walking into their turf. Especially walking

into that tiny, cramped office.”

Livvy gripped his wrist, and Jake felt the pressure of her fingers zing through his body. “We’re FBI agents, Jake. We make the rules when meeting with hostiles. And we do it in public. In a place where they probably know a lot of the customers. Which means they’ll be reluctant to use weapons.”

“Yeah,” Jake said. He slumped against the back of the couch. “Now we sit here and wait for Sergei to call.”

“You think he will?” Livvy asked.

“He doesn’t have a lot of choices,” Jake said.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:42 am*

The minutes ticked by torturously slowly as they ate room service meals and waited for Livvy's phone to ring. Finally Jake pushed his plate away and leaned toward Livvy.

"We need to have a plan for if Sergei calls," he said. "We need to have the name of an agent we can trust to protect him and his wife. To keep them safe."

"I've been thinking the exact same thing," Livvy said. "I'm reluctant to call the local FBI office. They wouldn't know who we are, or what our motives are. And how do we know if we could trust them?"

"Yeah. I think we have to get Diana involved. Explain the situation to her and have her contact someone she trusts in that office. So when Sergei calls, we have someone lined up to help him." Jake studied her for a moment. "You want to call Diana?"

"Yeah." Livvy reached for her phone and dialed the Director's number. She put the phone on speaker, and moments later, Diana's voice said, "Director Redfield. How can I help you?"

"Madame Director, this is Olivia Dunbar. We have a situation here in New York and we're going to need some assistance from the local FBI office."

"What's the situation?" Diana asked, her voice calm.

Olivia explained about Sergei, and how she and Jake were afraid he was going to be killed, how they'd contacted Sergei and offered the FBI's assistance. "We need the name of an agent who can pick up him and his wife when they call, set up a safe

house for them, and basically be their advocate with the FBI.”

Diana was silent for a long moment. Finally she said, “That’s a good thing that you and Jake have done. I’ll call the SAC of the Brooklyn office and talk it over with her. Get a recommendation for you with a name and phone number. So when your Sergei calls, you have someone to reach out to.”

“Thank you, Madame Director. We’re hoping he calls us tonight. I’m afraid that he’s a marked man now and it won’t be long before someone in his group kills him. Possibly his wife, as well.”

“That would be consistent with what we know of the Bratva. Let me make this call, then I’ll call you back immediately.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Livvy said.

Diana hung up, and Livvy ended the call. “I hope she calls back before Sergei calls us.”

“I’m guessing he’ll call us late, after his neighbors are in bed. He won’t want anyone to see him and his wife getting into a car.”

Livvy swallowed, and Jake’s gaze followed the ripple of muscles in her neck as she spoke. “I think we need to get Sergei and his wife out of that house as soon as possible,” she said. “I’m afraid that someone from that group at the meeting is going to try to kill them tonight.”

“That seems likely,” Jake said. “As soon as Sergei calls, we should tell him to get their things together and get out of the house. Maybe hide in the garage.”

“Maybe hide in a neighbor’s garage,” Livvy said. “If someone comes to kill them

tonight, they'll search the garage if they don't find Sergei and his wife in the house."

"Good idea." Jake swallowed and began to pace the room. "Now all we need is a name and phone number from Diana."

Tension swirled through the room, curling tight in Jake's belly. When he looked over at Livvy, he saw the same tension in her expression. "Come on, come on," Livvy murmured. "Call us, Diana!"

After what seemed like forever but was probably less than fifteen minutes, Livvy's phone rang. She snatched it up and connected the call. "This is Livvy."

"Olivia, I have a name and phone number for you." She rattled them off, and Livvy scribbled them on a piece of paper. "This agent grew up in a Bratva family, so he knows what Sergei and his wife are facing. His name is Roman Peters. He speaks fluent Russian and will guide your Sergei and his wife through the jungles of cooperating with the FBI. I spoke to him and he's prepared to leave at a moment's notice to pick them up."

"Thank you so much, Madame Director. Fingers crossed that Sergei actually calls."

"Yes, I hope so, too. Keep me updated."

"We'll do that." Livvy disconnected the phone, then looked over at Jake. "Do you think they'll call?"

"Sergei probably grew up in the Bratva. Maybe his wife did, too. They know what'll happen to them if they don't get to a safe place. My guess is that they're gathering what they want to take and packing it up. Once they're ready to leave, they'll call."

"I hope to hell you're right," Livvy said.

She paced the room for the next half-hour, until Jake grabbed her hand and pulled her onto the couch with him. “You’re making me dizzy, Liv. Pacing isn’t going to make them call more quickly.”

She banged her head against the back of the couch. “All I can see in my head are people breaking into their house and killing them.”

“They’re gonna be watchful,” Jake said. “You know damn well they have weapons, and they know how to use them. They’re not defenseless. Do I want them out of that house? Absolutely, and the sooner, the better. But sitting here and obsessing about it isn’t going to make them call any faster.”

“He seemed so young,” Livvy said in a low voice. “Barely more than a kid.”

“He is barely more than a kid,” Jake said. “But I’m guessing kids grow up pretty damn fast in Bratva families.” He reached over and grabbed her hands. Twined their fingers together. “He’s nothing like you or I were at his age. He’s not helpless. Not naive. He knows what the score is and knows what to expect from the other members of his group. I’m certain he and his wife have discussed all the possibilities. They know what the stakes are. They probably know exactly who’ll be sent for them.”

“What an awful way to live,” Livvy said.

Jake shrugged. “Guess that depends on your perspective. They probably think of it as knowing exactly what’s expected of you. Knowing exactly what your role is. There’s a lot of comfort in having a crystal-clear grasp of your role in an organization.” He curled his arm around her shoulders. “Take a few deep breaths. I’m guessing Sergei is going to call. Probably soon.”

Livvy stood up and began pacing again. She’d barely made it halfway around the room when her phone rang.

She froze, staring at Jake. He nodded at her. “Go ahead and answer it. And stay calm. They don’t need to hear you losing your shit.”

Livvy nodded, then took a deep breath. After the phone rang twice more, she connected the call. “Hello?”

“Is this the, uh, woman who gave me her phone number?” Sergei’s voice.

“Yes, it is. Who is this?”

“This is Sergei. From this morning.”

“I remember who you are, Sergei. Do you want us to help you?”

“Yes. Me and my wife want to leave our house and find a safe refuge. You said you could provide that.”

“Yes,” Livvy said, businesslike and brisk. “I’ll call my local contact with the FBI in Brooklyn. He will pick you up.”

“You and your partner will be here, right?”

She shot her gaze to Jake. “Do you want us to be there?”

“Yes,” Sergei said. “So we can be sure that the person picking us up is the person it’s supposed to be.”

“I’ve never met him, but I have his name and I’ll ask for his ID. My partner and I will meet you.” She glanced at Jake, and he nodded. “Do you have all your things packed and ready to go?” she asked.

“We do. Should we wait in the living room?”

“No way,” Livvy said. “They’ll go to your house first. I’d like you to go out the back door and into the alley. Don’t go into your garage. Walk down a few houses and go into a garage several houses away from your house. Be very quiet so the homeowners don’t notice. Tell me your address, and we’ll find you in the alley.”

Sergei hesitated for a long moment, then rattled off his address.

“Okay, good. I’ll call the agent who’s going to assist you, then my partner and I will walk over to your address. We won’t approach the front door, in case anyone’s watching. We’ll walk into the alley and find you. We’ll be there in fifteen minutes or so.”

“Okay. My wife and I will see you then.”

Sergei cut the connection, and Jake was already reaching for a jacket. He put his gun into a holster beneath his left arm, and Livvy did the same. Less than five minutes later, they left their room and headed down the elevator.

It took about fifteen minutes to walk to Sergei’s address. The agent who’d be assisting Sergei had said he’d arrive in about a half-hour. When they reached Sergei’s house, they continued past it and turned down the side street. Then, checking to make sure there wasn’t anyone around, Livvy and Jake ducked into the alley. They knew which garage belonged to Sergei, and they kept walking past it. The side door of the garage three houses down was ajar.

Livvy looked at Jake, who nodded as he pulled out his gun. Livvy did the same, then they approached the door. Standing on one side of the door, Jake murmured, “Sergei, are you in this garage?”

The door swung open and Sergei stuck his head out. Nodded when he spotted them. “Come into the garage to wait with us.”

“Why don’t you and your wife come out here?” Jake countered. “We’ll wait in the alley.”

Sergei frowned. “What if members of my gang show up?”

“They’re going to go to your house first. They’ll pound on the door. Ring the doorbell. We’ll hear them from here. If we hear your back door open, we’ll retreat into the garage. Your ride should be here soon,” Jake said. He touched Sergei’s shoulder. “What time would you expect members of your group to show up?”

“Not until later. Eleven or twelve tonight.”

Sergei stood with them in the dark alley. His wife’s pale face appeared in the doorway, then she stepped back so she was out of sight. A cat dashed through the yard, startling them, and Sergei flinched as the cat disappeared into the blackness at the side of the house.

In the darkness, a night bird called above them. The sound mournful. Somber, as if he knew what Sergei faced.

The bright headlights of a car turned into the alley. “Back in the garage,” Jake ordered. “Liv and I will see who this is.” He hoped to God it was Roman Peters, come to retrieve Sergei and his wife.

The car rolled to a stop at Sergei’s garage. After waiting a few moments, Jake began walking toward the car, holding his FBI badge in front of him. The driver’s side door opened and a tall, thin man stepped out. “You Sergei?” he asked quietly when Jake and Livvy got close.

“No,” Jake said. “Jake Dunbar, FBI agent from D.C. This is Olivia Williams, former FBI agent. We’re the ones who approached Sergei.”

“Where are they?” the agent said. “I want to get out of here as fast as possible.”

“May I see your ID and badge, please?” Jake asked, holding out his hand.

The agent handed Jake his ID and flashed his badge at him. Jake handed the ID back and nodded. “Don’t want to take any chances. They’re waiting in the garage two houses down. Drive down there, and I’ll bring them out.”

“Yeah. I don’t want to be in this neighborhood any longer than I need to be.”

“You grow up in the Bratva?” Jake asked.

“Yeah, and I know how vicious those animals can be,” Roman said. “Let’s get my cargo loaded so we can get out of here.”

Five minutes later, Sergei’s bags were loaded into the trunk of Petrov’s car, and Sergei and his wife were in the back seat. “Hate to break up the party, but we’re out of here,” Roman said. He handed Jake a card. “Call me so I can fill you in on how everything goes.”

“We’ll do that,” Jake said. He leaned toward the car and Sergei rolled down the window. “Good luck. You’re safe now. I hope you have a great life.”

Sergei stared at him. Blew out a breath. “Thanks to you, we will.”

The window rolled up, and the bureau car accelerated down the alley. Less than a minute later, it had disappeared.

Livvy exhaled, and her relief echoed Jake's. "You think we'll hear how they're doing?" she asked.

"Diana can probably find out for us. But they're safe now. That's the important thing."

"Yeah."

They walked to the end of the alley, then emerged on the street behind Sergei's house. Heading toward their hotel, they both glanced down the street toward Sergei's house. There hadn't been any lights on when they'd left, but now it looked as if every light in the house was on. Livvy stopped to stare, until Jake took her elbow and tugged her across the street. "Don't look as though you're watching," he said. "Thank God we got them out in time."

"Yeah. Ten or fifteen minutes made a huge difference."

As a door opened in one of the houses, Jake draped an arm over Livvy's shoulders. "We need to sell the story that we're out on a date," he murmured when he felt her tense beneath his arm. "Tuck yourself into me."

His back burned as if someone stared at them, but he didn't allow himself to look over his shoulder. His shoulders tensed, as if waiting for a bullet to hit him, but nothing happened as they walked at a slow and steady pace. Jake dropped a kiss on Livvy's head, using it to look down the block at Sergei's house. A man stood on the stoop, and it looked as if he was talking to someone inside the house.

Jake and Livvy continued at that same slow, casual speed, as if they were a couple returning from a date and reluctant for it to end. When they finally reached the next street and were hidden from whoever was at Sergei's house, Jake relaxed, but he didn't remove his arm from Livvy's shoulders. "Gotta make it look real," he

murmured. “Coming home from a date.”

“Yeah, I got it,” she said, tucking herself into his side.

Twenty minutes later, they were back in their hotel room. As soon as the door was closed, Livvy flopped onto the couch.

Jake dropped down beside her. “Thank God we got Sergei and his wife out when we did,” he said. “Whoever was in their house wasn’t looking to throw a party for them.” He drew a shuddering breath of relief. “Now we just have to deal with the guys who want to kill me .”

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:42 am*

The following morning, an hour before Jake was due in the Bratva office, he swallowed hard, picked up his phone and called Alexei. The other man answered warily. “Yes. Who is this?”

“Dunbar. I’m supposed to meet with you in an hour.”

“Yes, Mr. Dunbar,” Alexei said. “We are anxious to meet with you.”

“I’m making a few changes,” Jake said. “We won’t be meeting in your office. We’ll be meeting in the fast-food restaurant across the street from your building. At ten this morning. How many men will be in your group?”

There was dead silence on the line. Finally Alexei said, “This is not how we conduct business. We don’t meet in public.” His voice was cold.

“Sorry,” Jake said. “But it’s the way I conduct business. It’s either meet in the restaurant at ten or the meeting is off.”

A tense silence lingered over the line. After a too-long moment, Alexei said, “Why do you not want to meet in our office?”

“I don’t like private offices. I’m surprised Nelson never told you that. I want to meet in a public space. The restaurant across the street works better. If that’s not acceptable to you, I’ll head back to Washington D.C.”

“No,” Alexei said quickly. “We will make that work. We’ll see you at that restaurant at ten.”

“That’s fine. I repeat: How many people will be there? So I can set aside enough tables and chairs.”

There was a long pause. Alexei must have put his hand over the receiver, because Jake could only hear muffled, indistinct voices. Finally Alexei said, “There will be twelve of us.”

“Fine. I’ll see you in a bit.”

He ended the call and shoved his phone into his pocket, then turned to Livvy. “You hear all that?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Alexei is pissed off.”

“Good,” Jake said. “Why would he be unhappy that we’re meeting in a public space?” Jake put his finger on his chin. “Hmmm. Maybe because he can’t shoot me when I walk in the door?”

“Unless he wants to make a mess at McDonald’s,” Livvy said, raising one eyebrow.

“Which he most emphatically doesn’t want to do.” He drew in a deep breath. “They’re still gonna want to take me to the canal so they can shoot me and drop me in the sludge. But it’ll be a lot easier to turn them down.” He touched his coat to reassure himself that his gun was in his holster. Then he strapped his back-up piece to his ankle. After Livvy had done the same, he said, “Let’s get going. I want to be all set up before any of them arrive.”

“Yeah, me too,” Livvy said. “I’ll need to find a good vantage point to watch the show.” She tapped her jacket to make sure she had earbuds and an amplifier. “You have your microphone?”

“Yeah, I’m all set.” He grabbed Livvy’s hand and gripped it tightly. “Let’s go.”

The walk to McDonald’s took only ten minutes. As soon as they entered the restaurant, they scoped out the space. There was a spot near one corner where they could pull a few tables together, and a table against the wall where Livvy could sit and get a good view of everything going on. On the way into the restaurant, Livvy had bought a newspaper. Her cover.

They pulled three tables together and found enough chairs for fourteen people. A man who looked like a manager came bustling over. “Can I help you?” he asked.

Jake turned to him and smiled. “Thanks, but I think I’ve got it. I’m having a meeting here with a group of friends. Should be thirteen or fourteen people coming.”

“We appreciate the business,” the manager said. He handed Jake a stack of coupons. “Coffee for everyone,” he said. “We want to encourage community groups to meet here.”

Jake saw Livvy trying to hide her grin as he accepted the coupons. “Thank you. My colleagues will appreciate that gesture. They might want to have more meetings here.”

The manager beamed. “I hope so. Have a good meeting.”

“Thanks. I’m sure we will.”

As the manager walked away, Jake handed Livvy one of the coupons. “Might as well get a free coffee.”

She snatched another from the stack and smiled. “I’ll get one for you, too.”

She hurried away, and Jake slid into a chair in the middle of the table. Livvy already had her newspaper spread out, so with the cup of coffee, she'd look like a woman enjoying her newspaper and morning coffee.

After Jake sat down, he looked over his shoulder. His position would give Livvy a good view of what was going on beneath the table. He popped in one earbud so he could hear Livvy's voice, then opened a new notebook so he could take notes. If this were a normal meeting, Alexei's group would expect him to take notes, and he wouldn't disappoint them.

At five minutes until ten, men began walking into the restaurant. They studied Jake, and he assumed Nelson had sent Alexei a picture of him. As they stood around the table, Jake stood up. "Which of you is Alexei?"

"He's not here yet," a youngish man said. Jake recognized him from the tape he and Livvy had watched. Young guy hadn't been one of the big talkers the other day.

An older, bulky guy with belly hair pushing through the buttonholes of his shirt walked up to Jake. "May I pat you down?"

"Why would you want to do that?" Jake asked.

"To see if you're armed," the man said, as if Jake were an idiot.

"Of course I'm armed," Jake said. "I'm assuming you're all armed, as well. I don't meet with people I don't know without protection."

"But our contact sent you to us," the man said. "You can trust us."

Jake wanted to laugh, but instead he shook his head. "I trust, but I'm still armed. If that's not acceptable? We'll cancel the meeting right now."

The men glanced around at each other. “Will wait until Alexei arrives,” one man finally said.

Jake set the coffee coupons on the table. “The manager gave me these for free coffee. He wants to encourage meetings in his restaurant.”

The man who’d spoken looked at the stack of coupons and frowned, as if free coffees were a foreign concept. “Go ahead and get some coffees,” Jake said. “I already did.”

The men looked at each other and spoke what Jake was certain was Russian. Then they all walked up to the counter and got their free coffees. A couple of them bought breakfast food.

Jake wanted to glance at Livvy and see what she thought, but he didn’t dare turn around. Finally, all the men returned with coffee and food, and they slid into chairs at the table. Jake sat in the middle chair on his side, and he noticed that the Bratva members left the chair opposite him open. For Alexei? Probably. Livvy should have a clear view of the leader.

No one said a word. They all poured sugar into their coffee, and the men who’d bought food began to eat it. Finally, about ten minutes after ten, the door opened and Alexei walked in.

He spotted Jake immediately and went around the table to shake his hand. “Welcome, Mr. Dunbar,” he said. “I’m Alexei. I’m hoping we can do business today.”

“That’s why I’m here, Alexei.” He nodded at the remaining coffee coupons on the table. “The manager gave us those. Why don’t you get yourself a coffee?”

Alexei stared at the coupons as if they were a snake that might bite him, but he eventually picked one up and took it to the counter. The rest of his men were restless,

clearly unsure what to do now that their careful plans had been derailed.

Eventually, Alexei returned to the table with coffee and slid into the chair across from Jake.

As he sipped, Jake felt as if the entire table held its breath. Waiting for Alexei to make the first move? Probably. He knew Livvy had eyes on the table, so he waited to hear from her.

It didn't take long. She spoke quietly, but he could hear every word she said. "Alexei has a gun in his lap. Aimed at you. His finger is already on the trigger. I'd confront him about it now."

Jake sat up straight. "Alexei, I'd like to see your hands on the table, please. My nose tells me you're holding a gun beneath the table, and I find that disturbing. You're not thinking of disrupting this fine establishment by causing a scene in here, are you?"

Alexei frowned at him. "Why would I do that?"

"I have no idea. But I'd like you and all your men to put your hands on the table and keep them there."

Alexei's men looked at him, and he finally nodded, one sharp jerk of his head. Everyone's hands landed on the table.

Jake nodded. "Thank you. Anyone's hands slip beneath the table? I'd take that as a hostile gesture and respond accordingly. I tell you now because I'd hate for there to be any misunderstandings." He stared at Alexei, who gave him a short, hostile nod.

"Good. Now that we have that unpleasantness out of the way, what can Nelson and I do for you?"

Alexei looked down at the table, as if he wanted to grab his gun and begin shooting. But he was smart enough to know that was a very bad idea. Jake saw the impulse in his eye and leaned toward him. "Alexei, just so you know," he said, "I, too, have a gun beneath the table. Aimed at you. At your gut. If you or any of your men take your hands off the table, I'm gonna shoot you." He lifted his gun above the edge of the table for a brief moment, then put it back on his lap.

"It'll be a gut shot. Excruciatingly painful. And if you survive, you'll be wearing a bag for the rest of your life." Jake shook his head. "I don't want that for you, Alexei. So hands on the table. And make sure all your men do the same thing."

Alexei looked at his men. Muttered something in Russian. All of them slapped their hands on the table.

"Good," Jake said. "A much better look. Now why don't you tell me what you'd like Nelson and me to do for you?"

All the men looked at each other, then at Alexei. Finally Alexei said, "We need to have Nelson continue to let us know about the cargo coming in on the ships. Name of ship, when it's due, what the cargo is. That is very useful information for us to have."

"I'll let Nelson know," Jake said. "What else do you need from Nelson?"

The men all looked at one another, and Jake had no trouble seeing their desire to kill him in their eyes. "We will let him know what we require," Alexei finally said.

"Very good," Jake said. "Is there anything else we need to discuss?" Jake asked.

Alexei let his gaze touch every one of his men at the table. Jake didn't see any signals, although there could have been a few. Finally Alexei said, "Would you like to see our operations? We'd be happy to show you."

“And I’d like to see it,” Jake said, his voice smooth. Easy. “But it’ll have to be next time I’m in town. I’m running late today. I need to get back to Washington D.C. for a meeting.”

“Very well,” Alexei said. “Give my regards to Nelson.”

“I’ll do that.” Jake looked around the table. “Nice meeting all of you. Nelson will be happy to hear how well our meeting went. I’ll give him your regards.”

“Thank you,” Alexei said, but it sounded as if the words caught in his throat. “Have a safe trip back to Washington.”

“Thank you,” Jake said. He pushed away from the table and let the men see him replace his gun in his shoulder holster. “You go ahead. I’m going to put these tables back where they belong.”

Alexei and his men didn’t seem to like the idea, and Jake wondered if their plan was to ambush him on his way back to his hotel. But Jake smiled as the men stood and pulled on their jackets. And as they filed out the door, he was pushing the tables back where they belonged.

The same manager who’d given him the coffee coupons hurried over. “Don’t worry about that. We’ll put the tables where they belong.”

“Thanks very much,” Jake said, knowing Livvy was watching Alexei and his men. “We all appreciated the coffee. I’ll come back here if we have another meeting in this area.”

“Thank you.” The manager gave him a wide smile. “We aim to please.”

“I think everyone was pleased with the coffee,” Jake said. But clearly, Alexei and his

men were not pleased with the results of the meeting. Jake saw the quick glances at Alexei. The tension in every man's shoulders. Jake wondered what they had up their sleeves.

He'd been watching Alexei and his men since they walked out the door until they disappeared into their office building across the street. He blew out a breath, knowing how close a call he'd had. Thank God they'd placed those cameras in Alexei's office so they knew what the plan was.

When all the Bratva members were inside the building, Jake turned to Livvy. "I don't think we should be seen together," he said. "Why don't you walk up to that first alley, move a few feet in and wait for me. I'll be right behind you."

"Got it," Livvy said. She tucked her newspaper beneath her arm, dumped her coffee cup in the trash and pushed out the door.

Jake waited until she was around the corner and out of sight, then he stepped out the door, as well. He studied the Bratva building and didn't notice anyone lurking near the door. As he began walking, he felt an itch between his shoulder blades. He wanted to turn around to look. Knew he didn't dare. He used the windows in the shops to watch behind him. He didn't see anyone. They were staying back.

When he turned into the alley, he spotted Livvy a hundred feet ahead of him. He hurried to catch up, and he'd just reached her when he heard footsteps turn in behind him. He and Livvy took the first turn, and as they moved down the second alley, Jake glanced behind him. A long-haired, slight twenty-year-old stooped to tie his shoe. Jake remembered the guy from the meeting. So taking him out was still on the agenda.

"We're being followed," he murmured to Livvy. "One of the guys from the meeting."

“Not surprised,” she said as she walked a little faster. “They clearly wanted to kill you. They’ll try to gun you down in this alley.”

“Yeah,” he said, nodding at two large green dumpsters beside a garage. “Behind there.”

They slid between the dumpsters and the peeling paint of the garage. It didn’t take long for the footsteps to turn into this alley. As the steps got closer and closer, both he and Livvy pulled their Glocks. Waited and listened until the steps were right in front of them.

The footsteps slowed. Stopped. From where he crouched behind the dumpster, Jake could see the man turning in circles, as if wondering where he’d gone. Jake tightened his grip on the gun, heard Livvy do the same.

Jake took a deep breath. Glanced at Livvy, who must have read his intention, because she nodded.

Jake duck-walked to the edge of the garbage bins, with Livvy right behind him. He stood up, and the man waiting in front of the bins spun around to face him. He lifted his left arm and pointed his gun at Jake. Center mass.

He clearly meant business.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:42 am*

“Drop it,” Jake called. “Right now. I’m not gonna fuck around with you.”

The man smiled. Tightened his grip on his gun.

Jake raised one eyebrow. “You’re gonna shoot me here? With no Gowanus Canal to dump me into?”

The man reared back, apparently shocked that Jake knew their plans. “Don’t worry,” he said. His smile showed several rotten teeth. “We’ll manage.”

“Yeah, I bet you will,” Jake said. “One more chance to put the gun on the ground before I shoot you,” he called.

The man smiled more widely. “Not going to happen,” he said, and Jake saw his trigger finger tighten.

Lowering himself behind the dumpster, he murmured to Livvy, “Now.”

Livvy had moved into a position where she could see the guy but the edge of the dumpster kept her hidden. Livvy fired, and the shot hit the man’s thigh. He screamed, a high-pitched, agonized squeal, and dropped onto the pavement. Jake hadn’t wanted to shoot the guy, but he’d left them no choice. Jake wiggled out from behind the dumpsters and saw the gunman grasping his leg. Blood flowed through and over his fingers, leaving a growing red puddle on the cement.

Jake’s stomach churned. He didn’t have to fire his weapon very often, and every time he or his partner did, it took another piece of his soul.

“You broke my leg,” the man on the ground yelled.

“Hey, we didn’t kill you,” Jake said. He moved closer and kicked the gun out of his reach. “I know that’s what you intended to do to me, so count yourself lucky. You’ll probably even walk normally again -- after a lot of painful physical therapy.”

Jake stood over him, patted him down then stared down at the man. “Did Alexei order you to kill me?”

“Didn’t need to order anyone.” The gunman’s hands gripped his leg so tightly that his fingers were white. No matter how hard he squeezed, it wouldn’t make the pain go away. “Was the plan all along.”

“Sorry to disrupt your plans, but I’m not ready to die.” He stepped in front of Livvy. “Neither is my friend. Too many things left to do.”

He crouched next to the bleeding man. “Tell you what I’ll do. Once we’re out of this alley, I’ll call the cops. Tell them there’s a wounded man in this alley. That he needs some help so he doesn’t bleed out.”

Jake stood up and put his foot over the bullet wound. “Anyone else coming after me? Maybe going to the other end of this alley?”

The man’s teeth clenched tight, and he held Jake’s gaze, but didn’t say a thing.

“Really? You want to lie here until someone else walks through this alley? Could be quite a while.” He nodded at the growing pool of blood around the bullet wound. “Not sure you have a lot of time left.”

Jake waited a long moment, but when the man didn’t answer, he pressed down lightly on the ugly wound. The guy screamed, and the high-pitched, agonized sound bounced

off the fence on the other side of the alley. “Is one more man in the alley,” he finally managed to say. “Others on the streets.” He swallowed hard. “Call an ambulance. I don’t want to die in this alley, surrounded by garbage.”

Jake looked at Livvy. “I think he’s talking about me,” he said to her. “But that’s okay. I’ll call him an ambulance.” He held the guy’s gaze. “What’s this alley called?”

“Is known as the shortcut alley,” the guy managed to say. “Between the business district and the canal.”

Jake removed his foot from the guy’s wound, dug his phone out of his pocket and dialed 911. “That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

When the operator said, “What’s your emergency?” Jake said, “There’s a man lying in the alley. He called it the shortcut alley. Looks like he’s been shot. Bleeding like a son-of-a-bitch. And he’s in a lot of pain.”

Jake listened for a moment. “Nope. Rather not do that. The guy who was shot knows my name, because he was assigned to kill me.” He listened for a moment, then said, “You need to get here soon. He’s lost a lot of blood.” He ended the call and slid his phone back into his pocket.

Jake looked down at the man on the cement again. “Is this where Alexei told you to shoot me?”

“Alexei didn’t order it. But I knew this was best place for it,” the man said, grimacing as he held his now blood-covered hand on his wound.

Jake shook his head. “Now you’re just lying to me. I saw hope for my death in Alexei’s eyes. The plan was always to kill me.” He backed away from the guy. “But an ambulance is on its way. With a little luck, you’ll make it to the hospital. And

since I don't want to be associated with you, I'm outta here. Good luck. They'll get that bleeding stopped and get you to an ER. You're gonna be fine."

He and Livvy started to walk away, and the man called after them, "You don't know that. I might be dying."

"Anything's possible. But as long as that ambulance gets here soon," Jake stopped and listened. "In fact, I hear it how. You're gonna survive. Good luck with the rehab."

The siren was closer now, as if it had turned into the alley. Jake grabbed Livvy's hand and tugged her around the next bend. Once they were out of sight of the wounded man, they ran.

As they reached the other end of the alley, they heard the ambulance slow, then its siren died. "They've got him now," he said, tightening his hand on Livvy's.

"You think they'll spot us?" she asked.

"Hell, no," he said. "They'll be too focused on stopping his bleeding, starting an IV and giving him meds for his pain. By the time they're done treating him on-site and loading him into the bus, we'll be back in the hotel."

"Let's hurry," Livvy said. "I don't want to take any chances. Don't want to give anyone a chance to see us out here."

"That guy said there was someone else in the alley. Keep your eyes and ears open, and I'll do the same."

"Right," Livvy said. "Figured there'd be someone else. Alexei would be stupid if he didn't have a backup, and he doesn't strike me as a stupid guy. Nelson wants to make

sure you're dead, and he wouldn't hesitate to send a bunch of men after you."

"Afraid he's gonna be disappointed," Jake said. "I have no plans to die today. Or letting you die today."

Livvy grabbed his hand and squeezed. Pulled him to a stop. "I saw someone stick his head out from around the corner of the alley up ahead," she whispered into his ear.

Jake nodded but didn't answer. He studied the buildings that lined the alley. Most of them looked like the backs of small shops. He peered over the fences on both sides of the alley, until he found a shop that had a walkway on one side of it. It looked like it led to a street.

He nodded at it. Watched as Livvy studied it. Finally she whispered, "It's our best bet. If we walk between those buildings, we'll come out on a main street. We can catch a cab back to the hotel to avoid anyone else out looking for us." She pointed toward a tall, dark building on the skyline. "That's our hotel. A few blocks away. If we can get onto a main street, we can hail a cab pretty quickly."

"Let's check it out." Jake eased the gate open, wincing when it squeaked. But he pulled Livvy through the small opening, then eased the gate closed. They both trotted along a narrow sidewalk, ducking when they reached the windows on the side of the building. In less than two minutes, they were at the front of the shop and on the sidewalk there. A long line of women waited to go into the shop.

"A deli," Livvy said after glancing in the door.

"Sounds about right," Jake answered, gripping her hand tightly and pulling her away from the line of curious women.

They stayed in front of the deli, near the line of women. A cab appeared in less than a

minute, and when Jake hailed it, the driver pulled to the curb. After giving him the name of their hotel, Jake drew a deep breath and relaxed into the seat.

Livvy reached for his hand, and Jake wanted to stroke the soft skin of Livvy's hand in his. He wanted to lift her hand to his mouth and kiss her palm. Inhale the scent of her skin.

“Stress response ,” he told himself. A visceral response to danger. The relief when the threat was removed.

But it didn't feel like an easily dismissed reaction to danger. It felt like the culmination of far too many moments he and Livvy had spent together, going back to when Livvy was also an FBI agent. Too much awareness that had rippled between them, wrapped around them, drawing them closer together.

Five minutes later, they exited the cab and walked into the hotel's front door. Jake desperately wanted to wrap his arm around Livvy and draw her against him. Leave no space between their bodies, so that he could feel every breath she took. Every stutter of her heart. Every quiver of need that he hoped matched his own.

Beside him, Livvy took a deep breath. Blew it out and took another. Realizing he was still shaky and amped up, Jake did the same. By the time they walked across the lobby to the elevators, they were both breathing heavily. Pheromones danced between them like damn butterflies, all flash and color. All Jake could think about was getting into their room and ripping Livvy's clothes off.

He snuck a quick glance at her. Livvy breathed deeply, sucking in air as if she couldn't get enough of it. Jake knew exactly how she felt. All he wanted was Livvy. Touching her. Holding her. Kissing her. Ripping off her clothes and burying himself inside her.

Fortunately, since it was the middle of the day, there wasn't much elevator traffic. They were the only ones in their car, and they both gripped the back railing to keep themselves upright.

When they reached their floor, they stumbled out of the car. Jake grabbed Livvy's hand as they walked toward their room. When they opened the door, they saw that it had already been made up by the maids.

Blowing out a relieved breath, Jake threw the double lock on the door. He collapsed onto the couch and Livvy dropped onto the cushion beside him.

Jake curled his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close. When he felt her curves pressing against his body, a tidal wave of need surged through him, obliterating everything but his awareness of Livvy. If he couldn't touch her, couldn't taste her, he'd lose his mind. Now that they were safe, Livvy was all he could think about. All he wanted -- Livvy naked and wrapped tightly around him.

"Livvy," he murmured, turning to swipe his mouth over hers. The sensation of her smooth, hot mouth made him shiver. Want . When his lips touched hers, she opened for him immediately.

"I want you, Liv," he said. "I could have lost you, and I would have mourned that for the rest of my life."

"Jake, you read my mind," she said against his mouth. "I've wanted you since you rode on the back of my bike back in Montana." Her breath feathered over his mouth and he wanted to crush her into the cushions of the couch and drive into her.

Instead, he smiled against her mouth. "I've wanted you longer than that," he said. "Since before you left the FBI. I've kicked myself in the ass ever since the day you left for Montana. I wish I could go back and change that last day."

“Yeah?” She walked her fingers across his face, and he shivered with need. “Even though we didn’t know each other well when we were both agents, I still wanted you. It was a visceral ‘he’s the one’. I should have paid more attention to it instead of running away, which was a dumbass move. But what I felt for you terrified me. I didn’t know how to handle my feelings, so I did what I always do,” she said. “I ran.”

Jake leaned back so he could look into her eyes. “Sounds like we’re a pair of dumbasses,” he said. He nuzzled into her neck, drew a deep breath of Livvy’s distinctive, sweet scent. “If I touch you, are you going to run again?”

“Last thing I want to do,” she said into his mouth. She closed her lips around his bottom lip and sucked it into her mouth. Ran her tongue over the soft surface of his lower lip. “I want you. Right now. On this couch.” Livvy nipped at his lip, and he groaned into her mouth. “We almost died, and all I could think about was that we hadn’t had the chance to make love with each other.”

Jake ran his hand over her body from her neck to her waist. Felt the tremble of need and desire beneath his fingers and sucked her lower lip into his mouth.

“I don’t want to have you on this couch. It’s too small. Too confining.” He slid away from her and bent to scoop her into his arms. Pressed a kiss to the corner of her mouth.

“I want you on the bed. Where we have plenty of room to get to know each other better.”

Livvy wrapped her arms around his neck. “Good call. There isn’t enough room on that couch for me to do everything I want to do to you.”

Jake’s mouth curled into a smile. “I like the sound of that.” His fingers played with the buttons on her shirt. “May I take this off of you?”

“Yeah, you can take off my blouse. But then it’s my turn to take an item of clothing off you. ”

“Anything you want. Any time you want,” Jake said as he poked the buttons of her shirt through the stupidly tiny buttonholes.

“Either these buttonholes are too small, or my hands are trembling too much,” he said as he managed to unbutton two buttons. He spread her shirt and put his mouth on the upper curve of her breasts. She sucked in a breath, then reached up to unbutton the rest of the buttons.

“You’re doing a fabulous job,” she said, her voice trembling with need. “But you’re way too slow.”

“Show me how it’s done,” Jake said, his voice uneven.

Livvy lifted his hands away from her chest. Kissed his fingertips, one by one. Jake swallowed hard. He wanted to rip the buttons off her shirt, but he managed to slide his hands beneath her ass. Wiggled his fingers inside her waistband, and she sucked in a breath when his hot fingers touched her still-chilled skin.

Moments later, he slid his fingers away from her perfect ass and went to work on the button and zipper of her pants. As he tugged her pants down her legs, she wiggled to make them fall off more quickly.

Once her pants were off, he went back to work on her shirt. Soon that was gone, as well, and she was lying in front of him, naked.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said, running his hand over her breasts, her belly, her thighs. “I could just stare at you all day.”

“Are you actually trying to drive me crazy?” she asked.

One side of his mouth curled up. “Am I succeeding?”

“Oh, yeah,” she said, bending to press her mouth against the happy trail of hair that disappeared into his waistband. “Tell me how crazy I’m making you.”

“On a scale of one to ten?” Jake swallowed the saliva that had pooled in his mouth. “It’s about a fifty.”

She nipped at his lower lip. “Good to know. For the future, you know?”

“The future?” he muttered. “Not sure I’m gonna survive today.”

Eventually, they both were naked on the bed. Jake had yanked the blanket and top sheet down, so they were lying on the bottom sheet. Jake bent to take one of Livvy’s rosy nipples in his mouth, and she moaned. Curled her fingers around his shoulders and held on tightly.

When he slid down and put his mouth on her, she cried out. Her hips jerked, and she screamed as she orgasmed. It seemed to go on and on, and he loved watching her. But she finally eased him away. “Do you have a condom?” she panted, her breathing still ragged. Uneven.

“Of course I do.” He reached into the drawer in the nightstand, and Livvy lifted onto one shoulder.

“You were that sure of me?”

“No. But I was hopeful. I’ve been watching you carefully. I thought you wanted me as much as I wanted you. I wasn’t sure, but I wanted to be prepared.”

“Jake,” she said. “Get that condom on right now.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said with a grin, rolling the rubber down his length. “You ready for me?” he asked.

“If I was any more ready, I’d be orgasming again.”

“Can’t have you going there without me,” he said. He slid into her and groaned at the sensation of her gripping him.

“I want you, Jake,” she murmured, nipping at his ear. “Right now.”

“Might be pretty quick,” he said. “I’ve wanted you for a very long time.”

“That’s okay. We have all evening,” she said.

He moved slowly inside her, until she gripped his shoulders hard. “Faster, Jake.” she moaned. “Harder.” Her voice was rough. Uneven. Edged with desperation. He made sure she came again before he did, then he rolled them over so she was on top of him. He smiled against her mouth, nuzzling her neck, then stroked his hand down her back slowly, over and over, relishing the satin of her skin. “That was amazing, Livvy. I can’t wait to do it all over again.”

“You’re gonna have to feed me first,” she said, lifting up and grinning down at him. “I’ll need to keep up my strength tonight. I plan on wearing you out.”

“Good,” he said. “Because I have the same plans.” He grabbed the room service menu. “What do you want?” he asked, his voice rough.

“Salmon,” she said, and he swallowed hard as he fumbled for the phone. “Salmon sounds good.”

He pressed the button to connect with room service, and when someone answered, he said, “Two salmon dinners,” he said in a rough voice. When the woman asked for his room number, Livvy, snuggled up against him, gave the woman the number.

“Thank you,” the woman said. “Expect your meal in fifteen to twenty minutes.”

“Thanks,” Jake said taking the handset and fumbling it into its cradle. Then he turned back to Livvy. “Now where were we?”

“We were talking about you wearing me out tonight,” she said. She swallowed hard, and her hands tightened around him, then slid away.

Jake lifted up. After the intense day they’d shared, he thought he knew her pretty well. “Livvy? What’s wrong?”

She swallowed hard. “Nothing,” she said, but she didn’t meet his gaze. Her hands tightened on his back, then loosened again. Slid off his back and onto the sheet.

Jake kissed her deeply, then wrapped his arms around her and breathed in her soft, woody scent. Stroked the delicate satin of her skin. Listened to the sounds of her breathing steadily in and out, her breath feathering over him. He could lay here with Livvy until the end of eternity.

Something bumped into the wall outside their room. Ignoring it, he kissed Livvy again.

He’d lost all sense of time, and he didn’t care. All he cared about was Livvy.

Then someone knocked at the door, the sound sharp and impatient, and that jolted him to alertness.

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Jake ignored the insistent knocking and pressed another kiss to Livvy's mouth. She tightened her grip on him, wrapping one leg around him. He groaned and began to slide down her body. The knocking stopped. Instead, the phone began to ring.

Livvy struggled to slide up and rest against the bed's headboard, drawing Jake with her. "Someone wants to get hold of us pretty badly," she said, calling out, "Who is it?"

Jake stared at her. "You sure you want to find out?"

Livvy sighed. "We have to. Whoever's out there isn't going away."

Jake glared at his phone, then blew out a breath. "Oh, God," he said. "It's room service." He called out, "Be right there."

He swiped a kiss down her chest, moving from between her breasts to her belly. She sucked in a sharp breath, and Jake was pretty sure she moaned. He stared at her, torn. He knew the room service person wasn't going away, but he didn't want to leave Livvy.

She gave him a tiny shove. "Go get the food, Jake." Her gaze traveled down his naked body and she traced a finger from his neck to his groin. "Might want to put on a robe first, though."

Giving Livvy one last kiss, he slid off the bed and grabbed a bathrobe from the closet at the end of the bed. Slid it on, then grabbed his wallet. Opened the door and shoved the money at the woman's face. "Thank you," he said, tugging the cart into the room

and then closing the door. Locking it.

He left the cart near the table, tore off his robe and crawled across the bed toward Livvy.

She'd pulled the sheet over her breasts when room service had knocked, and now she slid over in the bed until she was almost at the edge. Jake stopped and stared at her. "You don't want to pick up where we left off?" he asked.

"You want the food to get cold?" she said.

"There's only one thing I'm hungry for, and it's not salmon."

Livvy smiled, but Jake could see that it was forced. "Remember keeping up our strength?" she said. "Putting more gas in our tanks?"

"I don't think I need any more gas," he said, picking up her hand and pressing a kiss to her palm. "I don't mind eating cold food."

Livvy didn't quite meet his eyes. "Let's have dinner, Jake. Since it's here. We can pick up where we left off afterward." But her gaze slid away from his. And she'd edged closer to the opposite side of the bed.

"Okay," Jake said slowly. "You want to eat in bed? Or you want to sit at that table?"

"The table, I think," she said, holding the sheet over her breasts.

Jake studied her for a long moment, then nodded. Turned and reached into the closet and tossed her the other robe. She slid into it quickly. Pulled the tie tight around her waist, so that the robe flared out at the bottom.

“For a moment there, I thought it might be Roman Peters,” Jake said. “Updating us on Sergei and Elena’s situation.”

“Yeah, he would’ve called if he had new information,” she said. “But I’m sure he’s focusing on getting them settled in somewhere.”

Jake shrugged one shoulder. “Good. Plenty of time for him to update us on how they’re doing. But I don’t want Sergei asking questions about our relationship.”

Livvy felt herself go pale at the description of what she and Jake had as a relationship. “Yeah,” she said, avoiding looking at Jake. She wasn’t ready to describe it as anything but sex. Hot sex? Absolutely. The best sex of her life? She swallowed. Labeling it as ‘the best’ made her feel... trapped. In a box, with no way out. She settled on, “I wouldn’t, either.”

She didn’t look at Jake, and finally he sighed. “I’m guessing sexy times are over,” he said as he slid off the bed and yanked on his pants. “You want to watch TV? Read? Just eat our food and go to sleep? Any preferences?”

“Maybe we should just eat our dinners and go back to Washington,” she said, afraid of what would happen if they spent the rest of the night in this hotel room. They’d be all over each other as soon as this... this uncomfortable, awkward moment had passed.

If she was honest with herself, this was exactly what she’d wanted for a long time. But opening herself to Jake made her feel exposed. Unnerved.

Jake jerked his head toward the window. “It’s getting dark already,” he said. “I’d rather drive during the day. Gives us a chance to make sure no one’s following us.”

“How could anyone follow us?” Livvy asked, afraid of what would happen if they

spent another night in this hotel room. She and Jake had connected too... deeply. The sex they'd had? It was the best she'd ever experienced. She'd somehow known it would be, which was why she'd run to Montana when she realized where things were going with Jake. If it happened again, how would she keep her barriers up?

"They don't know where we're staying or what car we're driving," she said, grasping at straws. "We could slip out after dark and no one would know."

Jake shook his head slowly. "My guess? They're watching all the hotels in this area. They know we walked to that meeting, because the shooter followed us on foot into that alley. If they plant a guy in every hotel within walking distance, which wouldn't be impossible, they'll see us checking out. Figure out which is our car. And we'd have a fatal accident on the way home."

"Then how will we ever get out of Brooklyn?" Livvy asked, panic a tight hand squeezing her throat.

Jake swiveled to study her. Livvy wanted to grab her clothes and slide into them, but instead she tightened the robe around her body.

"This really freaked you out, didn't it?" he finally said.

"I'm not freaked out," Livvy said, too forcefully. Because of course she was freaked out. The best sex of her life? What was she supposed to do with that? Get down on one knee and ask Jake to marry her?

She swallowed the lump of panic in her throat as Jake smiled at her. "Of course you are, Livvy. You have to know I can read you by now. I know exactly what's going through your head."

"And what would that be, Mr. Mind Reader?"

Jake leaned closer, and Livvy wanted to move away. But she forced herself to stay where she was. Jake's breath feathered over her skin, and she couldn't prevent the ripple of need that shivered through her.

He smiled, as if he knew exactly what she was feeling. "You're terrified by what happened between us," he said. "You want to pack your stuff, run out of this room and go directly to the airport. Fly back to Helena tonight. And never, ever, see me again."

"That's ridiculous," she managed to say, even though he was right on the money. "I already have tickets from D.C. back to Helena."

Jake laughed. "Wow, Williams. You're really scrambling for a reason to get out of this hotel room." He edged a little closer, and Livvy swore she felt sparks ping against her skin. She tugged the robe a little closer around her body.

After a long moment, Jake sighed and stood up. He'd put on his pants, but not his shirt. As much as she wanted to look away, she couldn't tear her gaze away from him.

Jake picked up her clothes from the floor and tossed them onto the bed. Kept his back to her while he pulled on his shirt. Finally he sat down on the couch. He reached for the small cart with the two trays. Put them on the small table they'd used for breakfast, then took the cover off both meals and set the plastic domes on the cart.

Jake ate his meal, then, without looking at her, said, "I'm beat. I'm going to bed."

Livvy's heart shrank in her chest as she saw the hurt on Jake's face. The disappointment. The pain.

Why was she acting this way? She wanted him as much or more as he wanted her.

And the sex they'd shared had been... mind-blowing. She'd never even imagined that two people could connect the way she and Jake had done.

She was acting this way because she was terrified. It wouldn't take much for her to go from really liking Jake to falling in love with him. And falling in love was something she'd promised herself she would never do. She'd seen her mother fall in love with a different man every couple of months. It never lasted, and then her mom had been devastated. Completely heartbroken. She'd hide in her bedroom for a month or two, then go out and find another man. A man she was also madly in love with. For a week or a month or even a handful of months.

Then the whole cycle started over again. After growing up with the ugly reality of her mother's life, Livvy had sworn she would never be like her mom. Never make a man the center of her life, the only important thing she had.

Jake edged onto the bed, careful not to touch her or get close to her. "Talk to me, Livvy," he said. "Tell me what happened. What went wrong for you? Because I swear you were into me as much as I was into you. Why did that change?"

Livvy swallowed the saliva that had pooled in her mouth. "Nothing happened," she said. "I just... just need to get back to Montana. Mel probably has an assignment waiting for me."

Jake frowned. "Did she email you that you have an assignment waiting?"

"No, she wouldn't do that," Livvy said. "She wouldn't want to distract me from our job."

"Then why do you think a job's there waiting for you?" He tilted his head to watch her. "I thought all the Blackhawk Security operatives got ten days off between jobs." He smiled. "I know that because a number of them have spent their ten days off with

the man or woman they'd met on the job."

"Is that what you were expecting?" Livvy demanded. "That I'd hang around D.C. with you for my ten days?"

Jake held her gaze and slowly shook his head. "I have no expectations where you're concerned, Livvy," he said. "I had hopes, but those were mine. Nothing that I'm expecting of you." He smiled, and the sadness on his face made Livvy want to cry. "I thought we had this evening and this night, but clearly we don't."

Jake retreated to the couch and pulled out his phone. Began scrolling through it, and Livvy wanted to cry. Throw herself at Jake and apologize. Kiss him until they were tangled on the bed together again.

But if she did that, she'd be lost. She'd want to spend every moment with Jake, and that made her no better than her mother.

So she picked up her own phone and began scrolling through it. After a while, she stopped and looked up at Jake. But he was engrossed in the content of his own phone. Either that, or he was ignoring her. Protecting himself? Probably.

Jake stared at her, his eyes carefully blank. "TV?" he asked. "Or do you just want to read?"

"Sure," she said.

"I don't know sure," he answered. "I know yes or no."

Cold rippled across her body. She swallowed and said, "I guess I'll just read."

"Works for me." He sprawled on the couch with his phone, not looking at her.

Eventually, she went into the bathroom and got ready for bed. When she was ready, she came out and said, “You should sleep on the other bed.” Just as he’d done the night before.

He didn’t even look at her. “I’m fine. I’ll move to the bed when I’m ready to sleep.” He sucked in a breath. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

He walked into the bathroom, and when he came out, she pretended she was asleep. But she lay on the bed, aching for him, until well after Jake’s breathing had evened out and slowed.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:42 am*

Jake stared at the ceiling, aware of the ribs in the mattress pressing against his back. He could blame them for keeping him awake, but it wasn't the lumpy mattress. It was Livvy and the way she'd pulled away from him. The way she'd shut him down, refusing to even talk it out with him. She'd gone from loving and cuddly to throwing up a brick wall between them, and she hadn't even explained why.

He rolled onto his side and punched his pillow with a vicious blow. If it had been an opponent, he'd have been unconscious on the floor. He glanced at the other bed. Livvy appeared to be sound asleep. But as he studied her he realized that she was faking sleep. Her fingers twitched on her pillow, and her eyes moved beneath her lids. Livvy wasn't sleeping, either.

The realization gave him a little hope. Maybe tomorrow she'd be willing to talk about this. At least give him a reason she was shutting him down. He stared at the sprinkler heads on the ceiling. There'd been a spark between them even before she left the FBI. Was that spark what triggered her resignation? He hoped not. He hoped she hadn't quit a job she clearly loved because of him.

As he stared at the plain white tiles and the sprinkler heads on the ceiling, he realized he couldn't force her to get involved with him. Couldn't force her to tell him why she was backing away. He couldn't even stop her from getting on that plane back to Helena. Livvy was an adult and in charge of her own life. And if she didn't want to get involved with him? That was her decision and he couldn't force her to change her mind.

He closed his eyes and rolled over. Opened them again when he heard Livvy snuffle in the bed that was only a few feet away. He wanted to climb into that bed with her.

Draw her against him and hold her while she slept. But he didn't have that right. Couldn't force Livvy to do what he wanted.

Flopping onto his back, he let his gaze travel around the room. Finally he closed his eyes, trying to force himself to fall asleep. He'd be driving back to Washington tomorrow, and if he didn't get any sleep, he'd be a danger on the road. So he closed his eyes. Ran through everything that had happened since they'd arrived in Brooklyn, looking for hints of what he could have done better with Alexei and his crew.

The answer, he realized, was nothing. Nelson had sent him to Alexei to be murdered. They'd failed, because he was still alive. But at least they'd confirmed Nelson and Windsor were working with the Bratva. When he returned to Washington, he'd work on figuring out who Nelson and Windsor reported to. Diana might have some ideas about that. He wished Livvy was still an FBI agent, because he trusted her. Knew she wasn't a mole. But Livvy had to return to Helena and her job with Blackhawk Security. She wouldn't be there to back him up.

So he'd figure it out on his own.

Finally, after tossing and turning for far too long, he fell into a restless sleep. When he heard Livvy moving around the room, he opened his eyes. She'd opened the curtains, and it was daylight. Time to pack up and head back to Washington.

He grabbed his pants from the coffee table and found a clean shirt in his luggage. Took both of them into the bathroom.

When he emerged after a shower, Livvy had thrown the duvet over her bed and was sitting against the backboard. He nodded to her. "Morning, Livvy," he said as he walked back to the couch.

"Morning, Jake," she replied, her voice tentative and soft.

He frowned. Swiveled to face her. “You afraid I’m pissed off at you?” he asked.

She held his gaze for a long moment, then looked away. “I’d be pissed if you’d done that to me.”

“I’m not pissed,” he said with a sigh. He turned his back on her and started to pack his suitcase. “What I am is sad. I have... feelings for you, Olivia. And I suspect you have feelings for me, too. But you’re more interested in running away than trying to work things out. I never thought you were a coward, but I guess I was wrong.”

“Wanting something different from you doesn’t make me a coward,” she said.

“Refusing to acknowledge how you feel makes you a coward,” he shot back. Before she could answer, he held up his hand. Turned to face her. “You don’t have to answer me,” he said. “Don’t have to tell me why you’re so freaked out. That’s your business, and I don’t have the right to force you to talk to me. But maybe you need to think about it yourself. Maybe you need to figure out what you want. How to get it.”

He tossed his kit bag into his suitcase, then shoved the lid down. Snapped the locks, then set his suitcase on the floor. “I’m gonna need to eat something before we start driving. I don’t want to eat in the restaurant, in case Alexei’s men are still looking for us, but we could do room service again. Or we could start driving and find a restaurant along the way.”

“I can’t go that long without coffee, and I’m pretty sure you can’t, either,” Livvy said. “Let’s order room service. I’d like French toast and bacon.”

“Sounds good,” he said, reaching for the room phone. “I’ll order it.”

When the two orders of French toast and bacon arrived, along with a carafe of coffee, Jake sat on the couch, with his plate on the coffee table in front of him. Livvy sat at

the table where they'd eaten their other meals. Neither of them talked while they ate.

Twenty minutes after their food and coffee arrived, they refilled their travel mugs with coffee from the carafe and got ready to leave. The elevator was half full, and they rode down to the lobby in silence. It took only a few minutes to check out, then they took the elevator to the parking garage.

Jake put himself in front of Livvy as they stepped out of the elevator on their parking level. He stood silently, listening, and he knew Livvy was doing the same. After five minutes, he looked over at her. "I don't hear anything. How about you?"

"No. Nothing," she said, in the same sharp whisper he'd used.

They'd parked close to the elevator so they wouldn't have to walk down rows of cars that would be potential ambush points. In less than five minutes, they'd loaded their bags, gotten into the car and were driving out of the garage. Twenty minutes later, they'd left Brooklyn via the Verrazzano Bridge and cruised through Staten Island into New Jersey. When they reached New Jersey, Jake let out a long, relieved breath. He'd expected an ambush at some point on their way out of Brooklyn.

"You watching that side-view mirror?" he asked Livvy.

"I am. No signs yet of anyone following us."

"We left really early. Probably too early for Alexei and his men to be up and about."

"Hope so," Livvy said, still staring at the mirror. "But I'll keep watching."

The drive back to Washington D.C. was smooth. Quiet. Neither Jake nor Livvy said much, because there wasn't much to say. When they reached the outskirts of D.C., Jake glanced over at her.

“Not sure what your plans are, but I assume you’ll be returning to Helena at the earliest opportunity. Do you want to go to headquarters and talk to Diana? Tell her what happened, and see how her investigation is going?”

Livvy frowned for a moment, then nodded slowly. “Yeah. I need a sense of closure. Need to know what she plans to do next.”

“You don’t have to be there in person,” Jake said carefully. “I can drop you off at your car, so you can get back to Helena, and Diana can fill you in later.”

She stared at him for a long moment, then looked away. “I know that’s what you’d prefer, but I’d like to talk to Diana with you.”

“I think you know it’s not what I prefer, but I figured that was what you’d want. If you want to talk to Diana, I’m happy to go directly to headquarters.”

God, could they be any more awkward with each other? Any more stiff and careful?

Blowing out a breath, Jake found a place to park and exited the car with Livvy. By the time they reached Diana’s office, Jake was not just uncomfortable. He was getting pissed off. But he forced himself to smile at Diana’s receptionist. “Is the Director available?” he asked.

“What are your names?” the woman asked. “I’ll ask her.”

She picked up the phone and murmured into it. Then she ended the call and smiled at them. “Go ahead into her office.”

Jake opened the door for Livvy, then followed her into Diana’s office. Her desk was cherry wood, gleaming in the sunlight from her window. Bookshelves lined two walls, stuffed with books and file folders. Diana stood up as they entered. “Welcome

home,” she said, holding out her hand to shake first Livvy’s hand, then Jake’s. “Have a seat and tell me how it went.”

They sat in the chairs in front of the beautiful desk and took turns telling Diana exactly what had happened. When they reached the part about the ambush in the alley, Diana frowned. “You’re both okay, right?”

“We’re fine,” Livvy said. “I didn’t want to shoot him, but he gave us no choice. If I hadn’t, he would have killed both Jake and me.” She shrugged. “That was yesterday afternoon. We left for Washington this morning.”

“It sounds like you accomplished a lot,” Diana said. She smiled. “I’ve had both Windsor and Nelson under surveillance since before you left. They’re both fairly... cocky,” she said. “Neither of them checks for bugs in their apartments. Or their cars. I had them both arrested yesterday. Even without your reports, I have enough evidence on both of them to put them away for a very long time.”

Jake leaned forward. “Any sense of who they report to in the Bureau?”

“Not yet. But I’m working on it,” she said. “I’ve put surveillance on three people, although only two are serious suspects. I’ve also wired their cars, their homes and their briefcases.” She smiled. “These suspects go nowhere without their briefcases.

“Now that you’re back in town, once I have your written reports from your meetings and the surveillance you installed in Alexei’s office, I’ll go to the prison and question Nelson. Windsor too, but I think Nelson is the brains of that pair, and he’ll know more. Right now, I can say with some confidence that two of the three people I’m focusing on are Russian moles. Eventually, Nelson and Windsor will confirm that for me.” She smiled. “I have many tools to convince them to cooperate and give up their contacts.”

Jake pushed a piece of paper across the desk to Diana. “This is the access code for the cameras Livvy and I installed in Alexei’s office. I’m not sure how helpful they’ll be, but you might get some useful information from them. Unless you speak Russian, you’ll need someone to translate the tapes for you.”

“Thank you.” Diana smiled. “I have several people I trust who speak Russian.”

Jake stood up, and so did Livvy. “We’ll both write down our thoughts,” he said. “I’ll get mine to you in the next day or two.”

“And you’ll get mine shortly after I get back to the Blackhawk Security compound,” Livvy said.

“I appreciate that,” Diana said. “I’ll keep you both in the loop about our moles. You deserve to know who they are and what happens to them.”

She leaned closer. “I also instructed Roman Peters, the agent who is assisting Sergei and his wife Elena, to keep you informed of what’s going on with them. He has your email addresses and phone numbers. He’ll be in touch.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Livvy said. “We appreciate that.” She smiled. “Naturally, we want to keep track of both Sergei and Elena.”

“Of course you do,” Diana said. “Thank you for arranging that. According to Roman Peters, Sergei is giving him a lot of very valuable information.”

“Great,” Jake said. “I’m glad he and his wife are safe, and that he’ll be able to help the FBI.”

There was a moment of silence, then Jake said, “Livvy has to return to Helena. I’ll get my paperwork done today, because I’m pretty sure Livvy is leaving tomorrow.”

“I am,” Livvy said.

Diana’s gaze settled on Livvy for a long moment. Then she looked at Jake. “I see,” she said.

Jake wanted to know exactly what she saw, but he wasn’t about to ask. “I’ll try to have that paperwork on your desk tomorrow,” he said.

“Thank you both,” she said. She turned her gaze on Livvy. “The door is open anytime you want to return to the FBI,” she said.

Livvy smiled, but Jake didn’t see much joy in it. “Thank you, but I’m very happy at Blackhawk Security,” she said.

Diana nodded. “I personally, as well as the FBI as a whole, thank you both. I’ll look forward to talking with you soon, Jake.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

As soon as they walked out of Diana’s office, Jake steered Livvy toward the outside door closest to her office. When she frowned up at him, he said, “We don’t want to run into whoever Nelson and Windsor report to. Don’t know if Alexei has told him yet that they didn’t kill me. I don’t want to spoil the surprise.”

Livvy’s mouth turned up in a smile, but again, Jake saw nothing happy in it. It felt strained, as if she couldn’t wait to get away from Washington. And him. “Yeah, nice to keep that in your back pocket.”

They stepped outside and had to walk several blocks to get back to Jake’s car. When they reached his apartment complex, Jake pulled up beside Livvy’s car in the parking lot. When she swiveled as if to get out, he put his hand on hers. He’d be damned if

she ran off before he could say his piece.

She looked at his hand covering hers, then slowly raised her eyes to his. Holding her gaze, Jake said, “Before you go, Livvy, I have a few things I want to say.”

It looked as if she recoiled. Drew into herself. Grabbing the handle for the door, she tried to open it. Jake engaged the lock, then leaned a little closer.

“The least you can do is take a few minutes to listen to what I have to say,” he said, holding her gaze. His voice was too sharp, but her attempt to flee pissed him off.

“I think we said all we needed to say last night.” Livvy swallowed, and Jake watched her throat ripple.

“Not everything,” Jake said. He stared at her, and he saw her flinch. As if what she saw in his eyes was painful. Unwelcome.

He didn’t give a damn. He was gonna say his piece anyway. What could she do? Fly farther away than Helena? Three thousand miles should be enough space to make her feel safe.

“I don’t want you to go back to Montana, but I think you already know that, Olivia.” She winced when he used her formal name. “I want to pursue a relationship with you.” He held her gaze and took a deep breath. “I love you, Livvy, and no, it’s not sudden. It’s been building for a while. I was fascinated by you since before you left the Bureau. The last week only confirmed what I felt for you. I want to make a life with you. Marry you. Have a kid or two with you.”

She opened her mouth to speak, and he held up his hand. “You don’t have to say a word. You made your feelings very clear last night. That’s why I’m making mine clear today. I only have one thing left that I want to say. If you change your mind, let

me know. Call me. Come to Washington and tell me. Or ask me to come to Helena to see you. Based on what you said last night, I'm not expecting to hear from you, but I'd like to be pleasantly surprised."

Without waiting for her to answer, he swung out of the car and opened the trunk. Picked up her suitcase and her briefcase and carried them to her car. When she popped the locks with her remote, he put both her briefcase and suitcase in the trunk.

She didn't look at him as she slid into the driver's seat. She adjusted the mirrors, which as far as Jake was concerned was an excuse for not looking at him. Who the hell had driven the car since she last did?

Finally she started the engine and looked over at him. He stared back, keeping his face blank. She nodded once, then drove off without looking back. But he saw her staring into the rear-view mirror as she exited the parking lot.

When her car was out of sight, he took his own suitcase and briefcase out of the car, then carried them up to his apartment. Once inside, he slammed the door so hard that the frame shook. He searched every room, and checked all the tells he'd left among his belongings. Nothing was out of place.

Tomorrow, he'd review the listening devices he'd placed around the apartment, but tonight, all he wanted to do was write up his report for Diana and do his best to put Livvy out of his head.

A fool's errand, he knew, but what other choice did he have?

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:42 am*

Jake spent the evening writing up his report for Diana. He went step by step from the time they arrived in Brooklyn until that morning when they left. He included a transcript of the tape they'd listened to from Alexei's office, the one that implicated Nelson, and a step-by-step account of their conversation with Sergei, his phone call and the call they'd had with Roman Peters. He described exactly what had happened when they met Sergei and his wife in the garage and explained what he and Olivia had seen when they were walking home -- the lights on in Sergei's house, the two men with guns standing on their front porch.

He described almost word for word the meeting they'd had at the fast-food restaurant with Alexei's group the next morning. He detailed how Nelson had been cited several times as directing the group's activities, and that, based on their words, Nelson was their boss.

Jake described the ambush waiting for him and Livvy in the alley, explained why Livvy had shot the guy, and their urgent rush back to the hotel when they found out about the other man in the alley and the others scouring the streets for them.

When he summed up his findings, he noted that Nelson was clearly the one giving orders to Alexei's group. He also clarified that he had no proof that Nelson was the only Russian mole in the FBI. He suspected someone higher up in the hierarchy was also involved, but hadn't gotten any clues about who it might be.

He stared at the document for a long time, thinking about anything else he might have missed. Finally he added that the camera was still installed in Alexei's office, and should continue to stream its audio and video content if it wasn't discovered. He included the password to access the recordings, as well.

Shoving away from his dining room table, Jake paced his living area, wondering what else he needed to tell Diana. Finally he collapsed back into his chair. Nothing else was needed. He'd told her everything that related to the job. Nothing personal was required.

The following morning, when he dropped off his report for Diana, her receptionist asked him to wait for a moment. She disappeared into Diana's office, only to emerge a few minutes later. "The Director would like to talk to you," she said.

Jake shrugged. He'd put everything necessary in his report, but if she had questions, he was glad to answer them. Diana looked up from her computer when he walked into the room. "Jake," she said with a nod. "Please, have a seat."

He eased into a chair and kept his gaze on Diana. "What can I do for you, ma'am?"

She leaned toward him. "What we discuss can go no further than my office. Is that clear?"

"Absolutely," Jake said. "I won't discuss it with anyone."

"Except for Olivia," Diana said. "Since she was with you these past few days."

"I won't be discussing anything with Olivia," Jake said, curling his hands into tight fists beneath the edge of the desk. "She's already gone back to Montana, and we won't be in contact again. Unless she comes to headquarters for some reason, and even then, she won't be seeking me out. And I have no reason to go to Helena."

Diana's expression softened. "I'm sorry to hear that, Jake."

He shrugged one shoulder. "Wasn't my decision," he said.

“I see.” Diana looked as if she was reaching across her desk to him, then she pulled her hand back. “I’m sorry, Jake. I asked you to come in so I could ask if you wanted to be transferred to the Helena office, but I’m guessing that’s off the table now.”

“Yes, ma’am. At this point, I have no interest in working in Helena.”

“If you change your mind, let me know,” Diana said. “That would be an easy ask.”

“Yes, ma’am. I will.” Based on Livvy’s demeanor, it would be the proverbial cold day in hell before that happened.

“Again, I’m sorry,” she said. She drew in a deep breath. “I wanted to talk to you about Nelson and Windsor. It’s clear from what you’ve told me that Nelson is deeply involved with the Bratva in Brooklyn. It seems as though he’s in charge of your Alexei’s little group.”

Jake nodded. “That was my understanding. I’m pretty sure Olivia felt the same way.”

“Based on that, I think I can assume that he’s also the liaison for the group in Brighton Beach. The one that almost murdered Olivia.”

“Yes, I think that’s fair to say. Nelson supervised both of us.”

“Nelson also supervises Windsor. Am I correct in that?”

“Yes, ma’am. It’s my understanding that Nelson is also Windsor’s supervisor.”

She bounced a pen off her desk. Plink. Plink. Plink. “I’ve had both Nelson and Windsor arrested. They’re being held in isolation in a secure, secret facility. No reason was given for their disappearance. If anyone asks, both of them are on assignment.”

Jake's expression must have shown his scorn for that decision, because Diana held up her hand. "Trust me, I know that's thin. I wanted it to be. I want the higher level moles to be nervous. Worried. I want him or her to wonder what's going on. I fully expect whoever they report to will try to murder them in prison. That's why the guards are required to log anyone who tries to visit them or even asks about them."

Jake leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "Any success so far?"

"Windsor was very eager to give up Nelson," Diana said, scorn in her gaze. "I had him questioned for a long time, and I'm pretty confident he doesn't know who Nelson reports to."

"And Nelson isn't talking," Jake murmured.

"No, he's not. You have any suggestions?"

Jake debated how much to say, and finally thought, what the hell . What's she going to do? Fire me? "I'd lean on Nelson hard. Tell him Windsor has already given him up. Confirmed that he's working for the Russians. You've put Windsor in protective custody, but you're not going to do that with Nelson unless he cooperates fully."

Jake leaned toward Diana. "Tell him you have two people with direct knowledge that he's working with the Russians. And several more you can offer plea deals to if they'll name the person they're working with. I'm pretty sure both of those statements will have Nelson soiling himself."

Diana nodded slowly. "Would you do me the favor of watching me interrogate Nelson? Watch his tells? His reactions? Come up with some other things I can use against him?"

Jake nodded. "I'm happy to do that. Not sure it's going to do any good, though."

Diana smiled. "I still have several cards I'm holding back. And I'll make sure Nelson knows it."

"Then let's take Nelson on. I want to nail that prick. God knows how many men and women we've lost because of him. How many sources died because of him." He drew in a deep breath. "And if you get him talking, ask him why he targeted Olivia and I. What did we see or hear? Won't change anything, but it'll satisfy my curiosity."

"And you'll pass the information on to Livvy?"

Jake shrugged. "I have no plans to talk to Livvy again."

Diana studied him for a long moment. "I'm sorry, Jake", she finally said.

He looked away. "No one ever said life was perfect."

\* \* \*

That afternoon, Jake found himself in an observation room at a federal prison. It wasn't identified as such on the building, but the very narrow windows made it look like a penitentiary. Nelson sat on a hard chair, his wrists in chains that attached to the table. He looked around the room, stared at the door. Swallowed several times. It was clear he had no idea why he was in the interrogation room.

Finally, after almost a half-hour, Diana walked into the room. She slid into the chair opposite Nelson and set a file folder down on the table.

"Mr. Nelson," she began, speaking briskly. "I know you know why you're in this prison. I'm going to give you a chance to improve your situation." She leaned closer. "First of all, understand that you're never getting out of prison," she said, her voice hard. "You'll die in here. But your life could be easier if you're willing to talk to me."

Nelson shrugged. "Say whatever you want. I'll decide to respond. Or not."

"Okay, Mr. Nelson. Mr. Windsor has already cooperated with us. He's given us good information, and as a result, he'll get better treatment than you. He's never getting out, either, but he'll be protected. He'll have a few privileges. Time by himself in the yard. A few visitors every month."

She leaned closer to Nelson. "He's getting those privileges because he cooperated with us. Tell us who you report to. Who's your contact in the FBI? You give me a name, credible proof, and you'll get the same treatment. You're never leaving this prison alive, but I can make your life a little more pleasant. It's up to you."

"Why do you need me if you've already flipped Windsor?" Nelson asked, scorn in his voice.

"Because I want to know everyone involved in this," Diana said, her voice cold. "I want to root this traitor out of the FBI. So you tell me who you report to, or you're going down hard. And you won't be protected in prison. How long do you think it's gonna take for your boss to make sure you can't give him up?"

"You can't do that," Nelson whined. "It's not fair."

"You think this is sixth grade, Nelson?" Diana's terrifying, expressionless eyes held Nelson's. "It's perfectly fair," Diana said, leaning back and studying Nelson. "You did the crime, and we have plenty of proof. So you're gonna do the time. In the general population. Unless you tell me what I need to know."

"You might as well take a gun to me right now," Nelson muttered as he flopped back in his seat.

"No. If you choose not to talk to me, you're putting the gun to your own head." Diana

shook her head. Sighed. “Talk to me now or live in fear for your life for however long you survive in prison. Your choice.”

Nelson slumped in his chair. “I have to think about that.”

“Don’t think too long.” Diana leaned closer to Nelson. “We’re finding more information all the time. Most of it is really pissing me off. So the longer you take, the less inclined I’ll be toward generosity.” She began to rise, and Jake saw Nelson’s relieved expression. Then she sat down again. “By the way, why did you order both Olivia Williams and Jake Dunbar to be killed by your Bratva buddies?”

Nelson stared at her for a long moment, swallowing several times. “I didn’t order anything.”

“Do you really think I’ll buy that load of crap? Both of them had close calls with Bratva groups that you sent them to. You might want to rethink your position on that. It might make me look more favorably at your treatment in prison.”

Wow , Jake thought, watching the way Diana was playing Nelson. She was cool. In charge. Nelson? He was falling apart. Trying to hide it but not succeeding.

He could learn a lot from watching Diana interrogate Nelson. Windsor, too, because he was sure she had tricks he hadn’t seen yet.

She slid out of her chair and left the room without looking back, leaving Nelson staring after her, terrified and angry.

In a few minutes, Diana was back in the observation room with Jake. “What do you think?” she asked. “He gonna cave?”

“I suspect so,” Jake said, watching the sweat drip down Nelson’s face. “Nelson was

always a coward.”

“Most traitors are,” Diana murmured, watching Nelson. Finally she turned to Jake. “You want a week of leave to get your head on straight?”

Jake shook his head. “Thanks, but I’d rather be working,” he said. “Keeping busy. A week’s too much time to think. And I want to make sure that we find whoever Nelson’s reporting to.”

Diana put her hand on Jake’s arm. “I’m sorry this assignment ended badly for you.”

Jake shrugged one shoulder. “Not your fault.” He sucked in a breath. “Don’t think it’s mine, either. This is Livvy’s problem, and she has to figure it out for herself. If she doesn’t?” He shrugged. “It wasn’t meant to be.”

“Okay,” Diana slapped her hands on the table. “You don’t want the leave, but you want to help figure out who the other traitor is?”

“Yeah,” he said, nodding his head. “Absolutely.”

“You have any thoughts?” Diana asked.

He stared at Nelson, now being shackled and guided into the hallway beyond the interrogation room. “Whoever it is, they’re higher up in the ranks than Nelson. Nelson’s an ambitious guy. He wouldn’t risk his career for some low-level mole. He’s hooked his wagon to someone higher up. Someone who can move him to a position that he thinks he deserves.”

Diana tilted her head to study him. “Interesting,” she finally said. “How do you know that?”

“I’ve reported to Nelson for a while.” He scowled as he watched Nelson stumble out of the interrogation room. “You get a sense of a person when you report to them. And Nelson is all about status. Rank. Power. I don’t think he’d hook his wagon to someone near his level. He wants to be one of the big boys. One of the people who bosses around other people. He wants that status.”

Diana nodded slowly. “Yeah, I think you’re right. I never saw that before he became a suspect in the leaks we’ve had. But he’s exactly the kind of person who’d want power. And he’s not picky about how he gets it.”

She stood up and opened the door. “Let’s get out of here. Prisons always make me jumpy. You know that every inmate in here would love to have the FBI director as his hostage. I’d be an extremely valuable bargaining chip.”

“God, I never thought of it that way.” Jake swung his head around. “What’s the fastest way out of here?”

Diana jerked her chin at a nearby elevator. “Down that elevator. It’s close to the door we came in through.”

Ten minutes later, they were out of the prison and walking toward the parking lot. Diana looked over at him. “Do you want to stay on this job -- finding the other moles in the agency? Or would you rather dig into something completely different?”

Jake shrugged. He’d assumed that he and Livvy would work on digging out the moles together. Now? It would be a daily, painful reminder of his loss. “Unless you need me on this job, because of my experience in Brooklyn, I’d rather be moved to something else.”

“I’m happy to do that for you.” She smiled. “I might contact you for your thoughts as we investigate Russian influence in the Bureau, but I’ll find another supervisor for

you. You're a damn good agent and I want you to enjoy what you're doing."

"Thank you, ma'am. I appreciate that."

"If you change your mind, let me know," she said. "At this point, I'd pretty much give you any assignment you wanted."

"Thanks for your support, ma'am."

Diana rolled her eyes. "How many times do I have to tell you to call me Diana?"

"Yes, ma'am, I mean Diana." Time to change the subject. "Do you have any idea who Nelson's contact in the Bureau is?"

"I have a strong suspicion," she said. "And it doesn't make me happy. It's a woman I trusted, someone who's been with the Bureau for a long time."

Jake frowned. "What makes someone decide to betray their country and the organization they work for?"

"It usually boils down to money." Diana clenched her teeth. "That's the case with this woman. She wants my job and has never hesitated to let people know that. I don't mind that -- I like ambitious people. They work hard. Get things done. But this woman has massive gambling debts, and I'm sure that's how the Russians recruited her." She clenched her teeth, and Jake saw her jaw muscles twitch. "We're gonna have to move on her soon, but we're still working on gathering evidence." She swiveled to narrow her eyes at Jake. "And that is need-to-know information. And no one else you know needs to know it."

"Wouldn't dream of sharing it with anyone," he said.

“Even Olivia?”

“I’m not going to see Olivia again, so that’s a moot point.”

“You can’t know that. She might show up in D.C. and throw herself at you.”

Jake laughed, but it was a strained, forced laugh. “Trust me, ma... I mean Diana. Not going to happen.”

They’d reached Diana’s car, and she put her hand on Jake’s arm. “I’m sorry, Jake. Truly. Take the rest of the day off and do something fun. Interesting.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said.

Diana looked at him and rolled her eyes. “I’m guessing fun and interesting isn’t on your agenda. Do what you want with the rest of the day. I’ll expect you in the office tomorrow.”

“I’ll be there,” Jake said. He waited until Diana got into her car and drove off, then he slid into his own vehicle. He sat for a while, thinking about what he wanted to do. When nothing appealed to him, he drove to Rock Creek Park. A walk outside would kick his ass into gear.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:42 am*

Livvy took her ten days off at the compound, working out, hiking in the desert, and going into Helena. She limited her trips into town, afraid someone would ask her about the job she'd been on. She was pretty sure she'd begin sobbing if anyone told her how much they liked Jake and asked how she and Jake had gotten along.

She ate in the dining room most nights, going into Helena once every few days but choosing restaurants that the Blackhawk Security people didn't usually go to. She avoided questions by hiding in her apartment and working out during times when she knew everyone else had training.

At lunch and dinner at the compound, she felt eyes watching her but never looked around to see who it was. She was afraid that even a simple glance would open her up to intrusive questions. It was better to keep her head down. The only questions she wanted to answer involved her next job, which couldn't come along soon enough. She wanted to get out of this compound where everyone was all up in everyone else's business.

Finally, after catching too many people studying her, she knew she had to get out of the compound. So she went into Helena and ventured into The Trailhead. Fortunately, she was early enough that no one else from Blackhawk Security was there yet. She chose a booth in a corner and sat facing away from the door. If someone recognized her by her back? She'd have to deal with it. But she must have given off strong 'stay away' vibes, because no one slid into the other side of her booth.

Until she'd been back for almost a week. She was sitting in that same corner booth, working on a Guinness, when someone slid onto the bench opposite her. Livvy snapped her head up, ready to tell whoever it was that she wasn't interested in

company. Swallowed when she saw that it was her boss, Mel.

“How’re you doing, Livvy?” Mel asked quietly.

Livvy shrugged one shoulder. “I’m good.” Her fingers tightened around the glass of Guinness. “Not looking for company, either.”

Mel tilted her head. “And why is that?”

Livvy took a too-big gulp of Guinness and coughed several times. Finally, she cleared her throat and took another careful sip. “I’m taking my ten-days leave,” she said. “Recharging, you know? Exactly what we’re supposed to do after we finish a job.”

Mel nodded. “That’s good, but most of our operatives don’t take their ten days at the compound. They visit family. Friends. Sit on a beach with a beer in hand. Camp in the wilderness.”

“I’ve never been big on camping,” Livvy said, taking a too-big gulp of beer, then coughing. “I’m more a city girl.”

“Yeah?” Mel put her chin in her hand and studied her, and Livvy wanted to dash out of the bar. But she suspected that Mel would grab her if she tried to flee. “You were in a city -- Washington D.C. You could have stayed there and seen the sights.”

“Wasn’t interested in museums,” Livvy said, hoping her voice was nonchalant but pretty sure it wasn’t. She suspected it wavered. Stumbled over words. But she tried to gut it out. Shrugged her shoulders and said, “Plenty to do in and around Helena.”

“Really?” Mel leaned against the back of the booth, a teasing smile at the corners of her mouth. “Pretty sure Helena isn’t a hotbed of cultural life. Unless you’re into

rodeos. They have a lot of rodeos here.”

Livvy flattened her hands on the table. “What do you want, Mel? I’m not working right now, and I want to be left alone.”

Mel tilted her head. “Why is that, Liv?” she asked softly.

Livvy managed what she hoped was a nonchalant shrug. “Not in the mood for company.”

“Any particular reason?” Mel asked.

“Yeah.” Livvy took a big gulp of beer and swallowed the cough that wanted to erupt. “I want to be alone.”

“Okay, Greta Garbo.” Mel propped her chin in her hand and studied her. “You’ve always been very social. What’s changed?”

“Nothing’s changed, Mel. So why don’t you go back to the bar and sit with your husband and let me enjoy my beer in peace.”

“Not gonna happen, Livvy,” Mel said, and her voice was gentle. “Something’s wrong. I can see it. Dev sees it. Hell, every other Blackhawk Security agent sees it.” She leaned across the table and held Livvy’s gaze. “You don’t have to tell me what’s going on. I have a few ideas, but I’m not gonna push you to talk. But you might feel better if you do.”

Livvy stared into the dark beer in her glass. “Not in the mood for chit chat.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Mel nod. “I’ve been there. I think everyone has. But I’ve left you alone for a week. It’s time to spill it to someone who cares about

you. Someone who knows what you're going through."

Livvy jerked her head up to stare at Mel. "How the hell do you know what I'm going through?"

Mel slid her hand across the table and covered Livvy's hand. "Because I'm pretty sure I've been where you are right now. It's no fun. Especially without a friendly shoulder to cry on."

"I'm not crying," were the only words that came out of Livvy's mouth.

"Maybe you'd be better off if you were," Mel said with a sigh. She leaned closer. "Did I ever tell you about Dev and me? How we ended up owning Blackhawk Security?"

Livvy shook her head. "I know you were both in Afghanistan. I assumed you came home and started the company." The knot in her stomach eased a little. This wasn't about her. It was about Mel and Dev.

A smile curled one side of Mel's mouth. "Not exactly. Dev and I were together in Afghanistan. Then one day, out of the blue, he dumped me. I was devastated, and I left the foreign service shortly after that. Came home and decided to drive to Seattle to visit my sister. I was driving through Montana when I saw what's now the Blackhawk Security compound. It was abandoned, but I could see its potential. I'd had an idea for a security company, and this abandoned piece of land would have been perfect for what I was envisioning.

"So I contacted Dev. I made it clear I didn't want to get back together with him, but I knew he was the partner I needed to start the company. Long story short, we pooled our money, bought the land and buildings, and rebuilt and repaired them until we had what we thought we needed. And that's how Blackhawk Security came to be."

Livvy lifted one shoulder. “Nice story, but it has nothing to do with me.”

“Oh, I think it does,” Mel said. “I’d been hiding my feelings for Dev, because he’d hurt me. Badly. He’d been hiding his feelings for me because I’d bought him out a few years after Blackhawk Security got off the ground. It took a long time, but we finally talked everything out and got back together. Best decision I’ve ever made.”

“With all due respect, Mel, what does that have to do with me?”

Mel tilted her head as she studied Livvy. “I suspect you’re moping around here because either you dumped Jake, or he dumped you.” She raised one eyebrow. “Would I be right?”

This was so not Mel’s business. But Livvy felt trapped. Either she stayed in this booth with Mel, or she’d have to walk past half the staff of Blackhawk Security to get out the door to her car. “Fine,” she finally said. “Yes. I dumped Jake after our job was done.”

“And you’re regretting it,” Mel said in a soft, kind voice.

Livvy lifted one shoulder. “I have had occasional thoughts that maybe I made a mistake.”

“So why don’t you do something about it and call Jake? You still have some time left. You could go to Washington, or he could come here.”

Livvy gripped her glass until her knuckles whitened. “Because I’m pretty sure I’m in love with him, and I swore I’d never do that.”

Mel put her hands on the table, palms down. As if she was restraining herself from reaching for Livvy. “Why not, Liv?”

So Livvy told Mel about her mother, and her endless string of boyfriends who never stuck around more than a month or two, and Livvy's devastation when her mother fell apart right on schedule. "I swore I'd never be that woman," she said. "Swore I'd never fall in love every month."

"Have you ever been in love?" Mel asked.

Livvy drank another gulp of beer to hide her reaction to Mel's question. But Mel saw through it. When Mel didn't say anything, waiting patiently for Livvy to answer, she finally spit out, "No. I wouldn't let myself fall in love."

Mel frowned. "Not even with someone who loves you and wants to make a life with you?"

"Especially not then," Livvy muttered.

Mel studied her for what felt like hours but was probably only a few moments. Finally she said, "But you are, aren't you? You're in love with Jake Dunbar." Mel reached across the table and took her hand.

Livvy took a deep breath. Stared at the table. She could either lie to Mel or get it over with and then escape. She nodded. "Yeah. I'm in love with Jake. How could I not be? He's wonderful."

"That's nothing to be ashamed about, Livvy. It's something to be celebrated. You're nothing like your mother. You know what she did was reckless and foolish and dangerous. You're none of those things. Your feet are solidly on the ground, and your head is squarely on your shoulders. But you've got a blind spot in your vision so big that you could drive a truck through it. Would it be so awful to give Jake a chance?"

"What if it doesn't work?" Livvy whispered. "I'd be devastated, and so would he."

“Then make sure it does work. Talk to him. Find out what he wants. What’s important to him. What matters to him. And tell him the same things about yourself.”

She put her hand over Livvy’s. “If you don’t take a few chances, you’re gonna have a very boring, cold and lonely life.” One side of Mel’s mouth curled up. “Most likely pretty unhappy, too.”

“I’ve never taken a chance in my personal life,” Livvy finally said. “Not sure I even know how to do that.”

“It’s not easy,” Mel said. “But the rewards are worth the risks.” Mel leaned back and smiled at Livvy. “So are you going to be on a plane to Washington tomorrow?”

Livvy took a deep breath. If she said yes, she’d be committed to it. Mel wouldn’t let her back down. Finally she blew out the breath. “Yeah. I’ll go to Washington tomorrow.” She swallowed. “I have five more days of leave, but I may need to take a few vacation days as well.”

“You take whatever you need, Liv. Just fix things with Jake. Figure out how you’re gonna work out your jobs.”

Livvy swallowed hard, trying to dislodge the lump that had taken up residence in her throat when she’d driven away from Jake. “Thank you, Mel, for kicking my ass. I’m gonna go back to my apartment and make arrangements to fly to D.C. as soon as possible.” She frowned. “Jake may not want to see me,” she said. “But I’m going to stick around and change his mind.”

Mel leaned against the back of the booth, and her smile lit up the room. “You go, Liv. And don’t take no for an answer.”

Livvy left ten dollars on the table and scooped up her things. “Thanks, Mel. I needed

my ass kicked, and you did a great job. I really appreciate it.”

“I’m available for ass kickings any time.” She slid out of the booth and hugged Livvy. “Your job will still be here when you get back. Good luck, Livvy. And I’ll look forward to hearing the story.”

Livvy felt her face turn red. “Parts of it, anyway. I hope there are other parts that I can’t share.”

“God, I hope there are,” Mel said with a grin. “Now go book that flight to D.C.”

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:42 am*

Livvy sat in her room, her phone clutched in her hand and her breath coming in short, ragged gasps. This was Jake, she told herself. The man who'd taken a huge chance and told Liv he loved her. He wouldn't have gotten over her in less than a week. Wouldn't have put her out of his mind and moved on with someone else. Jake wasn't the kind of guy to move on so quickly.

What he was probably doing was working twenty hours a day, then falling into bed. Using his job to keep the ghosts away. She wondered if it was working for him. Because filling every hour of every day with activities wasn't doing it for her.

She stared at her phone, wondering if she should call him to let him know she was coming to D.C. After thinking about it for way too long, she decided not to call. Too easy for him to tell her, 'Don't come. I won't be here', then take off himself.

She wouldn't blame him if he did. Saying that to her wasn't as bad as what she'd done, walking away after he told her he loved her. But she didn't want to give Jake the chance to disappear.

So instead of calling him, she called the airline she'd used last time she went to D.C. There were no direct flights to Washington D.C. that evening, but there was a red-eye through Chicago that would get her there early the next morning. So she booked a seat on that plane. After she threw her kit bag and a few changes of clothing into her travel backpack, she headed out to the garage and got in her car. Drove to the Helena airport.

As she drove, she tried to figure out what to say to Jake.

What could she say? ‘I was a jerk?’ That would work. ‘I’m an idiot?’ That would work, too. Both were true, and Jake deserved to hear both of them. But maybe she needed to start with the most important – ‘I love you, Jake.’

The problem was, after the way she’d acted in the Brooklyn hotel, and when they’d returned to Washington, she wouldn’t blame Jake at all if he didn’t believe her. Didn’t want anything to do with her. She’d been incredibly cruel to him. And thoughtless on top of cruel.

She finally fell asleep on the plane from Chicago, only waking when the plane landed at Reagan with a hard thump.

She shuffled off the plane with the rest of the passengers, then went directly to one of the rental car companies. Since she wasn’t picky about what she rented, as long as it had four wheels and an engine, she was on her way in less than thirty minutes. She didn’t need to map the route to Jake’s apartment -- it had been little more than a week since she’d been here.

As she drove into the parking lot closest to Jake’s building, she searched for his car. When she didn’t see it, she gripped the steering wheel tightly. Was Jake gone? On a job? Or on a trip? Maybe she should have called him.

Finally she spotted his car, parked far away from the door to his building. She parked close to it, then grabbed her suitcase and briefcase from the trunk before hurrying to the door of Jake’s building.

Just as she entered the lobby, a woman exited the apartment. Livvy leaped and grabbed the door before it clicked close, then she got on the elevator. Got off on Jake’s floor, then walked slowly to his door.

She stood there for a long time. What if he wasn’t home? What if he had... company?

Oh, God, that would be so mortifying. So awful. It would break her heart.

Finally she got up the nerve to knock on his door. She heard footsteps from inside his apartment, and finally the door opened. Jake said, "I told you I'm not..." He stopped, staring at her. "What are you doing here?"

There was no welcome in his cold voice. Livvy swallowed hard. Looked up and down the hall. She really didn't want to have this conversation where anyone could overhear her. Given it was early morning, people could and probably would walk down the hall to catch the elevator. An audience was the last thing she needed. Or wanted.

Jake stared at her for a long moment, his face unreadable. "May I come in?" she finally asked. When he didn't respond, fearing he was going to say no, she took a step closer. "Please, Jake. I don't want to have this conversation in public."

The silence stretched too long, and she was sure he'd say no. If he did, she'd wait at his car until he emerged. He may not want to hear what she had to say, but she needed to say it.

Finally, after a too-long hesitation, he stepped to the side and she walked into his entrance hall.

He didn't invite her further into his apartment. They stood awkwardly in the narrow hallway, and Jake was careful to keep a good distance between them. Probably so she couldn't touch him, and the thought made her chest ache as if someone had kicked it.

Finally, when the door was closed and he was standing far enough away that there would be no accidental touches, he said, "What are you doing here, Williams?"

God, not even an Olivia. She drew in a trembling breath.

He'd never called her Williams before, and her heart twisted in her chest. 'Williams' was even more impersonal than Olivia. She didn't realize how long she'd been staring at him without speaking until he said, "What?" He nodded at her suitcase and briefcase. "You planning a long stay? Have a job in D.C.? You want to stay in my extra bedroom? Save a little money on a motel?"

"No," she said, appalled. "God, no. I wouldn't do that to you." Why the hell had she brought her luggage up to his apartment? Because her subconscious mind had hoped he'd ask her to stay. God, what a fool she'd been.

"Really?" He raised one eyebrow. "You have lines you wouldn't cross?"

Oh, God, Jake was really angry. She drew in a deep breath. How could she blame him? He'd offered her his heart, and she'd crushed it beneath her heel.

"I came here to see you," she said. "I'm glad I caught you before you left for work."

"I was just going out the door when you knocked. Can this wait?"

From the way he was looking at her, she figured he meant 'can this wait until hell freezes over'?

She didn't want to wait. She wanted Jake to wrap his arms around her and tell her again that he loved her. She wanted to kiss him and say those words back to him. But Jake was in charge here, and he didn't look like he'd welcome her big reveal. Not now, maybe not ever.

Her eyes burned, and she struggled not to let the tears fall. "Sure. What time will you be home tonight?"

"No idea. I have an appointment late this afternoon. Don't know how long it'll last."

She swallowed the lump in her throat. “Why don’t you give me a call when you get home and are ready to see me.”

He stared at her hard for a long moment. “Not sure I’m ever gonna be ready to see you, Williams.”

Her mouth tightened and she clamped her teeth together to hold back the cry of despair in her throat. “I’ll be waiting here when you get back. You can walk past me and close the door in my face, but I’ll just be here when you leave tomorrow morning.”

“Fine,” he said, but his voice was strained. “I’ll see you after work.”

“I’ll be here.”

“Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to go.” He opened the door. She was barely past the threshold when it closed hard behind her.

She turned to stare at the door and it was still vibrating in the frame. Should she wait for him to come out? Walk to the car with him?

No. That would only make him angrier. She’d come back tonight to talk to him.

She walked back to her car and climbed in, then sat there, hunched in the seat, watching for Jake to come out of his building. When she realized her gaze was laser focused on the door, she rolled her eyes at herself. What was she, in junior high?

He finally emerged after ten minutes or so and walked directly to his car. He didn’t search the parking lot, looking for an unfamiliar car. He didn’t peer into the cars that were there, looking for her. Based on the way he strode to his car without hesitating or looking around, she realized he really didn’t care that she’d come to Washington.

She wanted to cry, but she fought the tears that wanted to fall. Tears never solved anything. It might feel good to release all that emotion, but it would just leave her drained. Exhausted. And vulnerable.

Vulnerable was the last thing she ever wanted to be. After seeing her mother fall apart when a relationship ended, Livvy had vowed she'd never be that woman. Never let a man control her emotions. As a result, she'd spent her adult life not being vulnerable to anyone or anything. It had worked just fine for her. Until Jake.

She swallowed hard as she realized that coming to Jake, telling him she loved him and asking him to forgive her, would put her completely at his mercy. Make her completely vulnerable to him. He might forgive her, but he could just as easily tell her to get lost. Tell her she'd had her chance and had thrown it away. She'd tossed his love back in his face like it wasn't good enough for her.

For a moment, she wanted to start the car, pull out of this parking lot and drive back to the airport. Get on the next plane to Helena and put Jake in her rear-view mirror.

Damn it, she wasn't going to do that. Wasn't going to live down to Jake's expectations. If she wanted a relationship with him, a real one that would last, she couldn't run away again. If she did that, Jake would never speak to her again. And he'd be right to cut her out of his life.

What was she going to do until Jake came home? Sitting in this car and staring at his building would be totally boring and wasn't going to make her feel any better. Neither was driving around the district and looking at the sights. She'd seen everything she wanted to see when she worked here.

Maybe she should start with breakfast. All she'd eaten this morning was a small packet of snack mix on the plane. And she hadn't even finished that. She'd been so nervous about facing Jake that she'd only managed to eat half the small bag. So she

put her car in gear and headed for her favorite breakfast place in the city.

An hour later, full of pancakes, bacon and coffee, she felt much better. As she walked back to her car, she thought about what she should do with the rest of the day. As she slid behind the steering wheel, she decided she'd go talk to Diana. See if it would be possible for her to get her old job back.

The thought made her heart ache. She loved working for Blackhawk Security. Loved everything about her job and her co-workers. But she needed something to show Jake that she was serious about him. Serious about committing to him. And getting her job back was a good place to start.

She sat in her car for a long time, gathering her nerve. She didn't want to go back to the FBI, but she would if there was no alternative. And she figured it was a good gesture. It'd let Jake know she was serious about him.

So she pulled out her phone and called Diana's office. Diana's secretary answered and said, "Director Redfield's office. How may I help you?"

"Does the director have any appointments available this morning?" Olivia asked. "This is Olivia Williams. I'd like to meet with her."

"Let me ask the Director," her receptionist said. She clicked the phone, and it began playing elevator music. Less than a minute later, Diana came on the line.

"Olivia," Diana said. "Rosie said you wanted to meet with me. I'll be happy to see you. Would ten o'clock work for you?"

"That would be great, Madame Director."

"Wonderful. I'll see you then," she said.

Before she could hang up, Olivia said, “Please don’t tell Jake we’re meeting. Okay?”

Diana hesitated for a moment. Then she said, “I wouldn’t discuss my appointments with anyone, including Jake. I’ll see you at ten, Olivia.”

She disconnected the phone, and Livvy took a deep breath. Closed her eyes until the butterflies stopped flapping in her stomach, then started her car and headed for FBI Headquarters.

At 9:55, she sat in a chair in the reception area, paging mindlessly through a magazine. She wouldn’t be able to tell anyone the name of the magazine or any details about the articles. But it made her feel less pitiful as she sat and waited for Diana to see her.

Finally, several minutes after ten, the receptionist said, “You can go back now, Ms. Williams.”

Livvy replaced the magazine in the rack and walked to the door of Diana’s office. Knocked once, then opened the door.

“Livvy,” Diana said, standing up. “Good to see you. Come sit down and tell me what I can do for you.”

Livvy slid into one of the visitor chairs on the other side of Diana’s desk and slid her hands beneath her thighs. “It’s good to see you, too, ma’am. I was wondering how complicated it would be to get my job with the Bureau back.”

Diana leaned back in her chair. “Do you want your job back, Livvy?”

Livvy forced herself to hold Diana’s gaze. “I might. I’m here to patch things up with Jake. If it works out, I’ll likely be moving back to D.C.”

“And if you do, you’ll need a job.”

Livvy nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

“What about your job with Blackhawk Security?”

Livvy cleared her throat. “I haven’t talked to them yet.” She drew in a shuddering breath. “No point until I see how things go with Jake.”

Diana raised one eyebrow. “But you came to me to ask for your job back.”

Livvy nodded. “Yes. I thought it would be easier to ask in person as long as I’m in D.C. anyway.” She shrugged. “If it doesn’t go well with Jake, all I’ve lost is the time spent with you. It’s always a pleasure to see you, ma’am,” she hurried to add. “But everything’s up in the air right now.”

Diana studied her for a long moment. “I understand, Olivia. And I would certainly give you your job back if you moved back to D.C. I’m assuming that’s what you needed to know.”

Livvy let her shoulders drop. Took a deep breath. “Yes, ma’am. That’s what I need to know.”

“Good luck with Jake,” Diana said. “I hope your meeting goes well.”

“Thank you, ma’am. And again, please don’t tell him we met today. If we can’t work things out, there’s no point in him knowing.” She shrugged. “If it does work out? I’ll tell him myself.”

Diana’s eyes softened. “I sincerely hope you can work things out, Olivia. Good luck.”

“Thank you, ma’am. And thanks for taking the time to talk to me.”

“Anytime, Olivia,” the Director said.

Livvy pushed back the chair and reached across the desk to shake Diana’s hand.

“Thank you again, ma’am.”

“You’re very welcome,” Diana said.

Livvy walked to the door. Just before she pulled it open, Diana said, “Good luck, Livvy.”

Livvy looked over her shoulder. “Thank you, ma’am. Very much.”

She slipped out the door and blew out a breath. Then she squared her shoulders, stepped out of the office and headed for the nearest elevator. The last thing she wanted was to run into Jake in the building.

Once out of the FBI parking lot, Livvy drove toward Jake’s building, anxiety ratcheting tighter the closer she got. Would Jake be home? Would he be willing to talk to her? She had no idea. All she could do was knock on his door and say what she’d come to say. After that, the ball was in Jake’s court.

By the time she pulled into the parking lot of Jake’s building, her heart was a hard drumbeat battering against her chest. As she looked around for Jake’s car, her heart rate quickened and she pressed her hand against it. It pounded against her palm in a rapid rhythm, both too hard and not hard enough to make up for what she’d done to Jake.

She scanned the parking lot again, but didn’t see Jake’s car. That was okay. She’d wait. She swung out of the car, leaving her suitcase and briefcase in the trunk, then

headed for the door.

When she walked into the small vestibule of his building, the access door was locked. So she pulled out her phone and pretended to be looking up someone's number. After about ten minutes, someone entered behind her, and Livvy followed her into the building. Got into the elevator and got off at Jake's floor. There was no one in the hall, and she didn't hear any noise coming from any of the nearby units. She knocked on Jake's door, not expecting him to answer. But after a few minutes, he yanked open the door. Studied her for what felt like a long time. Finally, he opened the door more widely and stepped to the side. She walked in, then turned to face him.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:42 am*

They stared at each other for a long moment. Finally he said, “Come in and have a seat. Want a beer?”

She didn’t. She wanted to keep a level head. Wanted to be able to say what she came to say. But it would be something to hold. She could take occasional sips, just to make it look like she was drinking it. “Yeah, a beer sounds good,” she said.

He walked into the kitchen, saying over his shoulder, “Go ahead and sit down in the living room. I’ll be right there.”

He came in a few minutes later, holding a can of Guinness and a bottle of Yuengling. She focused on the Guinness, touched that he’d bothered to get her favorite beer. He must have noticed her staring at the can, because he said, “Leftovers from when you were here a couple of weeks ago.”

Her face heated. Of course it was. There was no way he’d gone out today and bought Guinness for her. If he needed beer, he’d get whatever he liked, and if she wanted a beer, she’d have to drink that.

He sat on the couch perpendicular to the one she was on, so he was as far away from her as it was possible to be and still be in the same room.

He took a gulp of his beer, then set the bottle on his coffee table. “Okay, Williams, cut to the chase. What are you doing here?” he asked.

There it was. Trust Jake to go straight to the bottom line. She gripped the Guinness so hard that she was pretty sure her fingers were gonna leave dents on the can. Finally

she set it on the coaster in front of her. “I need to apologize for the way I treated you in Brooklyn, especially after we’d just...” She swallowed.

“Had sex, Williams. It’s okay to say it. It’s not gonna make me jump you.”

His words were a stab to her heart. They slid right through all four chambers and left her bleeding. “That’s not what I was going to say,” she said, staring down at the can of Guinness.

“Okay, then. What were you going to say?”

“It wasn’t just sex, Jake,” she said, her hands shaking so hard she had to set the Guinness back on the table. She wanted to look down, but she forced herself to hold his gaze. “We made love.”

Jake snorted and took a gulp of his beer. “That’s what it was for me,” he said. “For you? I think sex is the right word. Unless you prefer fuck?”

She stared down at her hands and swallowed hard, forcing the tears to the back of her throat. “No, Jake. Making love is the right word for me, too.”

He leaned back against the couch, studying her. Finally he took a sip of beer and set his bottle on the table. “You re-writing history, Williams? Doing some editing after the fact?”

“No,” she said, curling her fingers into her palms so hard she could feel the dents in her skin. “Making love is exactly what I intended to say. But if it came out... hesitant? Or uncertain? It’s because I’ve never said those words before.”

Jake tilted his head, studying her, and she squirmed beneath his gaze. “Is that so?”

She swallowed the lump that had lodged in her throat. “Yeah, it is.”

He kept his gaze on her. “Never in your life, huh?”

“No. Never.”

“And why is that, Williams?” He set his bottle on the table and leaned toward her, his eyes burning a hole in her chest. “Even people who aren’t in love say ‘making love’. It’s the polite way of saying fucking.”

Jake’s expression was unconvinced. Suspicious.

Livvy looked down at the half-moons pressed into her palms so she wouldn’t have to look Jake in the eyes. See the hardness there. Was that cowardly? Of course it was. But she needed a little bit of a defense right now. She felt torn and ragged inside, as if someone had ripped out the contents of her chest and stomped them into the ground.

She wanted to jump up and run out the door. Drive back to the airport and take the first plane back to Helena. If this painful, fractured feeling was love, then she wanted no part of it.

But she didn’t move. If she left now, she knew she’d never see Jake again. She could call him. Email him. Show up at his door. But he’d ignore her and move on. Exactly what she’d deserve for being such a coward. And she wouldn’t, couldn’t blame him.

Okay, time to bare her soul. She didn’t want to do that with Jake so dismissive and angry, but she had no choice. If she wanted Jake to listen to her, she had to be completely honest with him -- completely open.

She tucked her hands into her armpits so he wouldn’t see them shake. Then she took a deep, shuddering breath. “I’ve never told you much about my life,” she said.

His gaze drilled a hole in her. “You never told me anything personal, Williams. Not one damn little hint about how you’d grown up. What you wanted out of life. Where you saw yourself in ten years. I figured you were just cautious, but after our... stay in Brooklyn, I realized you had barriers so high and so thick that no one and nothing was going to breach them.” He shrugged. “So I knew there was zero chance that you’d be open to a relationship with me.”

“That’s the thing, Jake,” she said, sliding her hands beneath her thighs so he couldn’t see them shaking. “I’ve had a lot of time to think since I got back to Montana, and it didn’t take much time to realize what an idiot I’d been. How wrong I’d been. If I could go back and redo the past two weeks, I’d do things completely differently. I would have been a lot more open with you. Told you how I grew up, so you’d know that I had issues.”

When she took a breath, Jake scoffed. “Issues, huh? I think we all have issues .” He slashed vicious air quotes in front of him. “But the vast majority of people figure out why and how they’re messed up and do something to fix it. They don’t spend their lives ignoring those issues or taking them out on their partners.”

“Then I guess I’m in the slow class,” she shot back. “It took losing my heart to you and not knowing how to fix it before I realized that.”

His eyes darkened. “So you lost your heart to me and your first thought was how to fix that.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she said, appalled at how that had come out.

“Then what did you mean, Williams?”

His face looked as if it had been carved from stone. She began to reach out to touch it, then snatched her hand back.

“I meant that I fell in love with you, Jake. And since I’ve never been in love before, never wanted to be in love before, I panicked. Did what I do best -- I ran away.”

He stared at her, expressionless, for a long time. Her heart ached and her soul slowly shriveled, until it was nothing more than a tiny kernel inside her. Finally she set the Guinness she’d been holding so tightly back on the coffee table and stood up. “There were two more things I needed to say to you,” she said, clearing her throat to keep the despair hidden. “I’m so sorry about the way I treated you that night and the next morning. I was an idiot. Completely clueless about what to do when the man you love tells you that he loves you, too.” She stared at her hands for a long moment. Sucked in a deep breath as she stared at the floor instead of looking at him. “I love you, Jake. I was falling in love with you before I ran away to Montana.” She shook her head. “Probably why I ran away to Montana.”

She wrapped her arms around her chest, as if that could keep her heart in the right place. But it was too late. Her heart was destroyed.

She forced herself to stand tall. “I’ve said what I came here to say, and since you don’t seem to believe me, I’ll leave you alone.” She began walking toward the door, focused only on getting out of Jake’s apartment so she wouldn’t have to look at the expression on his face. She wanted to have her breakdown when she was far away from him.

His hand descended on her shoulder. “Where’re you going, Olivia?”

At least it wasn’t Williams . “I’m going to get in my car and go back to the airport. Get on the first plane back to Helena,” she said without turning to look at him.

“You like to make a dramatic exit, huh?” he said.

“No.” She swallowed hard and shook her head. “I want to get back to my car so I can

fall apart in private.”

Slowly, Jake stepped in front of her, blocking her way to the door. “Why don’t you fall apart with me?” he said. “Tell me why you’re so twisted up. Tell me what happened to make you that way.”

She stared at his chest. “Do you even care why I’m a neurotic mess? What’s the point of baring my soul? So that I can cry all the way back to Montana?”

“Huh,” he said. “Dramatic much, Livvy?”

His words were like a slap in the face, and she couldn’t stop the tears that poured from her eyes. “No,” she managed to say. “I’m never dramatic. Never let anyone see my messy, ugly emotions. You’re just the lucky guy who got the blowback.” She darted around him and hurried for the door. “Goodbye, Jake. Whatever you think, I really do love you.”

His hands clamped on her shoulders, but they were gentle. Soft. “Then why are you running away? Why won’t you stay and fight for me?”

“Because I see no signs that you want me to stay,” she said, staring at her shoes. “That you want me to fight for you.”

“And that’s gonna stop you?” He turned her around so she faced him. “You give up awfully easily, Livvy. I was gonna fly to Helena after you ran away from me,” he said. “Hunt you down and make you talk to me. But I got busy at work. Diana had Nelson and Windsor arrested, and she wanted my help unraveling who they’re working for.” He shrugged. “As soon as she identifies for certain the other Russian moles in the Bureau, I was gonna be on a plane to Helena.”

He took her hand and led her back to the couch. This time, he eased her down, then

sat down right beside her. Tucked her against his side and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “Tell me why you’ve never allowed yourself to fall in love before.”

She couldn’t look at him. She didn’t want him to see the hope in her eyes. The longing for him that she couldn’t hide anymore.

His hand tightened around her shoulder. “Tell me, Livvy,” he said, and his voice was tender.

“It’s an ugly story,” she said.

“It has to be, if you’ve never allowed yourself to fall in love before now.”

She swallowed hard, then told him about her mother. About the revolving door of lovers she’d had. How things had never worked out, and how her mother fell apart every time. The tantrums. The pouting in her bedroom. The way Livvy had to make their meals. Cajole her mother into eating. And then the ugly cycle would start all over again. She’d meet someone new, he’d stick around for a few months, then leave, and Olivia would have to deal with the tantrums and sulking all over again.

Even though she hadn’t been able to look him in the eye, Livvy knew he’d been watching her as she bared her soul. His gaze had burned her skin with its intensity. “God, Livvy, I’m so sorry,” he finally said. “That’s no way for a kid to grow up.” He drew in a deep, shuddering breath. “It’s shocking that you aren’t more screwed up than you are. Shocking that you’re able to live a relatively normal life.”

She turned toward him but couldn’t bring herself to meet his gaze. She wasn’t sure she wanted to see his face. “Normal except for the fact that I’ve never allowed myself to fall in love. Never allowed myself to have a... a real, growing relationship with a man.”

“Until now,” Jake said.

She looked up at him, stared into his eyes. Nodded slowly. “Yeah,” she said. “Until now.” She reached up and stroked her finger over his lips. Then pressed her mouth to his. Savored his taste, the essence of Jake she’d missed every minute since that night in the hotel room. “Until you. I want that with you, Jake. More than anything.”

For a long moment, Jake didn’t move. He sat beside her, still as a statue. His eyes were mirrors that let nothing out. His face was expressionless. He was hiding himself, just like she’d always done.

Before she could point that out, he yanked her into his arms. Pressed kisses all over her face. When she kissed him back just as frantically, he moved her into his arms and stood up. Carried her into his dim, shadowed bedroom where the bed wasn’t made and only a few rays of light penetrated the almost completely closed curtains.

He paused next to the side of the bed. “Is this okay, Livvy? Do you want to be in this bed with me?”

“That’s all I’ve wanted since that night at the hotel,” she said into his neck. “All I’ve thought about since I drove away from you.”

“You sure?” he asked.

“More sure than I’ve ever been about anything.” She lifted to press a kiss to his mouth, and when he kissed her back, she groaned with the rightness of it. With the need that roared through her like a raging forest fire.

When he set her on the bed, she reached for his hand. Tried to tug him down beside her. But he stepped away, out of her reach, and stripped off his clothes. Tossed them onto the floor, then crawled onto the bed until he was beside her.

“You’re a little over-dressed,” he murmured into her ear, tugging at the lobe with his teeth. Then pressed a kiss over the small teeth marks. “But that’s okay. I want to undress you. Kiss every inch of your amazing body. I want to make you squirm. Cry my name. Come at least ten times.”

“Ten times?” she traced his face with her fingers. Brushed her fingertips over his soft lips. “Is that even possible?”

He smoothed her hair away from her face. “We’ll find out, won’t we?” He ran his hand over her body and frowned. “We have to take care of this clothing situation,” he murmured, tugging at the buttons of her blouse. “Let’s fix that.”

With his mouth on hers, he shoved the buttons through the buttonholes. Then he stripped the shirt from her shoulders. It joined his clothes on the floor.

Then he undid the front clasp of her bra. The cups fell to the side, baring her breasts to him. He smoothed his fingers over first one, then the other, his touch light. Delicate.

She squirmed beneath him, wanting more. Finally said, “Jake, I need more. I need my clothes off. I want you inside me.”

His mouth curved, but he didn’t stop kissing her breasts. Sucking on the sensitive nipples. “Don’t worry, darlin’. We’ll get to that. I’m busy right now.”

She squirmed against him, desperate to have him inside her. “You’re punishing me, aren’t you?” she murmured. “Making me pay for walking away from you.”

His mouth curved into a smile against her breast. “Do you think I’m the kind of guy who’d punish the woman he loves? Torment her until she was begging?”

“I do.” Her breath stuttered out. “Absolutely,” she said, her tongue getting tangled in the words. “Do you want me to beg?”

“I’ve had many fantasies of you begging me to make love to you,” he said. “We’ll play with that another day. Today? I want to make you cry my name. Make you scream. I want to watch you fall apart. Then fall asleep on top of me.”

Without any warning, he slid down her body and put his mouth between her legs. When she came, screaming and bucking, he slid inside her. Found the secret place that made her sob out his name. And after she came again, he allowed himself to follow her over.

She lay limp beneath him, her eyes closed, her breath sawing in and out. He pulled her on top of him and wrapped his arms around her. Reached down for the sheet and comforter and pulled the soft fabric over their bodies. Then, beneath the blankets, he stroked his hand down her back, his hand both soothing and arousing.

Nestled in his arms, their skin touching from chest to toes, she let herself relax. Went boneless. But she was too jazzed up, too thrilled to be in Jake’s arms again. So she wrapped her arms around Jake and nestled into him. Sleeping alone at the Blackhawk Security compound hadn’t felt... right. She was always aware of the missing piece who wasn’t beside her.

He stroked his hand over her back. “Sleep, Livvy,” he murmured. “Rest. We can talk later. I’m gonna tuck you into my side and listen to you breathe. Savor the satin of your skin against me and enjoy every inch of your amazing body. You sleep as long as you want. We have all the time in the world to make up for the weeks we’ve been apart.”

She burrowed into Jake and loved the way her skin slid over his chest every time she breathed. All those sleepless nights caught up with her, because in minutes, she was

sound asleep. Her last conscious thought was that she was exactly where she wanted to be. Exactly where she needed to be. And that was the first thing she'd tell Jake when she woke up.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:42 am*

The next morning, they sat at Jake's kitchen table, eating French toast and bacon. When he placed their meals on the table, she looked up at him, and her face softened. "You remembered what we had in Brooklyn," she said.

He slid into the seat across from her and took her hand in his. Twined their fingers together. "Yeah. I want to replace those terrible memories with some better ones." He reached across the table and smoothed his thumb over her lips. "And after the way we spent most of the night, I think we both need to load up on carbs and protein."

Her cheeks heated with the memory of how they'd made love all night, and she smiled. She reached across the table for his hand and twined their fingers together. "I predict a lot of carb-heavy breakfasts in our future."

"Absolutely," Jake said. "As long as no one asks me why I'm losing weight, we're good."

After they'd finished their meal and Jake poured them both another cup of coffee, he reached for her hand again. "We have a big decision to make."

"Yeah?" She tilted her head. "Like what side of the bed we each want to sleep on?"

"That's really important, but we'll get to that later," he said, biting his lip. He was really enjoying this side of Livvy that he'd never seen before. "Where are we going to live?"

"Oh," she said, freezing with a forkful of French toast halfway to her mouth. "Yeah," she said, setting the fork back on her plate. "I've been too... busy to think about

that.”

“Yeah, me too,” Jake said. “But we have to figure it out.”

“I don’t want...” They both spoke at the same time. Jake smiled and jerked his chin at her. “Ladies first.”

“I don’t want to live apart and have a commuter relationship,” she said. “Do you want me to quit my job and move back to Washington? I talked to Diana yesterday, and she said she’d take me back.”

“You snuck into headquarters and talked to her?” Jake frowned.

“I did.” Livvy sighed. “I didn’t want to go behind your back, and I wasn’t sure that would even be an option, but I needed to know.”

“Is that what you want?” Jake asked. “To move back here and get your old job back?”

Livvy tilted her head and stared at him. “I know I want to live with you. And if taking my old job at the FBI back is the only way to do that? Yeah. That’s exactly what I want,” she said.

“You sure you want to leave your Blackhawk Security job and go back to the FBI? I know how much you love your job there.”

“I do love my job at Blackhawk Security,” Livvy said. “But I love you so much more. I don’t want to spend half my time on a plane, and I don’t want you to do that, either.”

“I could transfer to the Helena office,” he said.

Livvy studied him. “Helena’s a lovely city, but do you really want to work in the FBI office there? There probably wouldn’t be a lot of... meaty cases in Helena. Not the kind of cases that would challenge you. The kind that would use all your skills. Do you really want to spend your professional life doing things like interviewing Nick Doyle about his father’s business?”

“That needed to be done,” Jake said, reaching across the table. “And it gave me a chance to reconnect with you.” But the thought of leaving the FBI office in Washington D.C. and moving to the small satellite office in Helena made his heart ache.

Livvy already knew him too well, because she pointed at him. “Yeah,” she said. “I didn’t think so.” She gripped his hand tightly. “Even if you wanted to do that, you can’t leave D.C. for a long time. Who knows how long this search for Russian moles is gonna last? It could take months. Years, even.”

Jake sighed. “You’re right, and I need to be there for it.” He shook his head. “No, that’s not exactly right. Someone else could cover it. But Diana wants me there, and more important, I want to be there. I want to follow the clues and figure out who else at headquarters is working for the Russians. Who else is corrupt?” He shook his head. “It all started when I heard your story about being set up. When I tied that into Nelson acting odd, I suspected he was part of it. Now I want to dig deep. Put the pieces together and arrest the rest of the bastards.”

“I get it, Jake,” Livvy said, gripping his hand. “If I’m honest? I want to be there, too. I want to root out anyone who’s working for the Russians. But I’d have a lot of catching up to do, and you need to focus on your search and not babysitting me.”

“I don’t think it’ll take that long,” Jake said. “Diana’s got her foot on Nelson’s and Windsor’s necks. Once they’ve been rotting in prison for a few more weeks or months, they’ll be begging to talk. Begging to spill their guts.” He smiled. “Diana’s

playing them off each other. Windsor already spilled his guts, and it probably won't take long for Nelson to fold. Nelson will break, probably sooner rather than later.

“Oh, and by the way, Windsor finally told Diana why you and I were targeted. Apparently we both saw Nelson talking to someone from the Russian embassy. I don't remember that – hell, I'm not sure I'd even recognize someone from the Russian embassy. But Nelson was paranoid, and he over-reacted. Decided we both had to die. And he enlisted his Bratva buddies to take care of the problem.”

Livvy frowned. “Really? That seems like a stretch. I wouldn't recognize anyone from the Russian embassy.”

“Neither would I. But Nelson thought we were threats.”

“Nelson probably thought a lot of people were threats. But since we reported to him, we were the only two he could get rid of easily,” Livvy said.

“Yeah.” Jake shook his head. “But now? He has a lot to lose if he doesn't cooperate. They want protection in prison, and the only way Nelson and Windsor get that is by ratting out whoever they were working with. And they know it.” He smiled at Livvy. “Diana is one tough woman,” he said. “She'll make it crystal clear to Nelson and Windsor that if they want protection in prison, if they want a few privileges, it comes with a price. And the price is the names of Russian moles at headquarters.”

Livvy nodded and tried to swallow the knot in her throat. “So -- bottom line? You can't leave D.C. for a long time.”

“No. As arrogant as it sounds, Diana trusts me, and I don't want to let her down.”

“I don't, either. Which means you're here in D.C. for the foreseeable future.” She reached across the table for his hand. “If I'm honest? I want to be there, too. I want to

root out anyone who's working for the Russians.”

“You know more about this case than anyone besides me. And maybe Diana.” He frowned. “Do you think Mel and Dev would loan you to the FBI for a while? To work this case with me?”

Livvy frowned. “I don't know,” she said. “I've never heard of them doing anything like that before.”

“Yeah, it would be a new thing for Blackhawk Security. I have no idea how Mel and Dev would handle a request like that.”

“I don't, either,” Livvy said. She narrowed her eyes and stared at Jake. “If Mel and Dev don't go for that, I had another thought about how we could be together and both still be employed,”

“Yeah? What's that?” Jake asked.

She reached for his hand and wrapped her fingers around his. Jake wanted to reach across the table every night and every morning to hold Livvy's hand. But with their jobs three thousand miles apart, that dream was unlikely to come true.

“Blackhawk Security has two agents permanently stationed in Seattle, and two in Chicago, because they get a lot of business in both of those cities,” Livvy began. “And it works out well because the agents are familiar with the cities before they start guarding people.” She drew a deep breath and tightened her fingers around Jake's. “I was thinking that maybe I could propose that Mel and Dev station me permanently in Washington. If we got a few jobs here, and did well with them, we'd have a higher profile in the district. Could get more jobs. And if they agreed to that, you could stay here, working for the FBI, and I could live here, too.” She grinned at him. “And maybe the FBI would throw a few jobs my way. Maybe it wouldn't take so long to

get a reputation as a go-to security operation.”

“I like the way you think, Liv,” Jake said with a smile. “If Mel and Dev agreed to that, it would be the perfect solution.”

“Yeah. But Blackhawk Security doesn’t have a high profile here. We did in both Chicago and Seattle because we’d handled a few big cases in both of those cities. We don’t have that here, so I’m pretty sure Mel’s answer will be no.”

“I could ask Diana,” Jake said after a long moment. “Find out how the FBI handles cases where an individual needs a bodyguard. Do they assign an agent to the job? Hire someone else?”

Livvy tightened her grip on Jake’s hand. “Yes!” she said. “Talk to Diana. Explain the situation. And tell her although I was sincere about asking if I could have my old job back, what I really want to do is open a branch of Blackhawk Security in D.C. I’m wondering how much business I’d get. Are there bodyguard companies here already? How much work do they get? Would it be worth my while to move here?”

Jake nodded slowly. “That might work. But it’d be you making all the sacrifices. I’d still be here, doing my job. You’d have to leave Montana and all your friends to move here. And there might not be a lot of jobs for you, at least at first.”

“Yeah, all that is true,” Livvy said. “But it would be a way to stay together.” She tightened her grip on his hand. “I really, really don’t want a commuter relationship,” she said. “Especially one that’s six or more hours away by plane. The reality is, with our jobs, we wouldn’t see each other very often. And that’s not what I want.”

“Not what I want, either,” Jake admitted.

“You could join Blackhawk Security, but I don’t think that’s a solution. You love

your job with the FBI. And as long as you love what you're doing, why would you want to change that?"

"I'd change that for you," he said. "I'd do anything to build a life with you instead of having a commuter relationship."

"Same here," she said. "I'm willing to give up my job with Blackhawk Security to have a life with you. It wouldn't be my first choice, but I'd do it in a heartbeat if it was the only way."

Jake slid his fingers between hers. "I'll talk to Diana tomorrow. I'll tell her you were serious about asking for your job back, but it wouldn't be your first choice. You want to stay with Blackhawk Security, but unless you were posted in D.C., we'd be apart more than we'd be together."

He lifted her hand to his mouth and pressed a kiss to her palm. "I have no idea what the Bureau does if someone needs a bodyguard, and I'll ask her about that. Find out if they use non-agents for that, and if so, how do you get on their list."

"Thank you," she said. "Fingers crossed that I could work something out with the Bureau." She drew in a hopeful breath. "But if I can't, we'll figure something out."

The next day, Jake was going to take a day off, but Livvy shook her head. "Don't do that," she said. "We might need all the days off you have. Go to work and talk to Diana. See if they use outside bodyguards." She leaned closer to Jake. "And ask if it would be possible for me to be a... a contract hire, I guess. Short term, for a single job, or something like that."

"I'll ask her," he said. "I think she's pretty flexible. She might go for that."

\* \* \*

The next morning, Jake made an appointment to talk to Diana, then headed to his office to make a list of things he wanted to ask her. He was pretty sure that the Bureau didn't hire temporary workers, but he'd ask anyway. And he'd find out where the Bureau went if one of their agents needed a bodyguard.

When his phone alarm went off, he grabbed a notebook and headed for her office. When he arrived, the receptionist called Diana, and after a short conversation, the receptionist nodded at the door to Diana's office. "Go on in," she said.

Diana looked up from the papers she was studying and said, "Hey, Jake. Good to see you. What can I do for you?" She pushed the papers in front of her to the side and focused all her attention on him.

He swallowed once, then straightened his shoulders. "Livvy told me she came to you yesterday to ask about getting her old job back."

Diana nodded. "She did, yes."

"I'm not sure she shared her reasons with you, so I wanted to clarify them. And also tell you that she wants to stay in D.C., but not necessarily as an FBI agent."

Diana raised her eyebrows. "She didn't tell me that."

"Of course she didn't," Jake said immediately. "She was completely sincere, but that wasn't her first choice. And when she talked to you, she didn't even know what my reaction would be to her showing up in D.C. For all she knew, I'd tell her to get lost."

Diana tilted her head as she studied him. "I'm betting you didn't say anything even close to get lost."

"No, ma'am, I didn't." Jake blew out a breath. "Livvy and I are good, and we're

trying to figure out how to be together and both still have jobs. I know she asked you if she could have her old job back, and you said yes. As much as she appreciates that, it's not her first choice."

Diana smiled. "I didn't think it was. I saw it as covering all her bases."

"That's exactly what it was," Jake said, relieved that Diana hadn't taken offense at Livvy's request. "But I do have a few questions."

Diana leaned back in her chair. "Shoot."

"First of all, does the Bureau ever hire temporary workers? Maybe for a specific job, or a specific window of time?"

Diana sighed. Shook her head. "We don't. I know that Livvy's a special case, since she was an agent for a long time. But there are too many downsides to that. First and foremost is the security issue. If we hired someone on a temporary basis, the security screening would be time-consuming and expensive. Likely not worth it.

"Secondly, there would be so much information that she'd need. It would take a long time for her to get up to speed. So, no, Jake, I'm afraid that Livvy working here on a temporary basis wouldn't work for us."

Jake tried hard to hide his disappointment. "I suspected that was the case, but I had to ask." It would have been perfect and easy, but when had anything been easy for him and Livvy? "Another question -- what does the Bureau do when someone involved in an investigation needs a bodyguard? Do you just use one of your agents? Or do you hire private security?"

Diana leaned back in her chair. "We generally use one of our own agents. It's a lot easier than vetting a private security person. A lot quicker, as well."

“Okay,” Jake said, taking a deep breath. “What do you know about private security services in D.C.?”

“I know there are a few of them,” she said. “One has a good reputation. The others are... problematic, for one reason or another.” She leaned toward Jake. “Is Livvy thinking about starting her own service?”

“No. What she’d like to do is open a branch of Blackhawk Security in D.C. Mel and Dev have stationed people in both Chicago and Seattle, but they’ve had a lot of business in those two cities, so Blackhawk Security is a known commodity in those locations. That’s not the case for D.C. They might have had a few clients here, but not enough to create any buzz.”

“I see Livvy’s dilemma.” Diana frowned. “Let me give that some thought,” she said. “I have a lot of contacts in this city. I might find a few companies who occasionally need protection for their employees. If Livvy decides to go in that direction, I have some people she could contact.”

“Thanks, Diana.” Jake wanted to pump his fist. Instead, he said, “That would be very helpful.”

She smiled at Jake. “I’ll start working on a list.”

“I’ll let Livvy know. A few contacts would help when she pitches her idea to Mel Melbourne and Dev Smith.”

“I’ll email the list to you.” She tilted her head and held his gaze. “You sure she’s not interested in re-joining the FBI?”

“She’d do it as a last resort,” Jake said, trying to be as honest as possible. “But it wouldn’t be ideal. She’d much rather continue working for Blackhawk Security.”

“I understand,” Diana said. She raised one eyebrow. “And you’re not interested in transferring to the Helena office?”

“Honestly?” Jake cleared his throat. “Not really. I told Livvy I’d do it if I had to, but she knows that’s not what I want.”

“Thank you for being so honest with me,” she said. “And thank Livvy as well. I wondered how sincere she was about getting her job back, and now I know. She would have done a great job, like she did before she left, but it wouldn’t be what she really wanted.”

“No, it wouldn’t be.” He sucked in a deep breath. “Thank you, Diana, for being blunt with both me and Livvy. I’m guessing she’ll go back to Montana after her leave is over and talk to Mel and Dev. Hopefully they can work something out.”

“I hope so, Jake. In the meantime, take a few days off while Livvy’s here. Enjoy yourselves. Figure out what you’re going to do. And when she goes back to Montana to talk to Mel and Dev, you can throw yourself back into your job.”

“You know I will,” Jake said.

“Absolutely.” Diana smiled, then shooed him toward the door. “Now go home and enjoy your time off with Livvy.”

Jake pushed the chair back and stood up. “Thanks, Diana. You don’t have to tell me twice.”

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:42 am*

Jake didn't text Livvy with any of the details from his meeting with Diana because the situation was too complex to pare down to a couple of paragraphs. He did text her that he'd talked to Diana, and they'd discuss it when he got home tonight.

As he studied his text before he sent it, his gaze kept going back to 'when I get home tonight.' That was what he wanted. A home with Livvy. And he knew Livvy wanted that, too. So they'd work together to make that happen. He was willing to do anything, and he knew Livvy was, as well.

Once he'd texted her, he tried to put the situation out of his head and focus on his work. The last thing he wanted was to let his personal life interfere with his job. He'd never done it before, and didn't want to start now. Although Livvy was in a completely different category than other 'distractions'. Livvy was his life, and he found himself thinking about her too often during the day. Picturing her in his apartment. Wondering what she was doing. Counting the hours until he'd see her again.

Eventually, he had to shove everything Livvy out of his mind and focus on his job. But he couldn't stop himself from checking the time on his phone far too often.

Finally it was five p.m. and he could leave. He gathered together all the papers he didn't want to leave in his office -- there was still at least one Russian mole in the Bureau -- and headed for the door. Once in his car, he was careful to drive the speed limit. But it felt like forever before he pulled into his parking lot.

Instead of waiting for the elevator, he ran up the three flights of stairs. Unlocked his door and stepped inside. "Livvy?" he called. "You here?"

“In the living room,” she answered, but moments later, she appeared in the hall and threw herself at him. He caught her and buried his face in her hair, then kissed her like he hadn’t seen her in weeks.

When he eased away, he wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “Let’s sit down. I have a lot to tell you.”

He told Livvy that Diana couldn’t hire her temporarily, and Livvy nodded. “Yeah, I didn’t think that would fly. It was worth asking, but I was pretty sure I knew what her answer would be.”

“Yeah. We talked about you being posted here for Blackhawk Security, and she was more positive about that. Not that she would send jobs your way, but she knows a lot of people in D.C. A lot of companies. I got the impression that companies often called her for recommendations about bodyguards. She assured me she’d keep you at the top of the list.”

Livvy drew a deep breath. “Well, that’s something. That will definitely help my pitch to Mel and Dev.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I thought that, too.” He turned to face her and took both her hands in his. “How about I take a vacation day and we fly back to Helena this weekend,” he said. “You can talk to Mel and Dev, and we can spend a long weekend together. I want to save my vacation time to spend with you.”

Livvy nodded slowly. “I don’t want to leave you so soon after finding you,” she said. “But you have a job to do, and so do I. And the sooner I get myself on another assignment, the sooner I’ll have ten days to spend with you in D.C. afterward.”

Jake nodded. “Yeah. Ten days sounds wonderful. Let me call the airline and make reservations.”

\* \* \*

Two days later, when they landed in Helena after a long flight with a connection, they headed for the long-term parking lot and climbed into Livvy's car. As they drove into Helena, Livvy smiled over at Jake. "I'll drop you off at the hotel you stayed at last time, then I'll go to the Blackhawk Security compound. Talk to Mel and Dev and see what I can work out with them. Then I'll stay with you at the hotel, since technically, my ten days leave isn't over yet."

"Sounds great." He leaned over and pressed a kiss to her mouth as she started the car.

After Livvy had dropped Jake off in downtown Helena, she drove back to the compound and parked. She tossed her luggage into her apartment, then went in search of Mel. She knocked on her boss's door, and when Mel called, "Come in," she stepped into her office.

Mel frowned. "You're here a lot sooner than I expected. Did things not go well with Jake?"

"No, they went great. He's here with me for a few days, but I need to talk to you."

She sat across from Mel and explained her idea. "I'd like to be permanently stationed in Washington D.C.," she said.

Mel frowned, and Livvy could see the 'no' forming, so she held up her hand. "Hear me out, Mel. Diana Redfield, the FBI director, put together a list of companies in the area who often hire bodyguards." Livvy pulled out a copy of the list and handed it to Mel. "She's promised to give them all my name and a strong recommendation. I know it can't happen immediately, but I hope that if we get a good amount of business, you and Dev would eventually consider posting me there permanently."

\* \* \*

Three hours after she'd dropped Jake at the hotel, Livvy pulled into the parking lot, grabbed her travel backpack now filled with clean clothes, and hurried into the hotel. Jake had texted her his room number, so she went directly to the elevator. When she knocked on the door, Jake opened it, then yanked her into the room and into his arms. After kissing her thoroughly, he held her at arm's length. "How did it go?"

"I knew Mel wasn't going to tell me to set up shop in D.C. tomorrow," Livvy said. "But after I gave her the list of companies that often use bodyguards, and told her that Diana was going to recommend me, she was more... open to the idea. But it won't be immediately. She said she'd have to see steady growth in jobs and clients before she could even think about posting me there permanently. And even when I was, I'd have to come back to the compound on a regular basis, just like the operatives in Seattle and Chicago."

Jake brushed the hair away from her face. "That's about what I expected her to say."

"Yeah, me, too," Livvy said. "But I still get ten days leave after every assignment, and I'll be in D.C. for those ten days. And maybe, if bodyguard jobs start popping up in D.C, I'll be there a lot more often than for ten days after an assignment. Although when I'm working, I won't be able to see you very often."

"I have vacation days, too, Liv. I can come out here once in a while."

"Let's just see how this plays out," she said. "My ten days after a job is a given. Mel said she'd send me on the next job that comes up, so I could be back in D.C. in a week or two. We can go from there."

She leaned into Jake and kissed him, and Jake gently pulled her on top of him. "What did you do while I was talking to Mel?" Livvy asked, tugging his lower lip into her

mouth.

“I went shopping,” he said.

Livvy reared back. “Shopping? What on earth were you shopping for?”

“This,” he answered, pulling a small box from the drawer in the end table next to him. He slid off the couch onto his knees. “Livvy, will you marry me?”

She stared at him for a long moment. “Oh, my God, Jake,” she finally said. “You want to marry me?”

“Of course I do, Liv.” He grabbed her hand and kissed her palm. “You think I’m just in this for the short term? You think all I want are booty calls?”

Livvy giggled. “I’d like booty calls. With you.”

“Trust me,” he said. “I’ll give you all the booty calls you want. But I still want to marry you.”

“I, um, I guess I hadn’t thought about getting married.”

“I have, Liv. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. And I want you wearing my ring, and if I’m lucky, not much else. I want everyone to know we belong to each other.”

“Jake! Do you think I’d ever forget that? Hell, no, I wouldn’t.”

“Don’t you want to marry me, Liv?”

“Of course I do. But... but I wasn’t expecting this. Not now.”

“What? You think we should wait a few years? Get to know each other a little better? Make sure we’re compatible?”

“Of course not.” She drew in a shuddering breath. “You’re a part of me, Jake. And I’m a part of you. But this has all happened so fast,” she whispered.

“Not for me,” Jake said. “You’ve been it for me for a long time. I just want to make it official.”

Livvy stared at him for a long moment, then finally began to smile. “That’s what I want, too, Jake. Yes, I’ll marry you.”

Jake took her hand and slid the ring on her fourth finger. Then he kissed her hand. “We’ll figure out where and when,” Jake said.

“Yeah,” Livvy said. “We will. But we already belong to each other. I’m yours, for better or worse.”

“And I’m yours, Livvy.” He pressed a kiss to her mouth. “Now I want to make love to my future wife.”

“And your future wife wants the same thing,” Livvy said, as Jake slid her into his arms and headed for the bedroom.

\* \* \* \* \*

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## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:42 am*

Helen unlocked the padlock on the sheet of plywood replacing her office door. As she swung it open, a splinter from the rough wood stabbed into her thumb. A fitting metaphor, she thought, sucking on her finger, tasting the coppery tang of blood. Everything about what had happened yesterday was painful.

The afternoon sun highlighted dust motes drifting across the ruins of her outer office. The board-up company had swept up the debris from her shattered reception desk and the drawers of client files behind it. The files themselves were haphazardly stacked against the far wall. Behind the gaping maw in the wall behind the reception area, her own desk listed drunkenly, its left side crushed. By the time the car had gotten that far, it had lost a lot of its momentum.

Thank God her receptionist had left early yesterday. Any other day, Annie would have been sitting behind the counter that was now a pile of rubble.

Helen limped to the door separating the reception area from her office. Stood for a moment and studied her work area. The office she'd labored in for the past five years. Its devastation matched that of the reception area.

The contents of her desktop littered the floor. The files she'd been working on, a yellow legal pad, pens, a memo cube, her mouse pad, and the phone were covered in dirt from the cactus she kept on her desk. It had been a gift from a ten-year-old girl after Helen helped the girl's mother win full custody of the child. Broken pieces of the colorful, misshapen pot, which the girl had made herself, lay mixed with the rest of the desk debris. The cactus had shriveled to half its size and the sharp spines were limp. Curled into themselves.

She stepped sideways into her office, moving carefully past the door that separated it from the reception area. The door hung from one hinge, moving sluggishly in the breeze from the street.

Her office chair sat untouched against the rear wall, and Helen dropped into it, her ankle throbbing. The heavy boot on her right foot was awkward and uncomfortable, but she'd have to get used to it. She'd sprained her ankle leaping to get away from the car, and she'd be wearing the boot for the next week.

She'd managed to save her laptop, though. She was thankful for that. She needed something to be thankful for in the destruction that used to be her office. Losing her computer would have been a disaster. She had to be in court tomorrow, and she needed her computer to prepare.

So. She'd focus on the computer. And she'd try not to look at the ruins around her.

Her cell phone chimed, and she pulled it out of her pocket. Her landlord. "Hey, Michael."

"How you doin', Helen?"

"I've had better days." She rubbed at a lump over her right eye. "But at least I'm alive. Could have been a lot worse."

"You know it. I'm sending a contractor over this morning. Can you meet him at the office and let him in? I'm tied up here."

"That's fine. I'm here right now."

"You're at the office?" His voice sharpened. "Helen, your office is dangerous. You shouldn't be working there."

“The guy's not coming back, Michael. Cars crash into buildings all the time, right? It was an accident.” If she said it often enough, she might even believe it.

“I'm talking about the building. The walls are unstable.”

“I'm being careful.” She lifted her throbbing ankle and rested the boot on an open file cabinet drawer. “Don't worry, I'm not going to sue you.”

“Ha, ha. Lawyer joke. Good one, Brody.”

“Yeah, I'm full of them.” She shifted in the chair. “What's the contractor's name?”

“James something. Let me get the paperwork.”

“Don't bother. I don't have time to Google him.” She had to prepare for court. “You hear anything more from the police?”

“Only that the car was stolen. So no lead there.”

“Thanks, Michael. I'll be here when James Whoever arrives.”

No leads . Helen dropped the phone into her pocket, disappointment a bitter taste in her mouth. After ramming into her office, the driver had reversed and driven away. The license plate had fallen off the car after it hit Helen's desk, and Helen had hoped it would lead to the driver.

The moments after the car splintered the glass window were a jumble of memories -- the crunch of the reception desk, the foreign, wrong smell of car exhaust, the grill of the SUV barreling toward her. It might have been an accident.

Except Helen was almost certain she'd heard the car accelerate after it hit the wall separating her office from the reception area.

The police officers who'd arrived on the scene had listened to her, nodded, scribbled in little notebooks. But she wasn't sure they'd believed her. Who rammed a car into a building and accelerated instead of braking?

Helen drummed her fingers on what remained of her desk. Finally, she reached for her phone again. She had three nephews and a niece in the Chicago Police Department. Maybe they could reassure her.

And she hoped she didn't have to go as far as her other nephew in the Chicago FBI office.

Pushing a button, she heard the phone ringing. Finally a voice said, "Donovan."

"Hey, Quinn, it's Helen. How's it going?"

"Good, Helen." His voice relaxed from the brisk, business-like tone he'd used to answer. "How about you?"

"Mostly okay. But I had an accident yesterday."

"You hurt?" His tone went from relaxed to sharp. Concerned.

"Sprained ankle. No big deal."

"Thank goodness." He exhaled. "That sweet ride of yours banged up?"

She grinned. "The ten-year-old Toyota is good. This was at my office. A car drove through the window."

"Shit." All teasing left Quinn's voice. "How much damage?"

"A lot. The thing is, Q," she cleared her throat. "I'm not sure it was an accident. I'm

pretty sure the guy accelerated after he hit the building.”

A long pause. Then Quinn cleared his throat. “How about I grab Connor and we come over? You going to be there?”

“Yeah. You don't have to come right now, though.”

“As good a time as any. The June weather has apparently tamed the bloodlust of the good citizens of Chicago. No active cases right now.”

“Thanks, Quinn. I owe you.”

“Big time,” he said with a laugh. “See you in a bit.”

Helen's shoulders relaxed as she pocketed the phone. Quinn and Connor were both homicide detectives. They'd look at everything and tell her she was imagining things.

Then she could stop looking over her shoulder.

She'd just gotten her computer booted up when she heard a knock. Setting the laptop carefully on the seat of the chair, she stood and limped to the sheet of plywood pretending to be a door. She opened it to find a tall blond man carrying a clipboard on the other side, a messenger bag slung across his chest.

His very nice chest. Wide shoulders, sleekly muscled arms and impressive muscles beneath a tight black tee shirt. A shirt that highlighted his washboard abs.

His worn jeans hung low on his hips and clung to long, muscular legs.

“Are you...” she began, looking at his face. Then she stopped. Oh, my God. It was him. The guy from a year ago. Jamie. James .

Her mouth was suddenly dry as sand. The universe couldn't possibly be so cruel as to send the one guy she'd hoped to never see again to her office. "Are you the contractor?" she managed to get out.

"Jamie Evans." He smiled as he gave her his card. "Wow. Small world, isn't it, Helen? How have you been?"

He remembered her, too. Heat flooded her face. Apparently, neither of them had been drunk enough that night. Without bothering to look at the card, she shoved it into her pocket. "I'm good," she said, hating how breathless she sounded. As if she was thrilled to see him again.

"How... how about you?" She couldn't wrap her mind around having such a banal conversation with the man who'd shared one unforgettable night with her.

"The day is suddenly looking much better." His smile widened, revealing the dimple in his right cheek. The one she'd spent hours exploring. She'd teased him about that dimple. About how it matched the ones that bracketed his ass.

"I didn't know you were a... a contractor."

"I didn't know you were a lawyer." He leaned closer, his green eyes gleaming. "But we didn't do much talking that night, did we?"

No. No, they hadn't talked. They'd been too busy exploring each other's bodies. Finding all the spots that made the other one moan. Whimper. Gasp.

"You're looking good, Helen," he said. She remembered that bedroom voice of his. Even now, a year later, it made her clit throb. "Except for your eyes." He leaned closer. "They're even bluer than I remember."

He'd told her that her eyes were the first thing he'd noticed about her. All the Brodys

had bright blue eyes and dark wavy hair. Her niece and nephews had gotten them, too, from Helen's sister, Rose.

“Eyes are the same,” she choked out.

“Never saw them in the daylight.”

His eyes were hooded. She remembered that, too. If she were to glance down, there would be a bulge behind his zipper.

She wouldn't glance down.

Her gaze drifted lower. His jeans were a lot tighter than they'd been when he walked in.

They'd been staring at each other for far too long. Helen swallowed and tried to gather her wits. “So you're going to do the repairs here.”

“Yeah.” He shifted from one foot to the other and looked at his clipboard. “Car plowed into the office?”

“Yes.” He was trying to get comfortable. She swallowed again. “Destroyed the reception desk and came through that wall.” She waved at the hole in the wall separating her office from the outer one. “As you can see.”

Jamie nodded as he assessed the damage. Finally his gaze landed on her foot. “What happened there?” His voice was suddenly sharp.

“I had to jump out of the way. I tripped on a partially open file drawer.”

“Broken ankle?”

“No, just sprained.” She wanted to tuck the boot behind her left foot. She looked like a dork in the clunky, heavy boot.

And why did she care if she looked like a dork? Snap out of it, Helen .

“Good thing,” Jamie said, scowling as he stared at her foot. “They catch the guy?”

“No. He left a license plate behind, but the car was stolen.”

“The police can work on that. I'll get your office up to speed in the meantime.”

Good. Back to business. That's what she wanted.

Her swollen, aching breasts called her a liar. They remembered the wicked things he'd done with his mouth.

“How long... how long will it take to get it repaired?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “Depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“How long it takes to get the parts I need.” He made a note on the clipboard. “How long it takes to get you...”

His gaze drifted over her.

“To get me...?”

“Up to speed,” he said, his eyes hooded again. The bulge behind his zipper hadn't gotten any smaller.

“I’ll need it to be fast,” she said.

“I can do fast.” His gaze touched her breasts, and her nipples pebbled as if he’d put his mouth on them. “But slow is a lot more fun.”

Heat washed over her again. “Slow can’t be good for business.”

“Never had any complaints.”

“I bet you haven’t,” she muttered, kicking the overturned waste basket out of her way as she reached for some files on the floor. Slow with Jamie had been earth-shaking. Amazing. Even now, she remembered the way he’d touched her, the way he’d kissed her, until she was a needy, aching mess. Begging him.

She didn’t have a single complaint about slow.

She wondered how many other women had experienced slow with Jamie.

Not her business . Nothing about Jamie was her business. Besides the work he’d do on her office.

When she straightened, Jamie was staring at her ass, his eyes gleaming. He met her gaze.

“I’ll take a look around, see what needs to be done.” His voice was a low rasp that made her swallow. “You want me to do that fast, too? Or should I take my time?”

God, she hated the way his eyes twinkled. They made her remember things she’d tried too hard to forget. “Take your time. Do a thorough job.”

“I always do, Helen.” He waited until she met his gaze, then removed a pencil from the clipboard and got to work.

Helen returned to her office and shuffled through the pile of folders until she found the one she needed. The Ashcroft family. The court date was tomorrow. It was a custody case, like many of her cases. Her client, the ex-wife, was petitioning for full custody. She'd claimed abuse, and had the police reports to back it up.

Helen had filed a request for full custody until the next court date, and it had been granted. As far as she was concerned, the man had lost all right to see his kids without supervision. Melanie had testified Doug had beaten her repeatedly. She'd said that he had threatened their five-year-old son when the boy tried to protect his mother. Melanie had been granted the temporary order. Now Helen needed to make it permanent.

She was listing her reasons, focusing on each one and how they built her argument, step by step, when someone cleared his throat. She glanced up and spotted Jamie, standing in the doorway.

“Oh. Sorry. I'd forgotten you were here.” Not the complete truth. Awareness of Jamie had been bubbling beneath the surface since she sat in her chair and opened the Ashcroft file. But he didn't need to know that.

“Yeah? Must be an interesting case.”

“Custody case,” she said, closing the file. She liked him a little better for not being upset when she told him she'd forgotten he was there.

Not that it mattered. Jamie was here to do a job. That was all.

“You do a lot of them?”

“A lot of what?” Jamie was distracting her, and she couldn't allow that to happen.

“Custody cases.” One corner of his mouth curled up, as if he knew exactly how much

he distracted her.

She set the file on the laptop. “Yeah, I do.”

He nodded. “Good for you.” He gestured toward the outer office. “You have a minute to talk about what you want out here?”

“Sure.” She set the computer on the floor and limped toward him. “But I thought you'd re-do it the way it was.”

He shrugged. “I can do that. But since I have to start from scratch, you might as well get exactly what you want. Within the limits of what the insurance company's going to pay.”

“Okay. Let's take a look.” Good. He was being professional. No bedroom eyes. No twinkling. Exactly what she wanted.

They were talking about the reception desk and what would work when the door opened and two men stepped in. “Hey.” Helen limped toward them, hugging first one, then the other. “Quinn. Connor. Thanks for coming by.”

The twins gave her identical smiles. Their dark hair was cut short, and their blue eyes were mirrors of her own. “Come and take a look,” she said.

She turned around and found Jamie watching with narrowed eyes. “I can come back later,” he said.

“No, this shouldn't take long. Quinn, Connor, this is Jamie Evans. The contractor who's going to repair the office. Jamie, Quinn and Connor Donovan.”

Jamie glanced at the badges clipped to their belts and the holsters visible beneath their sports coats. “You called the cops?” His mouth quirked up in the smile that

made her clench her thighs together. “Not sure if I’m offended or flattered.”

Keep reading here! Thanks so much!