

**RUNAWAY**

**Cascade Mountain Manhunt  
Book One**

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## CHAPTER ONE

"None of this adds up, Monroe." DEA Assistant Special Agent in Charge John Bordowski sat across the table, his arms crossed.

Reed buried his head in his hands. The air conditioner buzzed in the upper corner louder than the fluorescent lights overhead. He'd been sitting in this uncomfortable chair in the El Paso debriefing room for three hours. His partner's killer was getting farther away with every second. "What more do you want? I've told you everything I know. I've given you every single file on all my hard drives."

"What about the ones in the safe house you two were using?"

"The cartel suspects caught up with me, and I had to bolt. I got here as soon as I could shake them. I've given you all the backups I have."

"Did you?"

Reed looked up, his eyes narrowing at his boss' accusatory tone. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're hiding something. This timeline doesn't make sense. In a three-year operation against the Cabello cartel, the only thing you can show for it is a bunch of useless surveillance files and a dead partner."

Reed winced. This couldn't be happening. Only three days ago, Joe was alive. If only he'd gotten to that damn warehouse a minute sooner. One fucking minute.

He dropped his head staring at the table's metal surface covered in scratches. He and Joe had been partners for years. He learned everything about the legal side of law enforcement from him. But they were more than partners. They were friends and brothers. They'd celebrated holidays together, played sports and worked out together, and got drunk together. They'd lived in the same damn tiny safehouse for three years straight.

That was all gone in the blink of an eye.

Reed could still hear the echo of the gunshots, and see Joe collapse to the ground like a ragdoll. Reed drew his weapon, but his killer was quicker and ran before he could get off a shot.

He'd held Joe as long as he could. *Joe! Joe! Where the hell is backup?*

The scene replayed in his head a million times. The metallic smell of the blood, the last second looking into his eyes before they closed. He'd tried to plug the wounds and stop the bleeding, but it was useless. Blood was everywhere.

*Joe! Hang on!*

He wanted to put his fist through a wall. He looked up at Bordowski. His boss was right about one thing. Joe's recent behaviors didn't make any sense. His partner had been meticulous in his reports. He was a stickler about filing them on time. "I don't understand. He and I were in constant contact, in lockstep this entire investigation. Except for the last few days, I've known his every move, and he knew mine."

"Is that so? Then care to tell me why Joe hadn't filed a single report in more than a month?"

Reed's mouth went dry. He'd seen his partner write up dozens of reports, right up until the last day he'd seen him. "That can't be right."

"Odd, wouldn't you say? I thought the same thing." Bordowski rolled his pen back and forth on the table between his fingers. "A fifteen-year veteran of the DEA, previously diligent about filing all his other reports, decided to stop sending them in. Not likely. So what's the more probable scenario? That they're getting deleted from our system. Which can't be done without top clearance, way above my paygrade. Or perhaps by a very...gifted...hacker."

Reed blinked, finally making the connection. He barely comprehended the implication floating in the air. "You think I deleted his reports from the system?"

Bordowski gave him a knowing stare. "One who is *very* familiar with our systems and security protocols."

A new realization hit him in the face like a vat of freezing acid. "This isn't a debriefing, is it?"

His boss leaned his arms on the table. His expression harsh and unforgiving. In all the years Reed had worked for him, he'd never seen him like this. "I know what you did for a living before Joe brought you into the DEA as a cyber security analyst. He said you were the best one he'd ever seen. That you can find anyone. That's why we hired you, despite your record. Then just before Joe's murder, magically, you couldn't find him."

"He turned off his car's geolocator and his phone."

"*He* did? Or did you do it for him?"

It took everything he had not to spit in his boss' face. "*He* did it."

"Then why did he go silent?"

Reed restrained himself from growling at the man, and his voice dropped. "You don't think I haven't asked myself that question a thousand times? He wasn't acting right those last few days. Joe said he wanted to follow a lead on his own. He told me forty-eight hours max. Then he just walked out. The next I heard from him was that night. He texted me to come help him."

"Where you tracked his phone to the warehouse? The phone he'd shut off."

His heart hammered fast, threatening to crack his sternum from the inside out. "He'd turned it back on by then. When I showed up, I saw him talking to two men. One shot him three times in the chest, then ran off. Why aren't you chasing them?"

"Because you're the one with Joe's blood on your hands. Literally."

Reed glanced down at his open palms. Dried blood was still under his nails. From where he'd held Joe in his arms, kneeling on that cold, concrete floor as his partner bled to death. He hadn't managed to wash off the stains beyond a cursory attempt in a gas station bathroom.

He'd never regretted his previous life as a black-hatter, a cybercriminal by the time he was sixteen. That's where he gained all his knowledge as a cyber-security specialist that now worked for the right side of the law. He viewed those years on the *other side* as necessary industry knowledge and how to crack into uncrackable systems and networks. But his boss trying to throw it back in his face and use it as a way to pin Joe's death on him? There was no way the DEA would do that. Not to one of their own. Or at least he thought he was one of them.

Bordowski watched him. Studying him, like a scientist observing a lab rat.

Had he been a lab rat this whole time?

"You think I killed my own partner?" he asked, barely audible. His head pounded. This couldn't be real.

"You're the only one who knew where he kept all his files. They're all gone. You were the last person to see him alive. And you were the last person to leave that warehouse where he was killed. You're the prime suspect."

Now the vat of acid climbed up his throat. "Why would I kill Joe?"

"Did you miss your old life as a cybercriminal? Figure being a DEA agent was too boring? Perhaps Joe caught you. You had to cover your tracks, so you set him up. To get taken out by the very men you were investigating."

Reed shook his head. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. "I would never do that to Joe. I owe him my life."

"Yes, you do." His nostrils flared. "Joe was one of our best men. Now, he's dead because of you." Bordowski's mouth twitched with hatred.

A long pause settled between them as the events of the last few hours sank into his mind. The DEA was dropping it all on his shoulders.

His boss reached into his back pocket and pulled out a set of handcuffs. "Hold out your wrists."

He could barely breathe. His lungs caved in on themselves, refusing to expand. He'd risked his life to throw off the cartel thugs trying to kill him for witnessing the murder. Voluntarily returned to the DEA field office to get help in avenging his partner. After everything he'd done and everything he'd seen, all the years spent next to and learning from his mentor, they thought Reed was the murderer.

"Don't make this harder than it already is, Monroe," Bordowski urged. He stood, pushing back his chair with the back of his knees. "If you surrender quietly, I will do everything I can to help you."

He glanced behind him. Two more DEA agents came in. No doubt to escort him to holding. Whereas a suspected cop-killer, he'd never see the light of day again. Which meant his boss' offer was nothing more than a hoax. To get him to yield. To confess. For something he didn't do.

In a gut-wrenching daze, he complied. The warm metal clamped down on his clammy skin, the clicking noise echoing in his brain.

"I never thought I'd see you like this," his boss muttered like a parent scolding a child. "Joe thought so highly of you."

He stood and absent-mindedly let the agents escort him out of the room and down the hall. Faces passed by him in a blur, some in shock, others angry. But that didn't match the level of shock and anger within himself.

Joe's killer was going to get away.

They were blaming Reed for it.

This was *not* the DEA he knew. This was *not* the justice he worked tirelessly for. They'd once considered his expertise in cyber security a highly valued asset, and now they were using it to condemn him.

It didn't matter how innocent he was—he'd be put away forever. And Joe wouldn't get the vindication he deserved. The whole thing made him want to fuck this whole thing and rage against authority. Just like his younger days.

But his mentor had convinced him he was better than that. To fight for what was right. What was just.

Staring at the metal cuffs on his wrists as he was escorted down the hallway, he decided right then this wouldn't be the end. This is *not* how Joe's legacy would end.

If the DEA wasn't going to search for Joe's real murderer, then Reed had to do it himself.

But he had to get out of these cuffs first.

He saw the sign overhead for the restrooms. "I'm going to throw up." He feigned a gag.

"Don't give me that," the agent beside him said. "Grow a sac."

Reed feigned a louder gag.

The other agent sighed. "I really don't want that shit in my car."

"Fine," the first one sighed and directed him to the bathroom. They stood outside while Reed dashed inside and pretended to make vomiting noises. He searched around for an exit point. Another door or an air duct. A small window in the corner let in additional light. He might be able to fit through it. If only he could get the handcuffs off.

He searched the bathroom for something to pick the lock. He dug in the trash and found a paperclip. In a few seconds, he had the metal off his wrists, thanks to a trick Joe had taught him. Then he shoved the trash can under the window to get a boost. With a few more vomit noises and toilet flushes to keep the agents at bay, he climbed on top of the trash can and squeezed himself through the window.

Which let him out into a gated parking lot for DEA personnel. A guard manned the entrance's security station. Beyond the fence line was a small strip mall with a few stores,

including a cafe on the corner with an outdoor patio. The dry air and strong dirt smell filled his senses. He never expected to welcome the dust hitting his face.

Reed acted as naturally as he could as he strolled through the parking lot right up to the guard. "I'm going to grab a bite from across the street. Want anything?"

The guard gave him a strange look but smiled. "Yeah, a turkey panini and soda."

"You got it." Reed continued on past the gate with sure, confident steps. Hopefully he looked calmer than he felt, his heart rate still harder than a jackhammer.

If he was considered the prime suspect in Joe's death, the only way to clear his name was to bring in the real killer. Since the DEA wouldn't do it, he'd have to go it alone. With the cartel after him, too, he'd have to move fast. Luckily for Reed, he knew how to disappear.

## CHAPTER TWO

*Eleven Months Later*

Skye flipped the magazine page from behind the diner's counter. *Faster Way to a Bigger Behind* was the headline of the next article.

"What! Are they crazy? Who wants a bigger butt?" She reached behind, running a hand over her backside, smoothing her waitress uniform. She closed the magazine and tossed it in the trash. Then pulled out her detective thriller novel.

"Skye!" Ralph called from the kitchen. The round man could barely tie his apron around his waist and his bald head reflected the overhead fluorescent lighting. He could be a stodgy SOB, but deep inside he was a teddy bear. A crotchety, lonely teddy bear.

"Yeah?"

"Did you make more coffee?"

Seriously? She'd been doing this damn job for over five years—geez! Had it been that long? She knew when to make coffee. But frankly, it didn't matter. The damn diner was empty.

"I'm too swamped serving all the full tables," she called back with a sigh. She flipped to her bookmarked page. She'd already read it several times, but at least it would be more interesting than the crap in that magazine.

*I have enough boredom in my life to make monks cry.*

"Ha ha, you're a real comedian," Ralph replied and left her to her book.

Suddenly the bell over the front door rang. Probably Tom and Sylvia for their blue-bird brunch routine every Friday. Without setting down her book, she poured two cups of coffee for the regulars. "Is it prune juice or iced tea today?"

A tall man in jeans and a T-shirt approached the counter. *Not* her regulars. The stranger slipped off his aviator sunglasses.

"Is it sweetened?" he asked, answering the question that clearly she didn't intend for him.

His deep walnut eyes peered up at her as he slid onto the stool.

"Hi." She stood upright, closed her book, and slipped it under the counter. "What can I get you?" She cleared her scratchy throat.

"How 'bout a black coffee and a menu."

*Menu, right.* "Sure." She quickly slid the plastic folder before him and turned to get his coffee. Her heart rate picked up, and she wasn't sure if it was from someone new walking into her world, or that new someone was as fine as peach cobbler on a summer afternoon, topped with vanilla bean ice cream. There had to be a story behind this guy. He was definitely not from Cascade Creek.

Skye was born and raised in this one-horse town. She knew everyone and their business, whether she wanted to or not. That's the way these small, rural places worked. Everyone knew everyone, and secrets never stayed that way.

She set the steaming cup in front of him. "Just passing through?"

"Looking for work. But I haven't had decent coffee in weeks." He took a long drink and seemed to relax further into his seat. She glanced at his hands as they wrapped around the mug. Rough, strong, with thick skin able to handle hot ceramic.

For a brief moment, he glanced to the left, perhaps looking at the empty place or to look out the window, but the sunlight played off his eyes, making them almost amber.

Wow! How did he get through life without those beauties virally shared on social media?

She licked her lips. "Can you cook?"

He shrugged noncommittally.

"Hey, Ralph," she turned to her boss through the open window separating the counter from the back kitchen. "I found a new short order cook for us."

She looked back at the tall drink of water sitting at her counter. His smooth chin as strong as his hands. "What's your name, handsome?" she asked.

"I'm just your average guy."

She called to the kitchen. "Guy here says he can cook."

"Be right there," Ralph called through the back.

Leaning an elbow on the blue formica countertop, she whispered, "We lost our cook a few weeks ago. Moved out of state to take care of his elderly parents. Ralph's the owner, been doin' the cookin' around here since. You can tell how well that's goin'." Her chin pointed toward the empty dining area.

The corner of his mouth lifted, exposing the most scrumptious dimple she'd ever seen.

Oh, yes. This day was startin' to look up. Her mind wandered to the possibilities behind this Guy. With his clean clothes, fresh aftershave, and only-slightly-dirty black truck parked in the lot, he wasn't a vagrant. Looking for work in a small town like this, maybe he was just discharged from the military and was desperate for the secluded mountain air. Or a former convict out on parole. Having paid his debt to society for life of insurance fraud or identity theft. She smiled wider with the idea of a world-renowned author finding a new inspiring place to finish his next best-seller. Reality could never live up to her vibrant imagination, but what else could she do in this small, idle town.

Ralph meandered over to the counter, hiking up the pants on his oversized belly. He stared at Guy for a bit too long. Skye resisted rolling her eyes at his obvious ancient tactic of trying to size up a man with who spoke first.

"Can you boil an egg?" he finally asked. "How about clam chowder?"

"Sure."

"Great. Start tomorrow, six a.m."

The stranger looked at her, then back at Ralph. "What's the pay?"

"Depends on how good the food is." Her boss went back to cleaning the grill in the kitchen.

She tapped the counter in mock celebration. "Congrats."

"That was my interview? Two menu items?" Guy asked.

Skye shrugged. "Simple needs for a simple man. You got yourself a job, just like that." She snapped her fingers and refilled his coffee.

"Yeah. Looks like." He glanced at her nametag. "Thanks, Skye."

"Anytime."

As she moved around the counter, she felt his gaze on her while sipping on his coffee. She pretended not to notice, though inside she was practically dancing. It had been a long time since she was admired by a fine man like this one. He was polite enough to be subtle about it as well. She forced herself to keep busy than pester him with all the questions in her mind. Her best friend, Lynée, always told her she talked too much, rarely let others get a word in edgewise. At least when she was excited about something.

One of her New Year's resolutions—to hold her tongue more often—lasted less than a week.

"How's the latest Security book?" he asked.

She stopped, soap all over her hands as she rinsed them clean. Then she gave him a smile. "You caught me."

His lips twitched like he was about to smile, but he kept his deliberate stare. Almost like he was too cautious to let anyone see a lighter side to him. "Did they reveal who framed the butler?"

There was no holding back her grin. The man was not only familiar with the series but knew the point of the next book. She dried her hands, reached under the counter, and slid the book across the surface. "Find out for yourself."

His eyes widened. "You don't want to know?"

She shrugged. "Already read it. I won't spoil it for you."

*Be still my heart. He's a book junkie like me.*

"Is that pie any good?" he asked, nodding to the cake stand in the corner case on the counter. "I can't remember the last time I had apple pie."

"Seriously?" Skye slid a slice onto a plate, and set it in front of him. "That's worse than any crime in these books." She watched his face carefully as he took the first bite. When he sighed and nearly gobbled it up in a few forkfuls, she grabbed a slice for herself and dived in.

Guy smirked. "Staff are allowed to eat the food in front of customers?"

Skye cocked her head. "Who do you think made that heavenly pile of sugary goodness?"

This time he gave her a full-blown smile—wide, straight and beautiful.

*Shit a brick wall.* Her hand gripped the edge of the counter so her knees wouldn't buckle. It was unfair to have a smile like that while the rest of the world walked around trying to hide resting-bitch-faces.

Guy stood and finished the last of his coffee. "What do I owe you?"

She lifted a palm. "Nope. Free coffee and dessert for employees."

He tucked the book inside his jacket pocket. "Thanks for this. It'll give me somethin' to do at night." He spun around, giving her a view of his gorgeous backside. His jeans hugged his ass perfectly.

*He has nothing better to do at night? That's a damn shame. I could give him something to keep him occupied.*

Just before he left, he slipped on his aviator sunglasses and gave her another smile.

"See you tomorrow."

She exhaled and reached under the counter for her glass of ice water. She needed to cool down with something crisp. It might be time to pull out one of those romance novels she splurged on.

"Welcome to Cascade Creek, Guy," she told the empty diner.

Getting excited over a new stranger in town was a tad depressing to Skye, considering all the novels she'd read of far greater adventures. But *this* stranger made her all giddy inside. She had to share it with Lynée. After clocking out, Skye ran the short distance across the gravel parking lot, down the hill and across the overgrown soccer field to the library. The air was unseasonably warm for early October, so all the trees were still a deep green. But orange, yellow and red patches scattered across the distant mountains like a Kinkaid painting. Signaling the oncoming belated autumn.

Yet this was no time to admire the amazing view. There was gossip to share. Gossip only she knew, which was the sweetest kind.

She panted, trying to catch her breath as she pulled on the library's heavy wood door. She blotted her upper lip and scanned the area for her friend.

Lynée's life-long love for books must have rubbed off on Skye as a child, since she was now addicted to mystery novels. Until she could find a way out of this small town, they were her only source of adventure. Except for that brief disaster her first year of college, which she never liked talking about. Her best friend, on the other hand, was completely content with vicarious experiences on the page.

Inside the small library with the smell of old books permeating the air, she found the reference desk empty. From the squeaky wheels of the return cart, her bestie was restacking books in the children's section.

She peered over a short bookshelf, where the strawberry-blonde reorganized the children's fantasy section. "Lynée," she stage-whispered, still panting for air.

"Hi, sweetie. How was your shift?" Her bespectacled friend's long hair was pulled back into a messy bun, and her signature oversized mauve sweater looked as comfortable as her shoes.

"Guess what?"

"What?" Lynée pushed the cart down farther.



"We got a new cook."

Lynée glanced up, readjusting the glasses that kept slipping down her nose. "Hallelujah. Ralph was one bad meal away from poisoning the entire town."

She was right. God bless that poor man. Good businessman, terrible chef.

"His name is Guy, he starts tomorrow, and," she cupped a hand over Lynée's wrist, "he is *fine*." She drew out the last word. "Kinda serious and doesn't smile much, but great muscles and nice ass. And girl, he reads the Security series! Can you believe it?"

"I like him already."

"I can't wait for you to meet him."

"What brought him to Cascade Creek?" Her friend asked the question innocently, without any hint of doubt.

"I don't know yet."

Lynée chuckled. "*That's* what you're enamored with."

"Seriously, though. Why would he pick this place? There's nothin' here."

Her mouth gaped. "What are you talking about? Besides this lovely establishment, we have a refurbished movie theater—"

"Still looks like a church," Skye cut in.

"The apple festival is right around the corner, and," she pulled a book from the cart's bottom shelf, "we just got the new John Grisham in. Saved it for you."

Skye gasped and hugged the beautiful book to her chest. "You're a saint."

"Of course, the main reason anyone stays up here is that we get the most beautiful colors in nature all four seasons. I think that's something even Mr. Grisham couldn't capture."

"Ugh. Sure, the first time you see it. But after *years* here, you're still hypnotized?"

"Absolutely." She pushed the cart a little farther down, her signature prim-and-proper smile in place.

Why Skye still bothered to have this disagreement with her best friend after all these years, she couldn't explain. Lynée still loved this town, and was perfectly content in her perfectly organized library. It was probably the biggest personality difference between them. Adventure was nowhere near the librarian's hopes, where Skye absolutely drooled over it.

"For a non-retiree, is nature enough of a reason to move here?"

"Maybe he's scouting it out before he brings the family here."

"Unlikely. No ring on his finger."

"Lucky you." Lynée winked.

"It's a start."

Both women chuckled, but her friend grinned and shushed her. "You better get outta here. I have work to do." She pushed the cart into the next aisle and readjusted her glasses.

"You stayed up all night reading again," Skye interjected. "Why else aren't you wearing your contacts?"

"Glasses don't dry out my eyes."

"It's not the contacts, girl. Your eyes wouldn't be dry if you got a full night's sleep for once."

Lynée huffed. "I'm not here to impress anyone but myself. Glasses or contacts, you love me for me, right?"

"Are you saying I'm not important enough for you to impress?" Skye joked. "I'm insulted."

"You like it." Lynée winked again.

"Fair enough. Come over later. I'll make dinner." Skye blew her a kiss, spun around, and headed for home. She had a good feeling about this Guy person. This was going to be the beginning of something great. Or at least interesting.

## CHAPTER THREE

Reed drove through the low hills outside Snoqualamie pass, his eyes drifting to the detective novel sitting in the passenger seat. A year on the run, and this was the first time he had a friendly chat with anyone that treated him like a human being. The first time he actually had an inkling of a reminder of what a normal life was supposed to be like. All because of a waitress with a smile from heaven.

He hadn't intended to give her a false name, but when Skye had started calling him Guy, he ran with it. Probably better to keep his real name a secret for the time being. From his days as a black hat cyber junkie, he wouldn't have thought twice about concealing his identity. That was a necessity. But years working on the right side of justice beside Joe had taught him a new appreciation for honesty and integrity. Using a false name now left a bad taste in his mouth. But once again...necessity. To keep the DEA and the cartel off his ass a little while longer.

The scent of fresh apples hung in the air through the open window as he passed by the orchards this area of Washington was known for. The trees looked ripe for harvest. Just the way he remembered. The last time he was here, he was only nine, on a fishing trip with his uncle. The smell was just as strong as then.

There was no way the agency could find him out here—not a single mention of Washington on any file. He'd made sure of it.

Which would give him the time he needed to find out who the hell killed his partner. Because despite what the DEA claimed, it sure as shit wasn't him.

The cabin he rented was far off the beaten path, with only a dirt road leading up behind a big hill. The small place would suit his needs well enough to conduct his research. No one came back here unless they were searching for it, and the tall trees hid the cabin from the main road. After he moved everything inside from his truck, he'd start scoping everything out for access points, hiding places, and a decent sniper's perch.

He counted his paces from the end of the dirt path to the front porch. Thirty, with another ten paces from the bottom step to the front entrance. The old-school latch creaked loudly as he opened the solid wooden door. The room smelled stale and moldy, and dust floated freely in the air like it owned the place. The living room furniture circled around the only fireplace in the house. The arrangement meant for functionality and comfort. He'd have to move things around to make it more suitable for a quick getaway, if and when he needed to.

The water was clean and soft, and the kitchen spacious enough. The bedroom at the back of the hallway had a connecting bathroom with a stand-up shower, both tiny. But they were vast improvements from the places he'd laid up in the last year. Hell, he'd spent an entire month outdoors, with three cartel hitmen on his ass, jonesing to finish him off like they did his partner. Hotels were out of the question. Most of them required identification and credit cards, which were too easily tracked. The rest, he was too afraid the locals would give him up. Those cartel bastards had infiltrated everyone.

He stashed his stuff in the front closet and started hiding a few weapons around the cabin, dusting off a few places as he went. Like the small, wooden table that only seated two people. More than big enough for just him. He duct-taped a Ruger under the table, aimed at the door. Another he stashed in a kitchen drawer next to the sink. A rifle behind the fridge, and a few more places. He'd need to get more ammo from town because what he had wasn't nearly enough. At least he always had his K-bar knife tucked in a sheath at his ankle.

As soon as everything was in its place, he started setting up his computer equipment. He doubted this little hunting cabin had Ethernet or other cables to connect to the web, but he came prepared. Satellite hookups would work well. His former life came in handy at times. His life before DEA undercover work.

His partner had often mocked him as a computer geek, a slave to his laptop and the Internet. All playful banter, meant to lighten the mood in their often stressful line of work.

Countless times, Joe had returned to find Reed still in his computer chair after a full day, and forced him to stand up, get a shower and eat. Hell, he probably would've never seen daylight without his mentor urging him to unchain from the chair.

*Slave was right.* An unfortunate, necessary one to bring down these bastards. He refused to give up. Maybe after all this was over, he'd promise to become an outdoorsman. Go hiking, fishing, and all that Mother-Nature-y stuff normal people enjoyed.

The sun dipped below the treeline, and stars twinkled overhead by the time he finished installing the last security camera outside the back door. The old propane tank for the gas heater was a little too close to the house than he liked. But he didn't have a choice.

His energy waned. Either from the lack of food or fatigue from the roadlife catching up to him, he wasn't sure.

Clam chowder. That sounded pretty damn good right now. He chuckled. Between all his gap jobs over the last year, a short-order cook was never one of them. But he'd learn. More importantly, somehow he knew Skye would make the job at least tolerable. Her eyes reminded him of the dark blue storm clouds that rolled through El Paso. Rare, full of lightning that dazzled as much as it brought hope to a dry desert. That made everyone stop what they were doing to admire it, and equally fear it. Not that he was afraid of Skye, but she was certainly worth the attention.

He glanced at the time. An hour to master clam chowder. What's the chance that spunky waitress even touched the stuff?

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Guy set a bowl of clam chowder down in front of Skye. A proud smile on his face. "What do you think?"

Steam rose off the creamy goodness, beckoning her to try a bite. She stopped refilling the napkin holders and used the spoon on the adjoining plate to taste, blowing on it first. The spices hit her in just the right way, warming her insides.

"Mm. What is that, paprika?"

His grin widened. "That's a secret."

He turned back around, retreating to the kitchen.

Skye watched his every step. She'd been watching him all morning. How could she not? The man was even more handsome than the day before with a fresh shave and his hair tucked under a black Seahawks ballcap. Or maybe her imagination was just getting away with itself. It's not like there were many dating options in this town. At least none she hadn't known most her life and wasn't interested. Besides, not many men could pull off that cooking apron the way he did.

"Skye, more coffee, please?" Gloria asked from the corner booth.

She jumped. "Oh! Sorry!" She grabbed the pot and cringed on the way over to her tables. They'd asked for refills a while ago, and she kept getting distracted. Gloria sat beside her new love-interest, Principal Foster. Rumor had it she and Victor had been seeing each other a few weeks now. Which is kinda interesting since Syke thought Victor was gay. But at least now the diner was back to half-full. Rumors had spread throughout town about the new cook, and people were anxious to see if he was worth his salt. Thank God for that. She wouldn't have to look for a new job while she finished her college courses.

Skye glanced back at the counter where Guy had set another three breakfast plates. He wore a concentrated prideful expression. Only one plate had been sent back this morning, with someone's eggs a little too runny. Otherwise, all the other dishes had been spot-on. Yeah, definitely worth his salt in her mind.

The few interactions he'd had with customers, Skye listened intently. Everyone asked him where he was from and what brought him to town. He had a different excuse for each one. Witness protection program, a cybercriminal robbing banks from his computer, even a federal

agent looking for his next target. Everyone chuckled. His fresh sense of humor was like a warm breeze through this place. Or more like an adrenaline shot to the soul.

Even Gloria and Victor found him instantly charming. Her former principal was impossible to impress and she rarely saw him smile. But with Guy, the man had actually chuckled.

She finished washing a set of lunch plates after their last customer. Guy wiped down the grills and restocked ingredients for tomorrow, all the while whistling a song she couldn't identify.

"You seem to be a big hit on your first day."

He shrugged. "Guess people are just grateful not to have to suffer through Ralph's food anymore." Then continued whistling.

"There are lots of places to become a cook. What brought you into town?"

Guy stopped whistling but continued scrubbing the prep area. His jeans hugged his ass nicely, but were loose around his thighs. Skye secretly enjoyed the view.

"Are you a doomsday prepper, convinced the apocalypse is around the corner?" She leaned against the counter, her arms braced behind her.

That made him stop cleaning. And turned to face her. "A what?"

She smiled. "Or are you a cult leader on the run from the authorities?"

The corner of his lip pulled up. "Bank robber on the lamb. Don't tell anyone."

She bit her lip playfully. "I can keep a secret."

"That's pretty rare for a small town. And an imagination as vivid as yours . . ." He stepped forward. He didn't stop until he was mere inches from her face.

Her heart jumped in anticipation. Was he really that forward, after just one day? Her mind told her to be cautious, but her heart was so damn curious.

Then he reached behind her, his arm brushing against her hip as he grabbed her novel from under the shelf. "I assume you get that imagination from the likes of Grisham." He flipped through a few pages. "Who else do you like to read?"

Skye's deep breath felt like a gasp. Warm fuzzies filled her all over, which she had to shake from her senses. "Um...King, Steel, Patterson, Roberts. Really I like all fiction, but especially suspense and mystery." Her face was so hot, it was probably beyond red. Damn, he was still so close and smelled like rosemary. "Do you have a lot of time for reading?"

He set the book back on the counter. "Not much lately. But hopefully, I'll have more time now that I'm here."

She was still out of breath. "Well, let me know what you're looking for. I have an insider at the library."

Straight white teeth showed through in his smile. "Does your dealer have the latest Milton book?"

"I'm sure she could oblige. What else are you looking for?"

He thought for a second, his gaze still perusing her face.

*Let's see if he takes the bait. What else are you looking for? Something sweet?*

"Now that you mention it..." he replied. "There is something I've wanted to sink my teeth into."

She held her breath. Because his gaze was so disarming. Hypnotizing, even.

*He's taking the bait. He likes sweet. Oh, please, take a bite.*

"Online gaming."

Skye's trance broke. "What?"

"Online video games. Do you play?"

She huffed out a laugh, trying to hide a hint of disappointment. "No. Can't say I have."

He pulled off his apron and leaned against the counter beside her. "I hear it's all the rage. Figured I'd give that a shot, too. While I had the time."

She turned her body to face him, her hand on the counter. More to steady herself from his alluring stare. "You came up to Cascade Creek to play online video games?"

He shrugged. "They say there's serious money in it." His lips twitched into a smile. "Where else can a bank robber hide his stash?"

"You could never be a bank robber."

He tilted his head. "Why do you say that?"

"You're too good looking. You'd stick out. The first rule is to blend in and be easily forgotten."

He leaned in, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "You think I'm good looking?"

She rolled her eyes to hide a smirk. "Don't let it go to your head."

"Too late." He winked and spun around, hanging his apron on the hook by the door before he left the diner, the door jingling behind him.

Skye buried her face in her hands. Sure enough, her skin was as hot as a pressure cooker. Well, Lynée was right about one thing.

The enigma of Guy had her completely hypnotized.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The professor's voice in Skye's Corporate Communications and Public Relations class droned on like a robotic feed from a CB radio. She was lucky her mind only wandered instead of being put to sleep by the monotonous white noise. At least now she had something more intriguing to let her mind wander toward. Images of Guy kept popping up in her brain. He had grace and ease in Rock Road's kitchen, a self-confidence the likes of which she wasn't used to seeing. Of course, she had to hold back a laugh when he couldn't find the switch to the vent hood, and the place started filling with smoke. Ralph almost had a conniption over that.

He circled around in her imagination like a brain teaser. *What is he doing here?* Maybe he was broke; Cascade Creek was definitely a cheap place to live. Or maybe he was running from the law. Or he just got divorced.

*Ugh.* That last thought unsettled her. Because statistically it was the most-likely answer. *Dammit, Skye, enough.*

She hardly knew the man, and now she was filling her fantasies, acting like a teenager drooling over his muscles or giggling at his jokes. Which is exactly the same behavior that got her burned the first time.

*Am I ever going to learn my lesson?*

"Miss Winters."

Her attention instantly switched to high alert as the professor called her name.

"Welcome to the discussion. What is one of the things a company can do to dispel a rumor?"

"Um...communicate with people." *Hopefully not using the voice of a robocaller.*

"Very good. Rather than staying quiet and pretending that nothing is going on, it is essential we communicate with others. The company should approach the rumor mongers themselves and inquire about what they've heard."

Skye exhaled. Dodged a bullet. If she could stay focused long enough to finish this class and one more after that, she'd have her degree. How to fill her idle energy with something other than Mr. Sexy Ass at the diner?

She groaned inside.

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How Reed had managed to work through his first shift without poisoning anyone with salmonella, he had no idea. Either through his novice abilities at cooking, or constant distraction of Skye's energetic persona, those swaying hips, and intoxicating laughter, someone was bound to have ended up with raw chicken or fish at some point. Or a burnt steak that looked like a hockey puck. Had to be a miracle.

But at least something had gone his way for once in the last year.

He needed to use this new streak to his advantage, capitalize on it for his investigation while he could.

He drove through the small town and back roads for much longer than necessary, making sure to take a different route home. Just in case someone followed him. Old habits and all. Despite all his glances in the rearview mirror, he didn't notice anyone suspicious. But he knew better than to let down his guard. Finally, he pulled up the gravel driveway to his rental house.

He sat in his truck for a few moments. Scanning the outside of the cabin, waiting for something in his gut to warn him. He even scanned the trees, checking for snipers or broken branches they'd left in their wake. Those cartel suckers were slicker, and he couldn't take any

chances. But everything seemed just as he'd left it, down to the awkward tilt of the shade on the right side of the front door. His other safeguards were in place, and he deemed it safe to go in.

With a grip on his pistol in the back of his waistband, he ventured inside.

The cabin was quiet. Illuminated from the sunlight behind him, the usual dust particles floated in the air. The large twig he'd left on the wooden planks just beyond the door remained unmoved from intruders. His security cameras didn't show anyone snooping around his place while he was gone, either. Always a good sign, he could stay another day. With a deep breath, he uncocked his gun.

A quick shower and change later, he was back in his truck with his laptop bag headed for Seattle. The three-hour drive was a necessity to conduct his first online search. He couldn't make the mistake of doing that from his cabin without the proper proxy equipment in place to hide him from prying eyes. The agency would detect him in three heartbeats, have a pinpoint on his geographic location in minutes, with agents up his ass sooner than he could heat up a microwave meal. Not to mention the cartel had their own tech team jonesing for his head in a duffel bag. He was no rookie. Better to do this far from home, at least for now.

Granted, the efforts took a lot more time and involved more effort, but he had to stay free long enough to identify and find Joe's killer. Which was worth more than the additional strain.

The long drive gave him more than enough time to think about his current predicament. To stew over the fact that in the last year, he hadn't gotten any closer to finding his target, bringing them to justice for his partner's death, or at least clearing his own damn name. By the time he'd lost the cartel thugs tailing him and felt comfortable enough to set down a base camp to start his investigation, they'd find him again. Which normally ended up with several bullets flying over his head, and another few weeks in the wilderness trying to throw them off. In fact, the only civil conversation he'd had was with the few people in this new town. Skye, in particular.

*Please let this place be far enough away. Let me take a deep breath for once.*

He passed rows and rows of apple trees, olive trees, and up into the mountains where the pines towered over the road. The fresh air grew more crisp with the elevation, and soon he reached Snoqualmie Pass, the point through the Cascade Mountains that led into the western coast of Washington State. Snow already covered the highest point of the barren peaks, though just a light dusting compared to what he remembered in the winters.

Hopefully, he wouldn't be here that long. He could do his clandestine investigation and somehow bring his partner's killer to justice and prove he wasn't a murderer. But he had to be realistic. It would take time to find the information he needed, the evidence to prove it, and where these suckers were located because they were no amateurs. Which meant he had to prepare for a long-haul, including a snowed-in winter in his cabin. God willing. And daily shifts with Skye Winters, with her ocean blue eyes staring at him, eager for him to share something interesting. What he wouldn't give to be snowed in with her for a weekend.

Damn, he had to stay focused. Somehow.

The dark waters of Seattle's Elliott Bay glittered from the snippets of sunlight piercing through the clouds. A breathtaking view if he'd ever seen one. Reed much preferred this part of Mother Nature's beauty than the dry, dusty deserts of El Paso and New Mexico, enchanting as they were.

He made sure his fake mustache, reading glasses, and backward ballcap were properly in place before he found a coffee shop close to the bay. Sporty-hipster facade in place, he settled into a cozy corner. With his laptop open and a fresh venti coffee, it took less than five minutes to find someone with an unlocked wifi signal he could borrow. Using his masking software, he piggy-backed off their I.P. address to check old email accounts and find any information he could about that horrible night eleven months earlier. He combed through news articles, darkweb sites, and anything else he could think of to find a lead to chase. A starting off point to dive in further. The real meat of what he needed was behind sophisticated, ironclad

security systems within the DEA, NSA, and their top clearance contractors. Which would take weeks or months to achieve, if at all. And he certainly wouldn't dare attempt breaking in from a public coffee shop.

He only had two things to go on: the face of the cartel thug who'd shot his partner, and the single phrase Joe had said with his dying breath: "Dark Inferno."

The man had choked on his own blood as he'd said them. Reed had never seen his mentor's face so ashen, like a ghost, the dark red blood covering his teeth and a trickle down his chin.

*No.* He rubbed his temples, trying to shake the image from his mind. "Don't focus on that," he whispered to himself. "Don't go there."

The son of a bitch who'd killed Joe in cold blood didn't have a name, yet. Before the DEA had deleted Reed's logins, he had scanned through all the files to see if anyone matched who he saw in that dark warehouse that night in El Paso. Zilch. But there's no way he would ever forget that man's face. His vicious gleam of sick pleasure after shooting Reed's partner in the chest. The sound of Joe gasping for breath, choking...gurgling...

*Shit!* He slammed his hands on the table, causing a few patrons to glance his way.

Why hadn't Joe checked in those last few days? Why did he have to go chase that lead on his own? Why hadn't Reed pushed back hard enough on his partner's determination to go it alone? Their case had stalled over the preceding weeks, and Joe had been just as frustrated as Reed, like caged wolves foaming at the mouth. The cartel had found a new way to coordinate drop locations for their drug shipments, completely under DEA radar. Reed and Joe had been thwarted time and again, and they were losing the war against this violent and savvy cartel. Until Joe had finally gotten a nibble of a lead and chased it down on his own. Three days later, Reed had caught up with him in time to see three bullets plugged into his chest.

*Dammit, stop it. I'm no good to him as a puddle of PTSD bullshit.*

Sure, Reed hadn't had more than three hours of straight sleep since that night. But he could sleep when he was dead. For now, he had work to do. Blood to wash off his hands..

He pinched the bridge of his nose. He needed to focus. He couldn't let the emotional anguish distract him.

*Dark Inferno,* he thought. He didn't even have time to chase down that lead before two more cartel thugs had caught up with him at their safehouse. He only had time to grab his bailout bag filled with cash, a few hard drives, and a few fake IDs. Everything else he had to leave behind. With more bullets flying past his ass, there was no time to grab his laptop. Twenty-four hours later, he was sitting in the DEA El Paso field office, waiting for debriefing when they came in and slapped handcuffs on him. Charged him with the murder of his partner, and a host of other allegations. They thought he was a double agent. The world spun around him, and he knew the only chance he had was to run.

He'd been on the run ever since. Hiding out in one hell hole after another, trying desperately to stay ahead of the agents on his tail, and not to mention the hitmen with a hard on for an undercover DEA agent.

After a messy close call in Ruidoso where he'd had to put a slug in two more cartel grunts, he'd gone completely off-grid. No hotels, no major highways with traffic cameras...and no Internet.

A pair of college girls with their caramel macchiato monstrosities walked by him. One gave him a wink and lingered at the napkin and sugar station. In just a quick glance, he knew both their names from their cups, the university they attended from the logo on their cut-off shirts, and what kind of car she drove from her keychain dangling from her hand. Another glance, and he knew her license plate number from the bright yellow Kia out front. He shook his head. Literally in less than three seconds, and he'd know everything about Mariah and her friend, down to their physical addresses, social media accounts, emails, and even their most frequented hangouts from the geolocation information stored on each photo in her account.



He'd learned some pretty shady shit in college, and then even more disturbing tricks in the agency. If he could do it that easily with just the laptop in front of him, these girls didn't want to know what the more nefarious technogeeks like him could do with his full equipment. They'd never take another picture again, let alone touch a computer.

But that's why Reed was in this job. That's why he stuck around. So he could stop it. So he could stop the guy who'd killed Joe and keep more of these evil bastards from hurting anyone else.

He typed 'Dark Inferno' into the search bar.

An online gaming app showed up first. Reed tilted his head. The site seemed like another run-of-the-mill sniper game, similar to ones he played in high school and college. A new one of these games popped up every other week. It wasn't out of the realm of possibility that Joe had played the game to pass the ample downtime they had during their case, but why would he choose this game to be his last words?

Reed entered anything he could think of for Joe's login and password. Scouring his memory for anything his partner might've used as a gamer ID. The man was too smart to use any personal info like middle name, birthdate, or anything related to their real identities. After several tries, nothing worked. He'd have to dig further, try to crack some of his old cloud files to see if there was any mention of a login ID or password Joe used. Which would potentially put the agency on his tail much quicker than he wanted. But he'd have to save that search for another day. His energy was draining, and the sun was setting, bringing in a beautiful twilight over Elliott Bay. The three-hour drive back was going to be a long one in the dark.

*Time to order a coffee to-go.*