

## PROLOGUE

### Great Falls, Virginia

The arctic blue Camaro convertible spun around the sharp curve leading down the wooded road. Upon seeing the emergency flares, Tristan Faraday tapped the brakes to slow down. A state police officer gestured with his flashlight for him to roll to a halt and lower his window.

In the passenger seat, Jessica Faraday's breath quickened when the black sports motorcycle parked at the bottom of the hill came into view.

"I'm Tristan Faraday. That motorcycle belongs to my brother-in-law."

The officer instructed them to park in a small gravel lot next to a fast-moving creek.

"He's okay." Tristan peered at the motorcycle as he drove past. "It's not wrecked. He wasn't in an accident. Maybe it broke down and he got a ride."

"He's only two miles from our house," Jessica said. "He could have walked home by now."

Without waiting for Tristan to turn off the engine, she rushed out of the car. She ran across the gravel lot to a barrel-chested man clad in a dark jacket with "NCIS" emblazoned across the back briefing a group of younger agents.

"Boris, what's happened? Where's Murphy?"

Special Agent Boris Hamilton took her into a hug. "We're doing everything we can. I called out my team as soon as we got the message from the police about his motorcycle being abandoned. What time did he leave the house?"

"It was around ten-thirty," Jessica said while staring at the motorcycle parked at the edge of the road. The kickstand was down, and Murphy's helmet rested on the seat. "We had a fight. He said he was going for a ride to get some fresh air."

Tristan approached the investigator examining the bike for evidence.

"Did Murphy say where he was going when he left?" Boris asked her.

"No." Jessica leveled her gaze on him. "We took a class at Natalie Stepford's cooking school tonight. He told me about her being connected to the murder of Commander Caldwell."

"Did he make contact with Stepford?" Boris asked.

Jessica nodded her head.

"Did you see anything suspicious? Did anyone seem particularly interested when Murphy spoke to her?"

"Only every man in that class," she said with a sigh. "Have you seen that woman?"

Boris chuckled.

"I hated her at first sight. Perfect hair. Perfect nose. Perfect figure. Perfect cooking skills. I'll bet she never burns anything on the stove." She allowed her voice to trail off.

"Chief!" Special Agent Susan Archer called to them. "You're going to want to see this."

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Before Boris could stop her, Jessica ran to where Tristan was squatting next to an evidence marker. Instantly, Jessica recognized the reddish-brown stain in the middle of the road.

As she let out a shriek, Tristan jumped to his feet and took her into a hug. “We’ll find him, Sis. Don’t worry. We’ll find Murphy and bring him home.”

## CHAPTER ONE

### One Month Earlier

“Are you kidding me?” Lieutenant Murphy Thornton re-read his wife’s text message that popped on the screen of his SUV’s console. He had the slimmest of hope that he had misread it.

*Study group running L8. Can U pick up pizza 4 dinner?*

With a curse, he threw his navy cap into the passenger seat and punched the steering wheel.

“Murphy, would you like to send a reply to Jessica?” the deep voice of the Faraday-Thornton artificial intelligence network came from the SUV’s speakers. Called “Nigel,” the state-of-the-art artificial intelligence was a test system designed by the federal government. Nigel controlled the Faraday-Thornton household’s entire technical network from communication, security, and even their calendars.

“Tell her okay, Nigel.” Murphy turned on the SUV and mentally prepared to join the thousands of drivers engaged in the Friday night rush hour from the Nation’s Capital. He could envision the dozens of patrons crowded in the pizza place in Great Falls.

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With a wave of gratitude, he eased his black SUV in front of a blue sedan to merge into traffic leaving the Pentagon. He sped up the access ramp to take the expressway along the Potomac River.

“Jessica has replied to your text, Murphy,” Nigel said as the words splashed across the console.

*Can U make mine pepperoni and Italian sausage pls? Luv U!*

“Yes, dear,” Murphy said with a sigh.

A moment later, Nigel said, “Jessica has responded to your reply, Murphy.”

*Didn't make it to the store 2day. Can U pick up coffee & dog biscuits pls?* Jessica ended her message with a kissy-faced emoticon.

“Murphy, how would you like me to respond to Jessica?”

“Damn it!” Murphy hit the brakes just in time to keep from rear-ending a red Jaguar cutting across two lanes of traffic to make an exit. A Mercedes barely kept from rear-ending Murphy’s vehicle.

The flow of traffic had finally returned to a steady flow when Nigel announced an incoming call from Jessica. “Would you like to accept or decline?”

“Accept,” Murphy said with a sigh.

“If you don’t want to go to the store, just say so. You don’t need to cuss at me.”

“I’ll go to the store like I do every day,” he said, “after I pick up a pizza for dinner *again*.”

“No, I’ll go! After I get done with my study group, on my way home in rush hour traffic—”

“Oh, and I’m not in rush hour traffic?”

“—before I clean up the kitchen—”

“Clean up the kitchen from what?” Murphy asked. “You haven’t cooked in three days.”

“And we haven’t had sex in ten!”

LAUREN CARR

“Sorry, sweetheart, but it’s kind of hard to have sex with someone who’s never home!”

The console went blank.

“Did she just hang up on me?” Murphy tapped the touch screen.

“Jessica lost the signal,” Nigel said.

“She did not lose the signal. Nigel, I thought lying was a *human* trait.”

“My programming includes a safety feature. Your steering wheel has sensors that allow me to monitor your pulse rate. When your heart rate indicates that human emotions are reaching a dangerous threshold, then communications are shut down to allow both parties time to cool off.”

“My virtual butler is giving me a time-out?”

“May I suggest you listen to some meditative instrumental music to lower your heart rate?”

A Celtic instrumental flowed from the speakers.



As Murphy had expected, the takeout restaurant was filled with patrons waiting for their pizza orders. Every one of the half dozen straight-back chairs lined up against the plate-glass window was occupied with unhappy customers. After placing his order for two pizzas, he moved to an empty corner of the crowded service area.

Along the way, Murphy spied another navy officer whose uniform bore the insignia of the medical service corps. He clutched a bouquet of fresh flowers in his arms. As Murphy’s eyes rose from the insignia to the officer’s face, a broad grin broke across his face.

“Thornton?” The officer stuck out his hand.

“Commander Ross Caldwell, good to see you.” Murphy clasped his hand. “What are you doing here?”

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“What do you think? We live on Mine Run Drive.” Dr. Caldwell pointed in the direction of the national park. “Don’t tell me you and your bride traded in the bright lights of the big city for the burbs.”

“We’re practically neighbors,” Murphy said. “We moved to a place along Falls Road. Jessica traded in her socialite crown to be a med student at Georgetown.”

“Which explains the pizza,” Ross said with a laugh. “I don’t envy you. But all the lonely nights and hard times you’re going through now will be worth it when Jessica gets her MD.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Hey, I’m probably the last one that you should be seeking advice from on family relationships,” Ross said with a low chuckle.

Murphy cocked his head. “I don’t understand.”

Ross looked at him with an arched eyebrow.

“I guess I missed something,” Murphy said. “You’ve been married how many years. Three great kids.”

“Just walked my baby girl down the aisle this past autumn,” Ross said with a wide grin. “Huge wedding with even bigger bills. You didn’t know?”

“Know what?”

“Your last year at the academy.” Ross shrugged his shoulders. “I guess you were so busy trying to keep your spot at the top of the class that you didn’t pay any attention to the dramas and scandals brewing.”

“I’ve learned that the best way to stay on top is to block out drama,” Murphy said.

“I transferred out of Annapolis after your last year. My family...” Ross’s voice trailed off before he cleared his throat.

“You left Annapolis and transferred to Washington to save your marriage,” Murphy said.

“I made a conscious decision to put my family first,” Ross said. “Once I did that, everything else was easy.” He held up

the bouquet. "As hard as things are now, these hard times will only make your marriage stronger when you come out together on the other side."

"That's what my dad keeps saying," Murphy muttered.

"How is Captain Thornton?" Ross grinned.

"You heard about his promotion?"

"The military is like a family. Dysfunctional, but still family." He looked down at the ribbons on Murphy's chest. "You already got yourself a Bronze Star. But you're not a SEAL. I'd heard the SEALs wanted you really bad—"

"I got a better offer," Murphy said. "Right now, I'm military liaison for NCIS."

Ross's eyes lit up the reference to the navy's criminal investigation unit. "Are you an investigator with them?"

"I have done some criminal investigation, yes. Why? Is there something you think we should look into?"

Ross's good-natured attitude gave way to nervousness. He glanced around at the patrons crowded in the small takeout shop. "A friend of mine came to me about something suspicious happening at a private clinic. If it's what I think—I just can't believe that'd be going on here. Anyway, I called the department of health and human resources. I'm supposed to meet an investigator tomorrow." He let out a deep breath and frowned.

The clerk behind the counter called his name. "Caldwell!"

Ross stepped toward the counter, but then turned back to Murphy. "Hey, are you still running?"

"Almost every day."

"How about if we get together tomorrow morning to go running through the park? Seven o'clock? Bright and early when the park opens." Ross grabbed the pizza box and jogged outside.

Murphy took out his phone to put the running appointment on his calendar. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw

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a bright red Nissan convertible pull up in front of the pizza place. The driver was hard to miss with her long blond hair under a red hat secured with a scarf and dark jeweled sun glasses. As it rolled to a stop in front of him, Ross looked around before bending over to talk to the driver. His expression was serious. Then, with another quick glance to make sure no one was watching, Ross climbed into the passenger seat. The blond driver sped away before Ross had time to secure his seat belt.

Murphy cocked his head. *Mm, I wonder if that was his wife.*