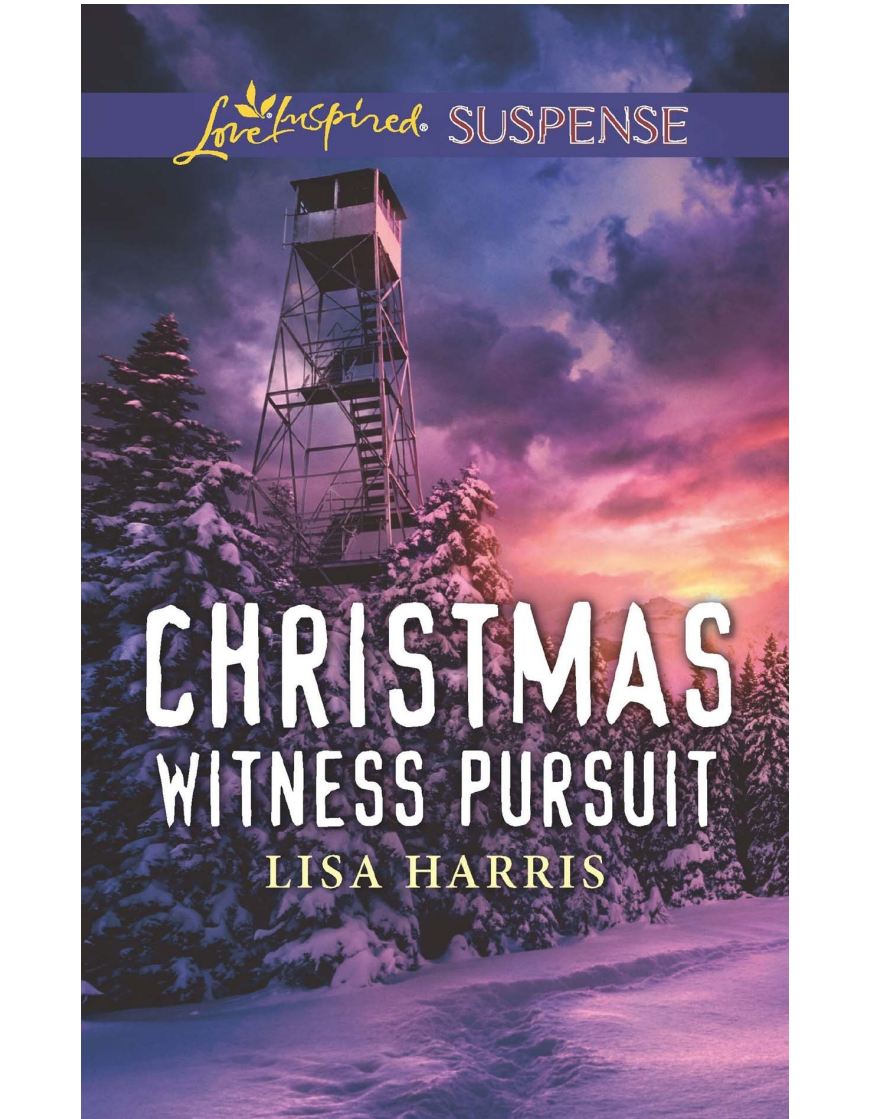


Love Inspired SUSPENSE



CHRISTMAS
WITNESS PURSUIT

LISA HARRIS

Lisa Harris
Christmas Witness Pursuit

Аннотация

Running for their lives at Christmastime...Can a lawman keep a key witness safe? Deputy Griffin O'Callaghan has a situation on his hands—two dead FBI agents, criminals on the loose and Tory Faraday, a witness with no memory. With a blizzard moving in and killers hunting them down, Griffin must keep Tory safe. But even his family's ranch can't provide a haven when a dangerous criminal escapes from custody with one goal: finding Tory.

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Running for their lives at Christmastime...

Can a lawman keep a key witness safe?

Deputy Griffin O'Callaghan has a situation on his hands—two dead FBI agents, criminals on the loose and Tory Faraday, a witness with no memory. With a blizzard moving in and killers hunting them down, Griffin must keep Tory safe. But even his family's ranch can't provide a haven when a dangerous criminal escapes from custody with one goal: finding Tory.

LISA HARRIS is a Christy Award winner and winner of the Best Inspirational Suspense Novel for 2011 from *RT Book Reviews*. She and her family are missionaries in southern Africa. When she's not working, she loves hanging out with her family, cooking different ethnic dishes, photography and heading into the African bush on safari. For more information about her books and life in Africa, visit her website at lisaharriswrites.com.

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Final Deposit

Stolen Identity

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Desperate Escape

Desert Secrets

Fatal Cover-Up

Deadly Exchange

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Christmas Witness Pursuit

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Christmas Witness Pursuit

Lisa Harris

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CHRISTMAS WITNESS PURSUIT

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- Text to speech

“I can’t remember my name...or why I’m here.”

“Do you remember how many were chasing you?” Griffin asked. He could see his car ahead of them and still no sign of the men who’d been after her.

“Two,” she said.

“Are you sure?”

She nodded.

He unlocked his car, then headed toward the motorcycles. “Go get inside. You’ll be safe.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’ll be right back. I promise.”

Sunlight broke through the gray clouds above them as he quickly searched the tree line for the men. For the moment, his number one priority had to be getting her to safety. The problem was he still had no idea where the men were. And that had him

worried. Not only were they armed, but he'd be outnumbered if they showed up.

He approached the motorcycles, quickly jerking out the spark plug wires on each bike.

But he was running out of time.

A bullet hit the side of his squad car.

Griffin ran back to his car and jerked open the driver's side door as the second bullet hit its mark...

And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

—John 8:32

[Dear Reader,](#)

Thank you so much for letting me share Tory and Griffin's story with you! I loved the chance to explore the lives of another O'Callaghan brother. I'm sure you can agree that there's always something extra special about the Christmas season, as it's a time for family, gratitude and hope. Especially in a place as beautiful as Colorado.

Like in the story, though, life also has its darker moment. Moments when you feel overwhelmed with what's going on around you. Maybe that's where you are right now, feeling as if you can't go on. Remember to keep your eyes on Him, because you are not alone. When you go through the deep waters, He will be with you.

Watch for more page-turning suspense in the next book in the series from Timber Falls with Caden O'Callaghan!

Lisa Harris

To those who long for freedom and comfort. May you find healing in His presence.

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ONE

The crack of gunfire ripped her out of the darkness. Ears ringing, she opened her eyes then had to wait for her blurred vision to clear. Everything around her spun while a thick dust filled her lungs with each breath.

She searched her surroundings through the haze. She was lying in the back seat of an unfamiliar car. Gray leather seats. A small duffel bag and red scarf beside her. Her gaze shifted to the front passenger seat, where a man slumped behind a deflated airbag, his head tilted at an odd angle while blood seeped through his suit jacket. The window beside him had shattered, leaving shards of glass covering the inside of the car and his body. A wave of confusion engulfed her. They'd clearly been in an accident, but no memories surfaced. Only panic.

Why couldn't she remember?

She sat up and pressed her hands against her head, trying to block out the pain pulsing through her temples. Pieces of memories fought to rise to the surface, but it was like a puzzle where she couldn't quite find the right pieces to snap into place. Couldn't find the answers she should know. Like, what was she doing there? Who was the man in the front seat? She glanced up and caught her dazed reflection in the rearview mirror. And who was she?

The man let out a low groan, turned and tried to grab for her

hand. “You need to get out of here. They...they’re after you.”

She sucked in a sharp breath as she pulled away from him, not understanding. “Who?”

“Just...run.”

His garbled words were clear enough for her to understand the stark warning. Still, she couldn’t just leave him.

Could she?

She reached for his wrist, checked his weakened pulse then saw the FBI badge hanging around his neck.

“They’re coming,” he warned again. “Go. Now...”

Shouts escalated outside the vehicle. Another shot ripped through the air. She turned to see a second man dressed in a suit drop to the ground. She froze. Blood pooled onto the pavement beneath the body. She shifted her gaze beyond the downed man to two men, wearing black, running toward the car.

They’re after you.

Go. Now...

There was no more time to think. She undid her seat belt, scrambled toward the door and shoved it open. The car had swerved off the side of the road, so the forested tree line beyond her was now only a few yards away. She had no weapons. No way to defend herself against the men. Her only possible protection, from what she could see, was the trees. She might not remember any details of why she was there, but she knew that the dying man in the front seat was right and the men coming for her had no intention to help her.

She jumped out of the car and fled into the forest. Her lungs felt as if they were going to explode from the cold air, but she had to keep moving. Her boots crunched through the underbrush. There was no real trail, just trees with thick brush beneath them as far as she could see, which meant leaving an untraceable path was going to be impossible.

Just like outrunning whoever was after her was probably going to be impossible.

Shoving the thought aside, she dodged a fallen branch, barely managing to keep her balance as she ducked beneath it. Her head felt as if someone was driving a stake through her temple, but she couldn't stop running. Not when she could hear the cracking of dry brush behind her as the men pursued her.

She glanced up at the gray sky above her, barely visible through the canopy of branches. She had no idea which direction she was running, but knew she needed to get as much distance between them as she could. If she found a way to lose them, she could head back to the road and flag down a passing car. At this point, she didn't care where she went. As long as she got as far away from the men as possible.

Fifty yards later she stumbled again over a dead log and tried to catch her balance, but this time she fell facedown onto the hard ground. Blood ran from a scratch on the palm of her hand, but she didn't even feel the sting. Instead she could hear them behind her, crashing through the brush as they got closer. It would be only a matter of seconds before they found her. There was a thick

layer of brush ahead to her right. It would provide her with cover. If she could hide there...

Still on the ground, she crawled through the brush, praying it was thick enough to camouflage her, then lay flat and still against the cold ground. Seconds later her pursuers hurried past, not even half a dozen feet from her hiding place. Her fingers were numb and her lungs burned with each breath as she waited for them to vanish into the forest.

She let out a silent sigh of relief when the men didn't stop. She'd wait for them to get out of sight then head back toward the road. Unless... She swallowed hard as one of the men stopped suddenly, held up his hand and turned around, suspending her plan. The wind howled above her through the trees. She pressed her body into the slight indentation where she lay, willing her heart to slow down.

Keep me hidden from these men, God...

The prayer came instinctively, without hesitation.

"What's wrong?" the second man stopped and looked back.

The first headed toward where she lay. "I can't hear her anymore."

"She can't be that far ahead. We need to keep going."

"Just wait a minute." The first man turned in a slow circle, close enough she could make out the biker patch on his leather jacket. Close enough she was certain he could hear her heart pounding inside her chest.

Panic mushroomed inside her. If they found her now...

“We’re wasting time. Let’s go.”

The first man continued to study the terrain a few more moments before finally nodding his head.

She waited until they disappeared into the brush and then slowly counted to twenty before coming out of her hiding place and running in the opposite direction. She might not remember what had happened or even who she was, but one thing was clear. If they found her, they would kill her.



Deputy Griffin O’Callaghan called in the single-vehicle accident and asked for backup and an emergency crew as he approached the wreck south of Timber Falls. A car had spun off the road and landed in the ditch. Two motorcycles sat behind the vehicle, but from a quick observation, neither looked as if it had been involved in the accident. He stepped out onto the road, his boots crunching against the gravel as he walked toward the wrecked vehicle then paused.

A man in a suit lay on the side of the road, shot in the temple. Griffin checked for a pulse then noticed the man’s gun and FBI badge. A second victim lay slumped over in the front passenger seat, once again shot. This was no accident scene. These men had been executed. But where were the drivers of the motorcycles?

There was a small bag next to a woman’s red winter scarf in the back seat and the side door was open. He worked to put the pieces together. Whoever had been in the back was, more than likely,

either a prisoner being transported or a witness being protected.

He grabbed a file off the front floorboard and quickly scanned the contents. There were no names, just instructions on the transportation of a witness to Denver and a court case number. He folded the papers and shoved them in his back pocket as he took a step away from the car and noticed the bullet casings scattered on the scene. There were bullet holes in the front passenger door, one of the tires had been shot out and a window was shattered.

A disturbing picture began to play out in his mind. The men on the motorcycles had shot the agent in the front seat either during or after the crash. The second agent had then taken a bullet trying to protect the witness in an apparent shoot-out. The witness had run, but the two hit men had gone after her.

Griffin moved away from the car toward the tree line, where he quickly found three sets of footprints leading into the forest. The witness was probably going to end up running in circles then being shot by the men after her. Or getting lost and freezing to death in the storm that was about to hit this part of the country. Neither scenario was acceptable because, either way, she'd be dead.

Like Lilly.

His stomach clenched at the unwanted memories that rushed to the surface. He shoved them aside, forcing himself to focus on the situation at hand. This was not the time to dredge up the past. Instead he updated the sheriff's office on his status

as he headed into the woods after her. He moved quickly but purposefully, studying the ground until the three sets of tracks he'd been following stopped and seemed to converge around one spot.

Griffin paused again. Something had happened here. His father had always taught him that tracking was like learning to read, a challenge that had always fascinated him. They'd spent hours out on the ranch training to interpret the terrain as they identified animals, studied the surroundings and traced their travel routes. Today he was praying his skills would help him save a woman's life.

He squatted down, ignoring the blistering cold. Two people had continued south after stopping. A third had doubled back before taking a new path toward the main road. It had to be the witness.

Griffin found her heading for the main road about a hundred yards south of the wreck. There was still no sign of the motorcyclists, but he knew he couldn't let his guard down. He had no doubt they were still out there. He held up his badge as he ran to catch up with her. Shouting at her to stop wasn't an option. It would only lead whoever was out there straight to her. But losing her wasn't an option, either. He chased her another ten feet then hurried to stop in front of her.

He held up his hands so she could see his badge. "Ma'am...don't scream. Please. I'm a sheriff's deputy and I can keep you safe."

She stumbled backward. He'd seen the accident aftermath and knew she had to be terrified. And, with her escorts dead, she probably had no idea who she could trust. He needed that person to be him.

"I know someone's trying to find you," he rushed on to say. "I'm here to help."

She hesitated then nodded. "They killed those men."

"I know. We're going to head to my car," he said, "then I'll take you directly to the sheriff's office in Timber Falls."

"They were FBI?" she asked as they started walking.

"Yes." He placed his hand on her arm, wondering why she didn't already know the answer to her question. "Do you know who killed them?"

"I'm guessing the same people who are after me, but I have no idea who they are."

"You're okay now. I'm going to get you somewhere safe." He picked up the pace slightly, his senses on high alert, knowing it was just a matter of time before her hunters realized she'd doubled back to the road. Letting them find her wasn't an option. "What's your name?"

She hesitated then shook her head. "I don't know."

He stopped for a moment, confused. "Wait... You don't remember your name?"

She glanced up at him with those big brown eyes and long lashes of hers, giving him a brief moment to study her while he waited for her to answer. Five-foot-five, maybe six, dark hair

past her shoulders... She had a lost look in her eyes that pulled at that familiar spot in his heart, making him want to protect her all the more. Her only visible injuries were a scrape on her hand and a bruise forming at her temple. But maybe he was missing something.

She shook her head. "I know it sounds crazy, but I can't remember."

"What about today's date?"

"It's... I don't know. What is it?"

"December tenth." He'd caught the panic in her voice as she struggled to answer. "What can you remember?"

Her eyes avoided the scene in front of them. "Nothing before the accident. The man in the front seat had been shot. He told me to run. That they were coming after me."

"Okay..." Griffin wasn't sure if her loss of memory was a sign of something more serious but, for now, he just needed to get her out of there alive. "Don't worry about that right now. Do you hurt anywhere?" he asked.

"My head, but that's all. That and, of course, the fact that I can't remember my name or why I'm here."

"Do you remember how many were chasing you?" he asked as they finally emerged onto the main road. He could see his car ahead of them and still no sign of the men who'd been after her.

"Two," she said.

"Are you sure?"

She nodded.

Her answer surprised him. There were three helmets on the bikes. She could be wrong, though it seemed to be the events after the crash that she could remember—like the dead bodies at the scene and the men chasing after her—but not events or things that had happened before the accident, including her name. Either she'd hit her head or was experiencing some kind of dissociative amnesia from the trauma. But the whys didn't matter right now.

He clicked the key fob as they approached his vehicle and unlocked his car, then headed toward the motorcycles. "Go get inside. You'll be safe."

"Where are you going?"

"I'll be right back. I promise."

Sunlight broke through the gray clouds above them as he quickly searched the tree line for the men. If he hadn't had to worry about the woman, he would have gone after them. However, for the moment, his number-one priority had to be to get her to safety. The problem was that he still had no idea where the men were. And that had him worried. Not only were they armed, he'd be outnumbered if they showed up. That meant ensuring she wasn't hit in any cross fire would be difficult, so he had to slow the men down. He stopped next to the two motorcycles and quickly jerked out the spark plug wires on each bike.

But he was running out of time. He could now hear the men crashing through the underbrush without even bothering to quiet

their steps. A bullet hit the side of his squad car. He ran back to his car and jerked open the driver's-side door. A searing pain shot through him as the second bullet hit its mark.

TWO

She couldn't breathe and her heart felt as if it were about to burst out of her chest. She'd just been rescued from the men trying to kill her, but this was far from over. Blood was rapidly spreading across the deputy's right sleeve as he spoke to his dispatcher to give an update on the situation.

"You've been hit," she said as he disconnected the call.

"It's just a flesh wound. My primary goal right now is to get you out of here. Backup is on its way to arrest the guys that attacked you."

She stared out the rear window to where the men were trying to figure out why their bikes wouldn't start and then focused back on his arm. "You have no idea how bad it is. You're running on adrenaline now. I need to look at it, and you certainly shouldn't be driving."

"We're twenty minutes out of Timber Falls," he said, pressing on the accelerator. "I can wait that long to get treated."

"We need to get the bleeding stopped before then." She grabbed for a T-shirt on the back seat and started pressing it against the wound. This was insane. She couldn't remember her name or what she did for a living, but somehow her response felt automatic. "What kind of first-aid equipment do you have in the back of your car?"

"A basic medical kit, exam gloves, a tourniquet..."

She pressed the shirt tighter, praying the bleeding stopped. “What did you do to their bikes?”

“They’re disabled for now.”

“So they can’t follow us?”

“Not unless they flag down a ride. I’ve got their spark plug wires.”

“That will buy us some time.” But she needed to stop the bleeding now. “I might not know my name, but somehow I know how to deal with this. Are you feeling light-headed?”

“No.”

“Nauseated?”

“No.”

She felt for his pulse. It was fast but strong and steady. “I should drive.”

“Except you’ve just been involved in an accident and hit your head. Out of the two of us, I’m definitely in a better position to get us out of here.”

“We make quite a pair.” She frowned at his stubbornness, but wasn’t backing down. “Drive another three or four miles then pull over so I can patch you up properly.”

“I’m not sure we should stop—”

“A gunshot wound isn’t something to play around with, and you’re losing blood. I need to assess how serious it is.”

She took his nod as confirmation that he would do what she asked, then listened as he spent the next mile or two telling her what he’d found out at the scene. The FBI badges and the file

that said they'd been transporting a witness for a trial...

"Do you remember any of this?" he asked.

She fought to resurrect memories she knew had to be there, but instead only encountered a mounting frustration. "I'm sorry, but no. I can't remember anything."

"Don't worry about it. Your memories will return."

"Maybe, but from what you're telling me, I'm not sure I want to remember."

What had she seen? It had to have been something horrible, like another murder.

A minute later he pulled the car off at an overlook with a stunning view of the mountains to the west. But she barely saw it. Instead her mind was fighting to focus on the one thing she knew she could do. She hurried to the trunk of the car with him then started going through his first-aid kit, trying not to give in to the panic.

Seconds later she carefully helped him out of his jacket and uniform, leaving on his T-shirt, so she could get to the wound.

"Ouch."

Her eyes widened. "Don't tell me you're one of those macho men who faint at the sight of blood."

"Hardly, but you've got to give me a little credit. I was just shot."

"According to you, it's just an insignificant flesh wound."

"Are you always this ornery?" He shot her a stern look, but his eyes were smiling.

Do you flirt with every woman you have contact with?

She bit back the question on the tip of her tongue.

“Honestly, I have no idea.” She shrugged, unable to avoid his grin or to ignore just how good-looking he was with those dark brown eyes. She shoved the ridiculous thoughts away.

“The good news is that you were right about one thing,” she said. “The bullet skimmed your arm and the blood’s already clotting. You’ll need stitches, but you’ll survive.”

He smiled again. “That’s a relief.”

She looked away, focusing on his arm as she disinfected her hands then started cleaning the wound. The routine seemed familiar. Comfortable. And was the first time she’d felt in control since the accident.

Or at least as much as I can feel in control in a situation like this.

The reminder sent panic flooding through her again. She might not remember why she’d been in that car, but she did know those men were still out there. And something told her that missing spark plug wires weren’t going to slow them down for long.

She opened a butterfly bandage to hold the wound together, trying to stomp out her anxiety at the same time. “They could have flagged down a car to follow us.”

“I know. But there aren’t a lot of cars out on these back roads right now, especially with the storm coming. Besides, backup should be there by now.”

“I hope so.”

“Which means we’re even now,” he said. “I saved your life and now you’ve saved mine.”

She shook her head. “Your life hardly needed saving. Anyone could do this, though it seems...familiar.”

A memory flashed to the forefront. She was running through a long hall with tiled white floors. Someone was calling a name.

Tory.

Her name.

His hand on her shoulder brought her back to the present. “You okay?”

She nodded, her hands shaking as she repacked the first-aid kit. “I remembered something. My name’s Tory.”

He pulled his shirt back on and started buttoning it up. “That’s wonderful. And it means your memory’s coming back.”

“Slowly, but I still feel like I’m fighting my way through this heavy fog.”

He smiled at her. “It’s nice to meet you, Tory. I’m Griffin, by the way.”

“It’s nice to meet you, as well.” His smile managed to erase some of her tension. “So we now know three things. My name’s Tory. I’m a witness in a case. And someone wants me dead.”

“Well, when you put it that way, it doesn’t sound quite so wonderful.”

“I guess there isn’t a nice way to put that, is there?” She laughed. “I’m just finding it kind of ironic that someone’s after

me for what I know, but I can't remember what it is."

"Don't worry." He slammed the trunk shut then headed for the driver's seat. "We're going to figure this out, Tory... But for now, we need to get out of here."

She climbed back into the front passenger seat, knowing he was right. She needed to find a way to fight the panic and stay focused on the fact that at least they were both alive.

Unlike the FBI agents.

"How are you feeling?" Griffin flipped on his blinker then sped back onto the highway.

"Seems like I'm the one who should be asking you that question."

"Oh, you don't have to worry about me. I happen to have a really good doctor. In fact, she told me I'm going to live."

Tory tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Are you always this funny?"

"My brothers would probably say no. That I'm the serious one of the bunch. But you didn't answer my question."

She smiled again, wondering how he kept doing that. Distracting her from the situation. "I'm okay for now. I just wish I could remember something significant."

"Remembering your name's pretty significant. That, and I think we might have figured out your profession."

She leaned back against the seat. "Somewhere I must have picked up some medical experience."

"I'm thinking a paramedic or maybe an ER doctor."

“Maybe, but I’d suggest we don’t test that theory.”

He couldn’t help but chuckle. “I have to agree with you on that one.”

Even his smile couldn’t put her totally at ease. Two men had just died protecting her. She could not let that happen again.



Griffin glanced out his rearview mirror as he sped toward town, glad they’d finally made it onto the main highway.

More often than not, women made him feel nervous. As much as he enjoyed the small talk with the woman sitting next to him, he couldn’t shake the worry that whoever was after her was going to find her. On top of that, his arm felt as if it were on fire. But he couldn’t worry about that now. He was more concerned that the men who’d killed the FBI agents would find a way to pick up his tail despite his attempt to disable their motorcycles.

He was convinced they weren’t dealing with amateurs. The attack against the FBI escort had clearly been strategic. The drivers had known the route and had planned their assault. But at least Tory was safe for the moment. If she hadn’t escaped into the woods when she had, they’d either have her or she’d be dead now.

The other pressing concern was the weather. The news had been reporting for days that a huge storm system was sweeping in from the north. That meant he was going to need to get her somewhere safe before the roads became too dangerous to use.

Tory pressed her hands together in her lap then stared out the

window. "It's starting to snow again. How far out of Timber Falls are we?"

"Just a couple minutes."

"Good. And it looks like the bleeding from your arm has stopped."

His phone rang and he glanced at the caller ID. It was the sheriff's office. He hoped they were calling with an update.

"What's your ETA?" Sheriff Jackson asked as soon as Griffin answered.

"We're almost to the Timber Falls exit."

"Good. Just to be on the safe side, I've arranged for Dr. Swanson to meet you at the back entrance of the clinic. You should be able to slip the witness in without being noticed. Someone will also be there to sew you up if needed."

"Thank you, but please tell me you found the guys who did this?"

"I wish I could say we did, but when backup arrived at the scene, they found the bikes, but no signs of the men. I put out a BOLO from the descriptions you gave us, but it's not going to be easy to search for them with this storm coming in."

"What about the accident scene?" Griffin took the exit and headed straight to the clinic located on the edge of the small town. "Was anything found that might give us answers?"

"That's going to take time. The coroner just arrived to pick up the bodies. They've been ID'd as special agents Lincoln and Adler...but that's really all we know at this point."

Griffin frowned. He needed some good news. “Have you heard from the FBI yet?”

“I’m still waiting for them to call back. I’ll let you know as soon as they do.”

Frustrated, Griffin hung up then drove through the back of the clinic parking lot. “I know this has got to be unsettling.”

Her lower lip trembled. “I can’t get their faces out of my mind. They died trying to protect me.”

He parked in an empty space near the back door and shut off the engine, fighting the urge to pull her into his arms to tell her everything was going to be okay. Because he knew the truth. Sometimes things didn’t turn out the way you wanted. Sometimes, no matter how hard he tried, everything wouldn’t be okay.

“You know none of this is your fault,” he said finally.

“Really? Because the way I see it, those agents were killed because of me.” She stared straight ahead, that lost look back in her eyes. “It just seems so crazy. All the things I want to remember I can’t, and yet no matter how hard I try, I can’t get the picture out of my mind of that agent being shot and dying in front of me.”

“I’m so sorry you saw what you did. Sorry your being in the wrong place at the wrong time put you in this situation in the first place.”

“I guess as a deputy you would understand death.” She turned and caught his gaze. “Does it ever fade, some of the things you

see?”

He looked away, wanting to ignore her question, but knew he couldn't. “I've had to learn to deal with things I've seen, but that still doesn't always make it easy. There are faces and stories I'll never be able to forget.”

“Thank you for what you've done for me.”

He shrugged off the gratitude, ready for a change in subject. “I'm just doing my job.”

“Maybe, but you saved my life.”

Thirty minutes later the nurse had just finished stitching up Griffin's arm when his phone rang again. He stepped into the small hallway at the back of the clinic for privacy and took the call.

“Deputy O'Callaghan...this is FBI Special Agent Mark Hill. I understand you have one of our witnesses in your custody. Victoria Faraday.”

“I do. We're at the clinic in Timber Falls and she's in with the doctor right now.”

“The report I received said she's suffering from memory loss and you'd been shot.”

“I'm waiting for a report from the doctor about her, but yes. Thankfully the bullet just grazed me.” Griffin took a deep breath before asking, “I'm assuming you've received the news that both your agents were killed?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

Griffin hesitated. “I'm extremely sorry for your loss.”

“So am I. They were good men that are going to be greatly missed. Jinx Ryder—the man behind this—has been a thorn in the FBI’s side for far too long.”

“What can you tell me about the case?”

“I can send you the file...but, briefly, she was out hiking eight months ago and witnessed the brutal murder of a couple not too far from where you are.”

“I remember that headline.”

“We’d been hunting Jinx for over a year. He’s suspected to be involved in a dozen other felonies, but we’ve never been able to pin anything on the man. Not until Victoria Faraday.”

“And she’s your eye witness.”

“Our only witness. That is why I need your help. The highway north of you was just shut down, which means it’s going to take some time to get anyone to you. They’re calling this the storm of the decade.”

Griffin glanced at the closed door where Tory was still meeting with the doctor. “What do you need me to do?”

“She’s going to need protection until we can get there.”

Griffin frowned. Playing the role of bodyguard wasn’t exactly on his to-do list for the weekend. While he wasn’t keen on babysitting, neither was he willing to leave her stranded.

“Can you get her somewhere safe for the next forty-eight hours or at least until this storm passes? Somewhere out of the way and secure until I can get someone there?”

Griffin mentally flipped through his limited options. “My

parents own a ranch not far from here. I suppose I could take her there for a couple of days. It's unlikely these guys would be able to track her down."

"Sounds like the perfect plan. And, Deputy O'Callaghan...this needs to stay under the radar. Jinx clearly has a long arm. Someone was able to track down that escort—"

"Exactly, which has me worried." Griffin vacillated, but he needed to know what was going on. "If you want to ensure her safety, you need to find out where your leak is."

"I can assure you there is no leak—"

"I'm sorry, Agent Hill, but two of your agents were just murdered and your witness barely escaped with her life."

"And we are doing everything we can to find out how that happened."

At the end of the hall, Tory stepped out of the examination room with the doctor.

"I need to go," the FBI agent said, "but keep me updated."

Griffin frowned as he hung up. If the FBI didn't find their leak—or at least admit they had one—keeping Tory safe might prove impossible.

THREE

Tory stepped into the clinic hallway with the doctor, wishing he had given her a prescription to restore her memory. Instead he'd told her all she could really do was watch for symptoms and wait for her memories to return. But that was easier said than done. She was tired of fighting to resurrect memories she knew were there but couldn't find. And scared at how vulnerable that made her feel.

“Deputy O’Callaghan...” The doctor dropped his pen into his front jacket pocket as Griffin walked up to them. “Sorry we took so long, but I wanted to make sure I didn’t miss anything.”

“That’s fine,” Griffin said then turned to her. “How are you feeling?”

“While I did hit my head in the accident, the doctor believes my amnesia should resolve itself eventually.”

“That sounds like good news.”

“It is,” Dr. Swanson said. “In the meantime, she’ll feel as if her thoughts and memories are clouded, but clearly they are already slowly returning, which is a good sign. I would, though, like to keep her here overnight for observation—”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.” Griffin shook his head. “Staying here would make it harder to limit who knows where she is. And the more people who know, the riskier this whole situation becomes.”

Tory felt another wave of panic hit. “Then what am I supposed to do? Is the FBI sending someone else?”

“Because of the storm, they won’t be able to get any agents here for at least forty-eight hours. They’ve asked me to ensure your safety until they get here.”

She worked to process the news. If trained FBI agents hadn’t been able to stop an attack, how was Griffin—a local sheriff’s deputy—supposed to keep her safe? She’d never be able to live with someone else dying trying to protect her.

“This isn’t your case—”

“No,” he said, “but I do have a solution. I want to take you to my family ranch, which is about thirty minutes from town. If we leave now, we should get there before the storm hits.”

She pressed her fingertips against her temples, trying to deal with the fact that once again she was having to trust her life to a stranger. “I don’t know—”

“It’s just a precaution until the storm passes. You’ll be safe there.”

“Will I?” She looked up at him, unconvinced. “Two agents are dead, which means I’d be putting your family at risk. And who’s to say they can’t find me there, too?”

She didn’t want to sound ungrateful, because she wasn’t. But she barely knew this man, and now he wanted to take her to his home to keep her safe? There had to be another option. Surely the roads weren’t that bad yet. If they could get to Denver, there had to be an FBI safe house where she could stay until this nightmare

was over. Something that wouldn't involve him and his family.

"I know this all has to be overwhelming," Griffin said, "but my job now is to keep you safe. Plus, my mom's a nurse and she'll be able to keep an eye on any medical issues." He turned back to the doctor. "I'm trusting you to keep this situation confidential."

"You know I will and, with Tory's permission," the doctor said, "I can give your mother a call and update her, so she knows exactly what she needs to watch for."

Tory knew Griffin must have read the doubt in her eyes, along with the fear she couldn't shake. She might not remember what she'd eaten for breakfast yesterday, but she knew she hated feeling out of control. And that was exactly how she felt right now. But what choice did she have? Someone wanted her dead and she certainly wasn't in a position to handle this on her own.

"I need you to trust me," Griffin said.

She shot him a weak smile. "You did save my life once."

"And I'm going to do everything I can to make sure you stay safe, but we need to leave now. Once the storm hits, I don't want to be out on these roads." Griffin caught her gaze, reminding her how she'd become totally dependent on the deputy. "Are you okay with the plan?"

She nodded, despite the fact she wasn't convinced they were doing the right thing. What if those men tried to come after her again? Deputy O'Callaghan might have saved her once, but she'd seen what those men could do, and he was only one man.

She glanced down the hallway at the six-foot-tall Christmas

tree made from blown-up surgical gloves and an IV pole and loneliness surged through her. It was Christmastime and she couldn't even remember who was waiting for her back home to celebrate the holidays. Surely there were family, friends and maybe even someone special in her life. Why couldn't she remember?

Griffin hesitated in front of her. "Are you sure you're okay?"

She forced a smile. "I will be."

Because she didn't have a choice.

"I just need to stop by the sheriff's office," Griffin said. "Then we'll head out of town."

Twenty minutes later they were driving toward the O'Callaghan ranch that was nestled beneath impressive views of Pikes Peak and the surrounding mountains while the sun slipped toward the horizon in front of them. On any other day, she would be soaking up the beauty of the wintery terrain. Right now, all she wanted to do was to run far away from everything that had happened.

"What are your parents going to say when you bring home a complete stranger?" she asked, breaking the silence between them.

"Trust me, my family won't think twice about it. It's definitely not the first time one of us has brought home someone needing a place to stay."

She couldn't help but smile. "You make me sound like a stray cat."

He chuckled. "We've taken in a few of those over the years, as well."

"Funny. Tell me about your family. You said earlier you had brothers." She needed a distraction. Something to stop her from worrying about what could happen and the memories that still refused to surface.

"For starters, I've got three brothers."

"Wow...your mother had her hands full."

"More than you could ever imagine, but thankfully for her we're all grown up now. Caden works with my father on the ranch and is a former army ranger. Reid works for the local fire department and my youngest brother, Liam, is in the army and recently got married."

"He's the only one with a wife?"

"Yep. They have a sweet daughter, Mia."

His response surprised her. If his brothers were even close to being as good-looking as Griffin, the three of them sounded like catches. She glanced at her own ringless left hand. She was going to assume she wasn't married or engaged but, for all she knew, she had a boyfriend back home.

Wherever that was.

She cleared her throat. "So, three bachelors. How did that happen?"

"That's a question my mom asks almost every time I see her."

"What about your ranch?" she asked, changing the subject. "Sounds like a wonderful place to grow up."

“It was. Our family has worked the land since the 1920s. It’s got over ten thousand acres and some of the best hunting in the area, and is still used for hay production, livestock grazing and raising cattle.”

“Sounds beautiful, too.” Nevertheless, there was still the lingering question she couldn’t shake. “What if something goes wrong? What if they find me and it puts your family in danger? I couldn’t do that—”

“We’ll deal with that when—and if—the time comes. But don’t worry about that now.”

“Okay, then that must mean it’s time for you to ask me about my family, except I don’t have any answers.”

“Have you remembered anything new?”

“Nothing more than a handful of fuzzy memories.”

“We know your name and that you have medical training. I suppose we can always Google you.” Griffin glanced toward the back seat. “The FBI sent over a brief file on the case. That’s what I picked up at the sheriff’s office. There’s supposed to be something on you, as well.”

“Really?” She grabbed the folder, suddenly nervous about what she was going to find out.

The file was thin and the documents had been redacted in several places, including her hometown, but reading through it felt more like reading someone else’s biography.

“Does anything stand out or jog your memory?” Griffin asked.

“Not really, but there’s not much. It says parents are dead, and

no siblings.” She looked up at him. “I’m going to assume I have a friend or two.”

“I’d say you definitely have way more than just a friend or two.”

“And why would you say that? I could be some recluse who lives with a houseful of cats and only goes out to check the mail.”

“Somehow I don’t think so. You’re easy to talk to, you have a sense of humor, and we already know how well you do in a medical emergency.”

She couldn’t help but smile. She liked the way he managed to disarm her fears and make her laugh. “Keep trying to make me feel better. You’re doing a good job.”

“There’s something else,” he said. “I know you put your life on the line to put a murderer behind bars. Something like that takes a lot of courage.”

His statement brought on another flash of memory, but she could not quite grab on to it. She glanced out the window at the falling snow that had already left a dusting of white across the landscape. She might have had to risk her life for justice, but even if that were true, it did little to erase the terror that wouldn’t leave her alone.



Griffin studied her reaction for a moment as they headed down the two-lane dirt road toward the ranch, knowing everything that had happened had left her unsettled. He couldn’t

blame her. Not only was her life in danger, she could not remember what had brought her to this point beyond what had been written in an FBI report.

“I meant what I said. What you did took a lot of courage.”

“Maybe, but I’m just trying to figure all this out without getting too terrified. I keep asking myself the same question. What was my motivation? I obviously had to realize there was going to be a cost.” She skimmed through the file. “There’s a section in here about Jinx Ryder. He’s been arrested for racketeering, conspiracy to launder money, murder, and is known to be involved in several criminal enterprises. Sounds to me like anyone would be crazy to cross this guy.”

“Or extremely brave,” he countered.

“I’m not feeling brave.” Tory drummed her fingers against the armrest. “Instead I’m wondering what made me think I could survive going up against this guy.”

He felt his jaw tighten as he debated whether or not to share with her what had been nagging him all afternoon. What he had to say would shake her already precarious world, something he didn’t want to do. But if there was any chance that he was right...

“What are you thinking?” she asked, somehow sensing the shift in his thoughts.

“What if they weren’t trying to kill you?” he asked, feeling the burn in his arm.

Her eyes widened as she glanced up at him. “I’m not sure I understand. They killed the men transporting me, chased me

through the woods and then shot at the car as we left. I'd say they were definitely trying to kill me."

"They killed the agents you were with and shot at me. Did they ever shoot directly at you?"

His question seemed to throw her off. "They shot at the car."

"Yes, but what if they were trying to stop the FBI detail. To extract you. Alive."

"Alive?"

He hesitated again, knowing that what he was saying would probably make no sense from her point of view. From the little they'd been told about the case, it seemed clear that Jinx and his men's only objective was to silence her. She was the sole witness to a heinous crime, and it didn't matter if she could remember the details or not. She had the evidence the FBI needed to put Jinx behind bars for life.

"Why would they want to me alive?" she asked. "I'm a witness to a murder. Aren't I better off dead to them?"

"That's an obvious assumption, but there are things that don't add up."

"Like?"

Griffin searched for the words to clarify what he was thinking. "What if you have information they want? Something that would make you worth more to them alive than dead?"

"Like what? Because at this point even if that were true, I can't remember the murder, let alone any information I might have."

"True, but they don't know that. Just think about it. There were

two men after you, but three helmets on the bikes. And on top of that, they never shot at you. They killed the agents and they were shooting at me.”

“I’m not convinced you’re right, but until I get my memory back, I have no way of knowing.”

“I’m sorry.” His parents’ house appeared in the distance as the snow began to fall heavier. “I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“What I do know is that they found me once and I’m sure they can find me again. I’m the only witness in a case that could put Jinx behind bars for the rest of his life. That’s pretty strong motivation on his part to get rid of me.”

He didn’t miss the fear in her voice as she spoke, making him regret he’d ever brought it up. “Forget all of that for now. All we really need to do is to focus on keeping you safe.”

“And when the storm passes?” she asked.

“We’ll get you to Denver. But it won’t be easy for them to trace you here.”

“Are you sure? What’s to stop them from finding me here just like they found my escort?”

“The sheriff’s office is going to be on alert, and I’ll also make sure our ranch hands are on the lookout for anything suspicious.”

Beyond that, all he could do was pray it would be enough to keep her safe.

Griffin’s phone rang, interrupting their conversation. He checked the caller ID and opted to answer on his cell instead of through the car’s speaker system.

Thirty seconds later he ended the call. “That was the FBI.”

“Why do I have the feeling this isn’t going to be good news?”

“Because it isn’t.” His frown deepened. He wished he could find a way to lessen the blow. “Jinx was in the process of being transferred to a new facility, so he’d be near the courthouse for the trial.”

“Griffin...what happened?”

He sucked in a sharp breath. “Jinx escaped.”

FOUR

It didn't matter that she couldn't remember Jinx Ryder's face, or even all the details of what she'd witnessed. Tory knew enough about the situation to realize her life was in danger. Now that Jinx had managed to escape from custody, there was a good chance he'd come after her himself. And that terrified her.

"Would you like more bread?"

Tory jumped at the question clearly posed at her and looked up at the basket of garlic bread Griffin's mom, Marci, was holding. She wondered how long the older woman had been waiting for her to answer.

Tory grabbed a piece then passed the basket to Griffin. "I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry about." Marci's smile seemed genuine, just like everything else about his family. "This entire situation has to be unsettling for you."

"I just can't stop jumping at every shadow." She glanced across the room as if to prove her point, but the reaction was automatic. "I'm convinced he's going to come after me himself."

"Not any time soon." Griffin's dad, Jacob, looked up from his bowl of stew. "I've lived in these mountains my whole life, and I'll be the first one to tell you that he'd be a fool to try to find you in this kind of weather. I know every inch of this ranch, and trust me, even I'm still planning on staying right here in this house

until the weather clears.”

Tory could hear the wind howling against the side of the house, giving her a tangible reminder of the storm now brewing outside. But Jacob’s words failed to take the edge off her fear. Jinx had managed to call a hit on her FBI transport before escaping from custody. She had no doubt that if he wanted to, he could find a way to make it through the storm and come after her here, as well.

“And when the storm’s over?” she asked. “He’s not going to stop until I’m silenced.”

“I say we worry about that when the time comes,” Marci said.

“You’re right.” Tory drew in a deep breath while trying at the same time to shake the fear that had taken hold. “I’m safe for now, and I can’t tell you how much I appreciate your generosity. All three of you.”

“We’re happy to help,” Griffin said.

She forced herself to finish eating the rest of her stew—a family recipe that called for elk meat hunted on their land, she’d been told, passed down from Griffin’s great-grandmother. While she sure would have enjoyed the meal if circumstances had been different, at the moment it was tasteless.

Marci stood from the table as soon as everyone had finished and caught her son’s gaze. “Why don’t the two of you go relax in the other room while your father and I clean up? You both look exhausted. I have some cobbler with berries from our summer garden and vanilla ice cream, if you’re interested.”

Tory scooted her chair back from the table. “Let me at least help clean up first.”

Marci waved away her request. “You go relax. I insist. Besides, I have the world’s number-one dishwasher right here beside me.”

Jacob’s brow crinkled when he laughed. “How did I know that was coming?”

Tory looked to Griffin.

“It’s not worth arguing with them,” he said. “They always win.”

“While you’re at it,” his mother continued, “try not to think too hard about what you can’t remember. Doctor’s orders.”

Tory smiled. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Go on into the living room,” Griffin said. “I’ll bring you some of the dessert.”

She nodded, feeling spoiled but too tired to argue, and went to stand in front of the Christmas tree. She breathed in the scent of fresh pine from the lighted green tree that no doubt had come from the ranch. White lights flickered against multicolored glass ornaments. She’d hoped that sitting around the table with his family would jog her mind and bring up memories of Christmas dinners, birthday parties and anniversaries from her own past. She had to have experienced those things at some point growing up.

But whatever those memories were, they were still lost for the moment.

Two minutes later Griffin handed her a bowl of cobbler with ice cream and stood beside her at the tree. “You seem deep in

thought. What are you thinking about?"

"The one thing I can't forget." She couldn't help but shake her head at the irony as she took a spoon from him. For someone who'd lost most of her memories, there was one she couldn't shake. "He's out there, Griffin. And his escape ups the stakes. He's going to come after me himself."

"Maybe, but if I were him, I'd forget about any witnesses and simply flee the country."

"Don't you think that's easier said than done?"

"Probably. But he's got to have plenty of money and resources to set himself up on some island and live out the rest of his days sitting in the sun."

Needing a distraction, she reached up and touched a glass snowman hanging on one of the branches. "I'm guessing you didn't pick this tree up at a local farm."

"No. Comes from right here. We always head out into the woods the day after Thanksgiving and find the perfect tree for my mom."

"It's beautiful," she said.

"Christmas is a pretty big deal around here, even now that we're all grown up."

"What do you do?" she asked.

He took a bite of his dessert. "Besides helping my mom with the decorations here, there's the annual Christmas parade and concert in town, and volunteering for the Giving Tree at church that helps families in our community who are in need."

“That all sounds fun.”

“It is my favorite time of the year.”

She followed him to the couch and sat next to him before sampling a bite of ice cream and berries. She knew she needed to relax, but her mind wouldn't stop working on the what-ifs.

“I'm guessing you're not really in the Christmas mood right now,” he added.

“Not really. I keep thinking about the file we read through. It said that Jinx normally lets his soldiers handle all his dirty work,” she told him. “It's one reason why the man has never been caught. But it also said that this time was different. He shot that couple himself. That must mean their deaths were personal. And what he didn't count on was having a witness.”

“What are you thinking?” Griffin asked.

“I've been going over and over in my head about what you said about my having information he wants.”

“And...”

“I still can't remember anything, but my gut tells me you're right.” She set her dessert on her lap, her appetite soured. “I just can't pull up the information.”

“My mom was right. Try not to think about it. I have a feeling the more you try to bring those memories to the surface, the harder it's going to be.”

“Maybe, but it's the not knowing that makes me feel the most vulnerable. Like I've somehow stepped into a gunfight but I have nothing to defend myself. This is something I don't know how to

deal with. I can't keep my brain from spinning.”

“There is something else to consider.”

She drew in a deep breath. “What’s that?”

“My mom told me it’s possible that memory loss can come from witnessing something traumatic. Like the car wreck and the agents being shot.”

Tory worked to process what he said as she tried digging into the cobbler, not liking the implications. “Meaning I’m too afraid to remember.”

“It’s a possibility.”

“I guess I’d like to think I’m stronger than that. I work in the emergency room, which goes to reason that I’ve witnessed a lot of traumatic situations.”

Whether it was true or not, the thought made her feel as if she were weak. As if her mind couldn’t handle what she had seen and had literally shut down. As far as she was concerned, the lump on the back of her head sounded like a more realistic option. But either way, her memories still refused to surface.

Griffin shook his head. “This has nothing to do with how strong you are. That’s how God created your mind. A kind of protection when having to face something traumatic. Maybe things are different because, this time, the trauma was directed toward you.”

She took another bite of the tart berries with the sweet ice cream. Like, witnessing an agent shot dead in front of her. Was that enough to erase her memories? She might not know for sure,

but there was one thing she was certain of. Not being able to do anything about it made her feel helpless.

“Your parents are sweet—and your mom is such a good cook,” she said. “I just hope they know how much I appreciate their taking me in.”

“They enjoy company and are known to spoil their boys every once in a while.”

“I’ll admit I don’t mind being spoiled a bit. And this is delicious.”

“I told you you’d feel safe here. I want you to feel safe here.”

She caught the intensity in Griffin’s eyes and wondered why he was doing this. In reality, he didn’t have to. She was pretty certain that guarding an FBI witness wasn’t anywhere in his job description, and he could have easily passed it on to someone else. But, for some reason, she was glad he had taken the job. Because there was something about his presence that was calming and reassuring. Something about him that made her want to pull back the layers and find out everything there was to know about him.

Especially since uncovering exactly who she was seemed impossible at the moment.

“It’s strange to think I don’t have any family,” she said, giving in to the need to probe beyond the surface. “There’s got to be someone out there who’s worried about me. Someone who knew what I was doing. I don’t even know if I have a significant other.”

Her gaze shifted back to the tree with a dozen presents already

beneath it. Had she put up a tree back home? Were there presents underneath it? How could she forget something like that?

“Have any more memories surfaced?” he asked.

“Not really. I went over the FBI file half a dozen times before dinner, certain something would jog my memory, but so far it’s still just a bunch of foggy details, with nothing more than a few impressions.” She took another bite of her dessert. “Though I’ve learned that I like ice cream and berry cobbler way too much.”

“I’d think something was seriously wrong with you if you didn’t.”

“Funny.” She couldn’t help but notice how his eyes smiled and how his brown eyes had flecks of gold in them.

“And I’ve learned a few more things about you,” he said.

“Like?” She sat back and waited for him to continue.

“You’re strong. You have a sense of humor.” Griffin paused. “And you’re beautiful.”

“I’m guessing I blush at compliments, as well.”

He smiled back, but she didn’t like the way he stirred her heart. She couldn’t remember what she ate for breakfast yesterday, let alone if there was someone else in her life. This definitely wasn’t the time or place to be feeling the tug of an attraction. All she was going to end up with was a broken heart. And somehow—despite everything she’d forgotten—she knew she’d had at least one of those.



Griffin studied Tory for a moment while she dug into her dessert, wondering why he'd said something so...personal. She was beautiful, but to say it out loud?

Still, there was something different about her from most women he met—something he couldn't quite put his finger on. Despite the alarming situation she was being forced to deal with, she was managing to hold herself together better than he'd expected. With her medical training, it made sense. She was used to making decisions in the middle of a crisis situation, but having a man who was wanted by the FBI after you brought things to a whole other level. Those feelings of fear and vulnerability were amplified with her memories suppressed. Being attracted to someone who couldn't remember who they were seemed ridiculous.

He needed a distraction and he had a feeling so did she.

“How about a movie?” he said. “It might keep your mind off of all of this for a while.”

And keep his mind off the woman sitting next to him.

She took another bite. “For some reason, I don't think I'm a huge movie fan, but I think I'd like that tonight.”

“Good. My parents have a huge selection of DVDs. What's your favorite?” He sat back, wanting to take back the question. “I'm sorry.”

“Forget it. Why don't you choose?”

He set his dessert on the coffee table, grabbed one of the movies he knew his mother loved and slipped it into the DVD

player. Why did he keep forgetting he wasn't there to get to know her? This was a job, nothing more. Besides, how was he supposed to get to know her when she couldn't remember her past? Even if it did eventually come back, his job was just until the FBI detail got here.

Halfway through the movie, they added a big bowl of buttered popcorn. When the final credits rolled, he realized she was leaning against his shoulder.

"Are you still awake?" he asked.

She nodded then yawned "I saw the ending, but think I missed part of it."

"I learned you have a cute snore."

"Very funny." She laughed. "I learned I like romantic comedies. Especially Christmas ones."

"I figured something intense wasn't going to be a good choice considering that the point was for you to forget everything that's going on, so I guess we accomplished that."

"Agreed." She scooted a few inches away and turned to him. "But to be honest, forgetting things hasn't exactly been an issue since the accident."

Griffin frowned, wanting to kick himself for his insensitivity. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

"It's okay." She shot him a smile. "I'm teasing."

He let out a low chuckle. "You might have lost your memory, but like I said earlier, definitely not your sense of humor."

"What I really should be saying is thank you."

“For what?”

“For helping me get my mind off all of this, even if it was just for a couple hours—and even if I fell asleep. I have a feeling that the next few days if not weeks are going to be tough. But in the meantime, I can’t imagine a homier safe house.”

He turned off the TV and the Christmas lights, grabbed the half-empty bowl of popcorn and headed toward the kitchen. “I can’t guarantee that the FBI is going to treat you to a movie and popcorn every night, but while you’re here we can afford to indulge some.”

He stopped midsentence, realizing what he was thinking. For some crazy reason he wished she were staying here—not just until the storm was over, but until he knew she was completely safe. And he wanted to be the one to ensure she stayed safe. But that wasn’t going to happen. She’d only be here until the storm passed and the FBI could get her out, then he’d get back to his normal life.

And reality.

He turned off the kitchen light and started upstairs with her.

“The house is beautiful.” She ran her hand across the wooden banister as they walked up the stairs. “When was it built?”

“My grandfather built the original structure back in the early 1900s, but my father continued to add on. He put in the second story back in the seventies, added a back porch and most recently put in a gun room for safety.”

She glanced at the vaulted door at the end of the hallway. “So

he's a serious hunter?"

"Hunter...collector. He had the vault put in a few months ago. His first grandchild—and any future grandchildren—was his main motivator, though he's been talking about doing it for years. If you're interested in hunting, he's the man people come to. I might be biased, but he and my grandfather are experts on not just hunting but survival and really anything outdoors. He loves this land and knows how to adapt to whatever comes."

She stood quiet for a minute in front of the guest room.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. Just tired. I love hearing you talk of family, but it makes me wonder about mine."

"The memories will come."

She nodded. "I hope so."

"Do you need anything else?"

"I don't think so. I have my bag from the agents' car and your mother helped me get settled."

"Good. But if you end up needing something—anything at all—during the night, I'm just down the hall."

"I'm sure I'll be fine."

A moment later she turned around and slipped into her room.

He stared at the closed door a few seconds then made a tour of the house, ensuring all the doors and windows were locked. His parents had gone to bed an hour ago, but he had a feeling he wasn't going to get much sleep.

The wind was still howling outside and the snow continued

to lay a thick blanket on the ground, which meant he couldn't imagine someone coming after her now. Not in this weather. But he still wasn't going to take any chances. His brother Caden and the ranch hands were already on alert to anything out of the ordinary. And the local sheriff's department had their deputies on call, as well.

If Jinx did manage to track her down and come after her, they were going to be ready.

He checked the mudroom door then stopped and moved closer to the window. Something shifted outside near the barn and he was sure it wasn't simply the wind. He grabbed his heavy coat and gloves off the hanging rack, along with a flashlight, then put his service weapon in his holster. If Jinx and his men were foolish enough to try to fight this storm, he was going to make sure they lost.

The wind howled around him as he stepped outside and quickly shut the door behind him. Bitter cold slashed his cheeks, sending shivers up his spine. Steeling his breath, he headed for the barn. Shadows moved in the wind, but that wasn't what he'd seen. Something—someone was out there.

He held out his weapon as he approached the barn. "Turn around slowly and put your hands on your head."

He shone his flashlight into the shadows. "Caden?"

His brother stepped up in front of him. "What are you doing out here?"

"Just checking things over one last time. I can't see those guys

coming after her tonight, but saw someone moving around and had to check it out. What are you doing?"

Caden let out a low laugh. "I think we're both a bit on edge. It hasn't been that long since Gabby's and Liam's lives were in danger, and now this..."

Griffin stepped into the shelter of the barn behind his brother. "I have to admit, this situation has me rattled and they've crossed my mind once or twice the past few hours."

Caden shot him a smile. "Gabby fell in love with Liam during all of that. The same thing could happen to you."

"Seriously? There's a killer after the woman I'm protecting, and you're thinking about matchmaking?" Griffin frowned. "I'm not doing this because I think she's beautiful or charming. I'm just doing my job."

"If you say so."

"Caden, you can't seriously be going there. I don't even know her."

His brother let out a low chuckle. "You know I'm just kidding, though it has been a while since you've been in a relationship. I'm just thinking of your happiness. Mom told me Tory's both beautiful and charming."

Griffin headed into one of the stalls to check the supply of feed, even though it wasn't his job.

Caden followed him, stopping in the doorway. "I'm sorry."

"Forget it. That was a long time ago. I just haven't found what I'm looking for."

“What are you looking for?”

He headed into the next stall, wanting to ignore the question. Wanting to ignore the entire topic.

“You’re not exactly one to give relationship advice.”

The four brothers had fought like cats and dogs growing up, but in the end they would have sacrificed anything for each other. Caden and his fiancée had broken off their engagement the night before their wedding. He’d never told Griffin the entire story of what had happened, and Griffin had never pushed. Just like he’d never shared with Caden all the details of losing Lilly.

But none of that mattered right now.

“What I just said crossed the line,” Griffin said.

“Forget it. It’s just that you’ve just seemed...lost lately.”

Griffin stepped out of the stall. “I’m fine. Busy at work and church... There’s nothing to complain about.”

“But that’s not always enough, is it?”

“I just...” He stopped. Wasn’t that the same question he’d been asking himself? What was he looking for?

Satisfied the horses had what they needed for the night, Griffin buttoned the top of his coat. He needed to get back to the house to ensure everything was okay there.

“If things were different, I might not mind getting to know her, but she can’t remember much more than her name, which makes it a bit hard.” He stopped just inside the doorway leading outside and rested his hands on his hips. “I think the stress of all of this is taking more of a toll than I realized.”

“She’s going to be fine,” Caden said, heading toward the door with him. “She’s got you as her guardian.”

He was cold and tired and needed to get a good night’s sleep if he was going to be able to do his job. “We both should get some sleep.”

“Agreed. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Griffin walked back to the house and made another sweep of the perimeter, knowing he wouldn’t sleep tonight. While the chances of Jinx or his men facing this storm seemed slim, he still wasn’t going to dismiss the possibility. That meant he couldn’t put his guard down.

He glanced up at the window of the room where Tory was sleeping then shifted his gaze toward the shadows in the living room. This time he wasn’t imagining anything. Someone had broken into the house.

FIVE

Tory woke with a start. After hours of not being able to sleep, she'd finally dozed off only to be jerked back awake. It was still dark outside and she had no idea what had startled her. She grabbed her phone to check the time. It was only half past twelve. Maybe she hadn't been asleep as long as she'd thought.

She crawled out of bed, shoved her feet into her thick slippers and then stopped in front of the window. Snow was falling and had already covered the ground with several inches. Griffin had been right. Jinx might have escaped, but he couldn't find her here. The authorities would catch him and all this would be over.

At least that's what she prayed would happen. Somehow she was pretty sure it wasn't going to be that easy.

If she testified, he'd send someone after her.

If she didn't testify, he'd go free and probably still send someone after her.

There was no way to win.

A memory flickered in the recesses of her mind as she headed out of her room, but she couldn't catch it. She'd head downstairs to get a drink then try to go back to sleep. Try to not dwell on the fact that her memories were locked up in a place she couldn't access.

She'd have to read the additional case files the FBI had sent over and, she hoped, uncover clues to what for now had been lost.

But there was something unnerving about trying to find out who you were in a government file.

Another noise snapped her out of her thoughts. Someone was moving inside the house. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled, but she knew it was probably just Griffin or his parents. She drew in a deep breath, trying to slow her heart rate. It wasn't anything sinister. Like her, he was probably having trouble sleeping.

She dismissed the fear and headed down the main staircase and into the kitchen.

“Tory.”

She spun around. “Griffin?”

A sigh of relief escaped her lips. She'd let her imagination take over but she'd been right. There was nothing to be afraid of.

“There are two men in the house,” he whispered.

“What?”

The night-light in the living room went out, leaving them in darkness.

“They've cut the electricity.”

Fear pressed against her chest. This couldn't be happening. She was supposed to be safe here. But now...

Griffin motioned for her to stay quiet as he grabbed her hand and pulled her across the kitchen toward the laundry room. “They're here in the house. Upstairs. I don't know how you managed to miss them, but I need you to come with me.”

She went willingly, an indication in her mind of how much

she trusted him. But trust didn't take away the panic engulfing her. Jinx had no intention of simply disappearing. He wanted her dead and was willing to battle a storm to take her out.

She caught the glint of the handgun Griffin held as the moonlight streamed through the window and wondered how it had come to this. She was supposed to be safe here. A shelter in the storm until the FBI could retrieve her. She had to have known she was putting her life at risk when she'd decided to testify against a man like Jinx, but now she was risking Griffin's family's lives, too. She didn't want that. And she had no desire for him to put his life on the line to fight for her. But what other options did they have at this point?

He pulled her into the laundry room and shut the door behind them. She had a dozen questions to ask Griffin. Like, how were they going to escape? But all she really needed to know was that Jinx's men—and maybe Jinx himself—were here in the house and, with the storm in full force outside, escaping was going to be next to impossible.

How were they supposed to hide when there was nowhere to go?

Griffin released her hand and pulled out a handheld two-way radio. "Caden...we've got two intruders in the house."

"Where are you?"

"Downstairs in the laundry room."

"You need to get her to the safe room."

"That was my plan, but they're blocking it."

“Can you take them out?” Caden asked.

“Yes, but I could use some backup. I’d rather avoid someone getting hurt in a confrontation.”

“What about Mom and Dad?”

“I haven’t been able to get through to them.”

“I’m on my way to the house now.”

“Copy that.”

She heard movement behind them. The door swung open, followed by a bright light and then everything went dark.

Tory grabbed Griffin’s arm, though she couldn’t see or hear anything. Someone pulled her up but she couldn’t make out who it was. Was it Griffin or one of Jinx’s men? She couldn’t tell. Her ears were ringing and her heart pounded as her vision came back into focus. Someone grabbed her from behind but Griffin pounced on the man, forcing him to lose his grip. Free, she snatched an iron off the dryer and swung at a second man with everything she had. A moment later the man dropped to the ground.

Griffin grabbed her hand. “We need to get out of here. Can you run?”

“Yeah.” She still wasn’t sure where he planned to go, but she wasn’t going to wait to find out.

He swung open the outside door and helped her down the porch stairs. The cold hit her like a freight train. She was wearing sweats, a long T-shirt and slippers with soles, but that wasn’t enough to protect her from the freezing temperatures or the

snow that was still falling. It wouldn't take long, exposed in this weather, to bring on the first stages of hypothermia.

She didn't question his decision as they headed for the barn, but there was no way they could take a horse out into this weather. That left them with no real escape as far as she could tell. But Griffin had a plan. He had to.

Her lungs hurt as she took in a breath. "Where are we going?"

"To the barn. We've got a couple snowmobiles there."

They crossed the gravel driveway that was now covered with several inches of white, the only light a sliver of moon reflecting off the falling snow. She had no idea what had happened to his parents, but she had a feeling that Jacob and Marci O'Callaghan could take care of themselves.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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