

Love Inspired SUSPENSE



CHRISTMAS

WITNESS PROTECTION

Maggie K. Black



Maggie K. Black
Christmas Witness Protection
Серия «Mills & Boon
Love Inspired Suspense»
Серия «Protected Identities», книга 1

Аннотация

A witness targeted...and on the run The first Protected Identities novel When key witness Corporal Holly Asher is abducted, Detective Noah Wilder risks everything to rescue her. Now they're undercover as an engaged couple, hiding from a sinister hacker group—who plan on exposing every witness in protection on Christmas Eve. But can Noah and Holly stop a deadly conspiracy...without tipping off those who want to kill her?

Содержание

MILLS & BOON	7
Note to Readers	8
ONE	12
TWO	29
THREE	37
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	54

A witness targeted...and on the run

The first Protected Identities novel

When key witness Corporal Holly Asher is abducted, Detective Noah Wilder risks everything to rescue her. Now they're undercover as an engaged couple, hiding from a sinister hacker group—who plan on exposing every witness in protection on Christmas Eve. But can Noah and Holly stop a deadly conspiracy...without tipping off those who want to kill her?

MAGGIE K. BLACK is an award-winning journalist and romantic suspense author with an insatiable love of traveling the world. She has lived in the American South, Europe and the Middle East. She now makes her home in Canada with her history-teacher husband, their two beautiful girls and a small but mighty dog. Maggie enjoys connecting with her readers at maggiekblack.com.

[Also By Maggie K. Black](#)

Protected Identities

Christmas Witness Protection

True North Heroes

Undercover Holiday Fiancée

The Littlest Target

Rescuing His Secret Child

Cold Case Secrets

Amish Witness Protection

Amish Hideout

Military K-9 Unit

Standing Fast

True North Bodyguards

Kidnapped at Christmas

Rescue at Cedar Lake

Protective Measures

Discover more at millsandboon.co.uk.

Christmas Witness Protection

Maggie K. Black

MILLS & BOON

www.millsandboon.co.uk

ISBN: 978-1-474-09758-1

CHRISTMAS WITNESS PROTECTION

© 2019 Mags Storey

Published in Great Britain 2019

by Mills & Boon, an imprint of HarperCollins *Publishers* 1

London Bridge Street, London, SE1 9GF

All rights reserved including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form. This edition is published by arrangement with Harlequin Books S.A.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, locations and incidents are purely fictional and bear no relationship to any real life individuals, living or dead, or to any actual places, business establishments, locations, events or incidents. Any resemblance is entirely coincidental.

By payment of the required fees, you are granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right and licence to download and install this e-book on your personal computer, tablet computer, smart phone or other electronic reading device only (each a “Licensed Device”) and to access, display and read the text of this e-book on-screen on your Licensed Device. Except to the extent any of these acts shall be permitted pursuant to any mandatory provision of applicable law but no further, no part of this e-book or its text or images may be reproduced, transmitted, distributed, translated, converted or adapted for use on another file format, communicated to the public, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of publisher.

® and ™ are trademarks owned and used by the trademark owner and/or its licensee. Trademarks marked with ® are registered with the United Kingdom Patent Office and/or the Office for Harmonisation in the Internal Market and in other countries.

www.millsandboon.co.uk

Version: 2020-03-02

MILLS & BOON

Before you start reading, why not sign up?

Thank you for downloading this Mills & Boon book. If you want to hear about exclusive discounts, special offers and competitions, sign up to our email newsletter today!

[SIGN ME UP!](#)

Or simply visit

signup.millsandboon.co.uk

Mills & Boon emails are completely free to receive and you can unsubscribe at any time via the link in any email we send you.

Note to Readers

This ebook contains the following accessibility features which, if supported by your device, can be accessed via your ereader/accessibility settings:

- Change of font size and line height
- Change of background and font colours
- Change of font
- Change justification
- Text to speech

“I’m guessing you don’t like this plan...”

“I don’t want anyone risking their life for me,” Holly said, her voice quiet.

Noah pulled back just enough that he could see her face, and something caught in his chest to see the worry and pain there. She’d radiated pure defiance and strength when he first laid eyes on her. Now something else hovered within the green depths of her eyes: vulnerability.

“Hey, it’s okay,” he said. “They’re amazing cops, and it’s a team effort. We’ll get you working with a sketch artist and going over mug shots. The two most important things right now are keeping you safe to testify against General Bertie and stopping the Imposters, and both of those involve my keeping you alive.”

But still her head was shaking, and he could feel the softness of her pixie cut brushing against his fingertips.

“Look, I get it,” he said. “I really do.”

“No, you really don’t,” she said. “I don’t think I can identify the Imposters. I can’t remember what their faces look like...”

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the first book of my new Stolen Identities series. I hope you enjoy it! The best part of writing the True North Heroes and True North Protectors series was getting to know the characters better as I watched their lives crisscross each other’s stories. Now I’m excited to do it again in this new witness protection series, while bringing back both Liam Bearsmith and Seth Miles for more adventures.

I wrote this book while recovering from a concussion. During the slow recovery, I realized my usual way of sitting down and writing a book wasn’t working, and so I had to come up with new strategies. I owe a huge debt of thanks to my editor, Emily Rodmell, and agent, Melissa Jeglinski, for their patience and help in getting my writing back on track.

I hope that whatever you’re going through, you are surrounded by people who support and love you. And that when needed, God will help you find those people and bring them into your life.

Thank you again, as always, for sharing this journey with me.

Maggie

The bricks are fallen down, but we will build with hewn stones:
the sycamores are cut down, but we will change them into cedars.

—Isaiah 9:10

To Zachary. Thanks for the left hook.

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Back Cover Text](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Booklist](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Note to Readers](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Dear Reader](#)

[Bible Verse](#)

[Dedication](#)

[ONE](#)

[TWO](#)

[THREE](#)

[FOUR](#)

[FIVE](#)

[SIX](#)

[SEVEN](#)

[EIGHT](#)

[NINE](#)

[TEN](#)

[ELEVEN](#)

[TWELVE](#)

[THIRTEEN](#)

[FOURTEEN](#)

Extract

About the Publisher

ONE

It was a week until Christmas, and the early morning sky was every bit as cold and gray as the icy waters of Lake Ontario and the concrete loading docks that surrounded the car now transporting Corporal Holly Asher to her new life in witness protection. Her eyes flickered to the passenger-side mirror as another car came into view on the empty road behind them.

A tremor of warning brushed her spine.

“That looks like the same car I saw parked outside the safe house this morning,” Holly said. “I think we’re being followed.”

Officer Elias Crane, the gray-haired witness protection officer in the driver’s seat beside her, cut a glance to the rearview mirror. He frowned. “It’s fine.”

No, it really wasn’t. Her gut told her something was wrong—very wrong—and after surviving two tours of duty overseas on a combination of faith and intuition, she wasn’t about to start ignoring either now. Something about the Royal Canadian Mounted Police detective had had Holly on edge ever since Elias had woken her up at the safe house before dawn and given her exactly five minutes to get into the car. She’d done it in four, including an external sweep of the vehicle, which he’d told her wasn’t necessary considering it was unlikely “anyone would go to too much trouble to stop someone from testifying in some government inquiry about a handful of misplaced weapons.”

That was the moment she'd first felt her jaw set. It had been far more than just a handful of weapons and they hadn't been misplaced so much as illegally bartered, sold and given to warring factions by one of the most respected generals in the Canadian military. It was an international scandal, one that had the potential to ruin General Alberto "Bertie" Frey's career. Holly had grown up in a military family and dedicated her life to serving her country. After a decade of exemplary service, she'd agreed to come forward, testify in the upcoming inquiry against her former mentor and explain the best she could exactly how a man as beloved as General Bertie had somehow allowed dozens of Canadian military firearms to end up in the hands of warring desert families in a remote area of the world where the Canadian military was deployed. For that, she'd been treated like a pariah by some of the people she'd served alongside and had her reputation dragged through the mud online. Then had come the final breaking point—three thugs had jumped her one night in downtown Ottawa and tried to intimidate her, later claiming to police that some stranger had paid them to show her just how bad her life could get if she didn't keep her mouth shut. But they'd clearly underestimated the strength and power of the woman they were trying to scare out of testifying.

Even then she wouldn't have delayed deployment on a third tour of duty or gone into witness protection if the RCMP hadn't insisted and the inquiry hadn't wanted to risk losing their star witness.

“I’m telling you it’s the same car.” She opened the sun visor mirror and took a better look, glancing past her own short-cropped black hair and the dark shadows that framed her green eyes. She couldn’t see the driver’s face in the darkness, but something about the sense of alert tension that seemed to radiate through his muscular arms and broad shoulders was anything but forgettable. “Could be a potential hostile.”

“This is Canada, not Afghanistan.” A chuckle slipped from Elias’s lips, and Holly felt her spine stiffen. He gestured to the rearview mirror. “And that’s just Detective Wilder. He’s got a bit of a burr stuck in his fur about our drive.”

“Why is he concerned?” she asked. “Has he been assigned to me, as well? Is there something wrong with my new temporary identity?”

The irritation that flashed in Elias’s eyes told her the answer to the third question at least was no.

“Look, Corporal, it’s fine,” he said. “Can I call you Hildy?”

“No.” Because it wasn’t her name and she’d never been one for being called anything other than who or what she was. Her given first name was Hildegard, an old-fashioned family name shared by both her mother and grandmother. Her parents and very closest friends had always called her Holly, in part because she was born on Christmas Day. For everyone else in her life Asher would do. “Either Asher or Corporal is fine.”

“Well, then, just learn to relax, Corporal, or it’s gonna be a really long drive.”

But how could she relax when something inside kept telling her something was wrong?

Help me, Lord. Something's not right. I can feel it. Help me know what it is and what to do about it.

A phone began to ring. She reached in vain for the cell that used to be in her pocket before she'd entered witness protection, and then realized it had to be Elias's. The officer yanked his phone from his own pocket and her eyes barely caught the name on the screen before he held it to his ear. *Det. Noah Wilder.*

"Back off, Wilder," Elias said. "I've got it covered. I don't need your help. I've been doing this since before you were in diapers and you're not even supposed to be on active duty!"

She didn't hear whatever answer Detective Wilder gave, but it seemed to be taking him a long time to say it. Elias was still driving with his phone to his ear and one hand on the steering wheel. Then he wedged the phone into his shoulder and his left hand darted out of sight. A loud and sudden click resounded through the car. Officer Elias had activated the child safety locks. He'd locked her in? Why had he locked her in? Elias swerved up an on-ramp and onto the elevated highway that ran through Toronto's downtown core. For a moment, the city spread out below her and skyscrapers pressed in around them. Then he darted down another ramp and back into a maze of docks and warehouses. Green and red cardboard letters in the windows of an ugly brick building wished her a Merry Christmas. She glanced back. The blue car had stayed on the highway and was

now traveling parallel to them on the road above.

“You were wrong, plain and simple,” Elias said. “The safe house was clean, the route wasn’t contaminated and—Yes, I’m sure it’s really her! I’m not about to pick up some imposter!”

He said the last word so loudly it seemed to reverberate inside the car. Warehouses hemmed them in on either side. Fleeting glimpses of ships docked in Toronto’s harbor rose to her right, through the narrow, vertical slits between buildings. He turned down another, even narrower street, and though the man was old enough to be her grandfather, her own years of tactical experience made the hair stand up at the back of her neck. Not only did he not take her, or apparently Detective Wilder, seriously, he’d chosen a route with terrible lines of sight.

“You know, Corporal,” Elias started, and it took her a second to realize he was now talking to her, “sometimes you’ve got to ask yourself if whatever stand you’re trying to make is really worth all the trouble it’s gonna put you through.”

Gunshots split the air to their left, taking out the tires and shattering the driver’s and back seat windows in a spray of bullets and broken glass. The phone fell from Elias’s hand. His lifeless body slumped over the steering wheel. The vehicle swerved wildly.

No one was driving the car!

“Help me, God!” The words flew from her lips as she lunged for the wheel and fought to straighten the car. But the vehicle began to speed faster, as the pressure of Elias’s full weight landed

hard on the accelerator. She yanked her seat belt off, then threw her leg over the center console, kicking his foot off the pedal and pressing her own on the brake. The car spun on the icy ground. She clenched her jaw and tried to force the wheels to the right. But they reached a lamppost first, taking out the front of the hood as the vehicle slid into it. Her head slammed against the dashboard, then her body landed back against the seat. Pain filled her skull. The sound of a horn filled her ears as Elias fell against it.

“Hello? Hello?” A male’s voice, deep and disjointed, floated up from somewhere below her. “Are you there?”

She pulled herself back into the passenger seat, checked Elias’s neck for a pulse and couldn’t find one. *Lord, have mercy on Elias and those who love him.* Then she felt around on the floor behind her for the phone.

“Hello?” She’d snatched it to her ear so quickly nausea swept over her. “Hello?”

“Corporal Hildegard Asher?” Detective Wilder’s voice was warm and concerned, with just the faintest hint of a growl, and for some reason made her think of the protective wolf character from a book she’d loved as a kid.

“Speaking,” she said. She slid the phone into the crook of her neck and carefully pulled Elias’s service weapon from his holster.

“I’m Detective Noah Wilder,” he said. “You can call me Noah. Are you okay? Where are you? Where’s Detective Crane?”

“Detective Crane was shot and appears to be deceased.”

She heard Noah whisper a prayer as she looked around. Her head was pounding, and it seemed to be affecting her ability to focus. Brick buildings and gray empty streets filled her gaze through the maze of broken glass. Noah's blue car was nowhere to be seen.

"Our vehicle was shot, and we crashed," she added. "I'm as okay as can be expected. But I can't see any street signs. Hang on, I'll go search the area."

"No, stay in the car," he said. "Wait there, until I can find you and assess the situation."

Her eyes rolled. She was just fine assessing the situation on her own, thank you very much, and then she could help him locate her and brief him better on his arrival. If only her head would stop pounding.

"Don't worry," Noah added. His voice softened. "It's all going to be okay. What happened?"

She opened her mouth to tell him, then closed it again. It had all happened just seconds before and yet somehow her mind was fuzzy.

"Gunshots came from our left," she said. "I didn't see the shooter."

"And then?" he asked.

"Then the vehicle lost control. I had to grab the wheel and force it to stop. We crashed."

And she'd hit her head. Motion dragged her attention back to the window. She looked up. A white cop car was pulling

into the alley in front of her. A slim, uniformed officer sat behind the wheel. In recent years, Toronto police had slowly started swapping out their signature white cars for nondescript gray cruisers that blended perfectly into the dreary city streets in winter. But this one was an older model, its white hood reflecting the dim street light against the predawn sky. She glanced to the mirror. A second police vehicle was pulling up behind. It, too, contained just one officer—a large figure in a peaked uniform cap. “The cops are here. I’m going to go talk to them.”

She grabbed the handle and pushed the door open.

“Wait! No! Stay in the car!” Noah’s voice rose. “They might not be cops!”

What? What did he mean by that?

“What do they look like?”

“The cops?” she asked. “One’s big. One’s skinny. I can’t really see their faces or give you much of a description from this distance.”

Tires screeched. The vehicles ahead and behind her surged forward, as if both drivers were mashing their accelerators at once. They were coming up fast on either side, trapping her in the middle. She leaped from Crane’s ruined car and started to run, feeling another wave of nausea sweep over her. *Help me, Lord!* The cruisers roared closer. She rolled, tucking her body tight and desperately hurling herself out of the way. The phone fell from her hand. She heard the screech of metal smashing hard against metal. Slush and dirt flew, spraying over her.

She lay still for a moment, shivering on the cold ground, urging her body to rise. Then she heard footsteps running toward her.

“I’ll grab the phone and laptop, you grab the girl.” The voice was thin, high-pitched, and made her think of a weasel. Then large, rough hands grabbed Holly. “We can use her.”



RCMP Detective Noah Wilder scanned the cold, dark Toronto streets for any sign of Elias’s car. The officer’s phone was dead, Corporal Asher was gone and he’d lost sight of the vehicle when the overpass had turned slightly to the north. But he’d heard the sound of gunshots, and a car crash had split the morning air.

He never should’ve done what Crane wanted and backed off. Yes, the old officer had served for so long he’d twice declined retirement and now chose his own assignments. But he was also too set in his ways and didn’t understand the nature of dark web threats. Not that Noah was exactly an expert, but he had an excellent source. One that had told him there’d been chatter in the seedier corners of the internet that a pair of cyber terrorists, called the Imposters, was going to hijack Corporal Asher’s witness protection transfer.

But why? And what for? What would a pair of notorious dark web hackers and thieves want with a military corporal? He still had no idea. He just wished he was wrong.

Noah opened his window. Cold wind and the smell of burning

fuel assailed him at once. For a moment the sound of the crash still seemed to bounce and echo off deserted buildings in the frosty morning air. Then they faded, and silence descended again. He pulled up one street and down another. Three cars came into view, mashed and tangled together. There were two white cop cars, with Crane's vehicle in the middle.

Noah stopped the engine, pulled his weapon from its holster, thankful he'd maintained his authorization to carry a handgun. Then he leaped out and ran toward the wreck. Thick snow swirled down from the sky above him. The passenger door and trunk of Elias's vehicle were open. The elderly officer lay against the steering wheel, and even at a glance Noah could tell he hadn't made it. Corporal Asher was nowhere to be seen. Sets of footprints spread across the ground were quickly disappearing in the blanketing snow.

God, please help me find her.

He grabbed his phone and hit a number. Seth Miles answered before it had even rung once. "Hey, Noah? I'm getting intel that the Imposters might be posing as cops."

Seth was what was known in the tech industry as a "white hat" computer hacker because he only used his considerable powers for good. He was notorious for taking down and exposing abuse and corruption in places of power, starting with his own violent military general father. For years Seth had tried to be more of a heroic outlaw, hacking at will, infiltrating various criminal organizations and tipping off law enforcement, while skirting

laws that got in his way. Then some violent criminals, linked to organized crime, had kidnapped him, hoping to use him for their own purposes, and Noah had saved his life.

“Too late,” Noah said. “Looks like they already found Officer Crane and Corporal Asher. Are you tapped into whatever area surveillance you can get of the Port Lands around the water filtration plants—”

“That would mean bending the terms of my witness protection agreement—” Seth started.

“Understood,” Noah cut him off. He’d been responsible for Seth’s protection for eighteen months and knew all too well the terms he’d agreed to, as well as his habit of skirting them. Noah didn’t much like it, but that was a battle he’d have to save for another day. “But you already opened this can of worms when you tipped me off and I’m asking not instructing. Right now you’re an informant in a possible murder and possible kidnapping. I’m looking at a car crash, a missing whistle-blower and a dead RCMP officer. I think the Imposters took Hildegard.”

“Sorry, on it.” Seth took a sharp breath. Then came the sounds of typing. “I think her friends call her Holly, by the way. I’m guessing it’s because she was born on Christmas.”

Holly.

Noah’s mind flashed to the image of the strong, slender and attractive woman with dark hair and piercing green eyes he’d seen in her file. Yes, that name suited her better.

“Rumor is she hates being called Hildegard,” Seth added.

“You know her personally?” Noah asked.

“I know of her,” he said. “We both grew up military, went to the same high school for a year and even as a teenager she had a reputation for being exceptionally talented at both precision shooting and hand-to-hand combat.”

“What can you tell me about the Imposters?” Noah asked.

“They’re cyber terrorists,” Seth said. “In it for the money and not ideology. It’s believed there are only two of them. The huge hulking one who manhandles and hurts people goes by the handle the Ghoul. The other is a lot smaller and goes by the Wraith. They say he’s Canada’s second best hacker.”

No guess who Seth thought the best was.

“They go after very large-scale targets,” Seth added. “Hundreds of thousands if not millions of dollars. They’re ruthless and mercenary. In it for money and destruction. They’ve been known to both wear disguises and kidnap people to use online as proxies, before killing them. It’s said that no one has ever seen either of their faces and lived.”

The typing stopped.

“Okay, I think I’ve got you,” Seth said. “Skipped the street cameras and went for piggybacking on a satellite. Just zooming in. Now I can see you. What do you need?”

“Everyone. Local police, RCMP, ambulance and our missing whistle-blower,” Noah said. “Any hostiles in the area?”

“Nope, you’re all clear,” Seth said. “I’m trying to track where the Imposters took Holly now.”

Hopefully, they were still on foot and hadn't gotten far. In the meantime, Noah would go old-school.

"I've got footprints," he said, "and I'm going to follow them. If you see anyone or anything coming my way, let me know."

"Will do." Seth kept typing.

Noah started toward the footprints, weapon at the ready, following the faint and fading indentations in the snow. How had they managed to take her alive? When he'd been parked down the road from her safe house, he'd watched as she walked out to Elias's car and insisted on doing a visual sweep of it herself, like a pro. Then she'd glanced his way and for one fleeting moment, her eyes had locked on his face, and it was like someone had sucked all the air from his lungs. Corporal Holly Asher was beautiful in a way he'd never expected from her file, with cropped black hair that perfectly framed her face and a strong, straight, almost regal bearing. Her military file alone had been enough to catch his eye. She was brilliant, talented, decorated and brave. But there was something else to her, too, a quality that had made it hard to look away.

Just keep fighting, Holly. Wherever you are, just keep fighting until I can get to you.

"Give me something!" Noah reached the end of the alley and looked around. The snow fell heavier now, wiping out any hint of footprints there might have been. He heard more keyboard taps. Each second ticked by, longer than he could stand.

"Got her," Seth said. "Warehouse. One street over to your

right and three doors down.”

“On it.” Noah started running. “I need you to call this in for me. Call everyone. Toronto cops. RCMP. The whole shebang.”

“Already done.” Seth sounded worried. “But those aren’t secure lines. Anyone good enough to pull this off can hack into them.”

“I know.” Noah reached the next corner and dived into an alley. Dirty red and gray brick hemmed him in on either side. “But we have to do this by the book the best we can.”

A row of doors appeared to his right.

“I just can’t guarantee who you’re going to get showing up,” Seth said, “and whether they’re going to be real or Imposters. Also, I think there could be a leak within the RCMP. Either that or someone in the military who happened to know everything about Holly’s protection detail and Elias’s movements. I just can’t see any other way the Imposters would’ve gotten enough information to set this up and kidnap her this way. There has to be a mole. Or some other way the RCMP has been infiltrated.”

“I figured,” Noah said. “That’s why I’m also going to need an extraction team.”

Fellow undercover RCMP detectives, who he knew were in the city, people he trusted with his life, who’d been through their own tricky and dangerous assignments and survived. Officers who, like him, were currently off active duty or on leave, so couldn’t have been tainted by whatever mole or leak there might be inside the RCMP. “Get me Mack Gray, Jessica Eddington

and Liam Bearsmith.”

“Assemble the renegade detectives,” Seth said. “I like it. Should I worry that none are currently on active duty?”

“No,” Noah said. It was none of his business, any more than the personal reasons he was technically on vacation were theirs. Liam was on six months medical leave after being beaten into a short-term coma when his cover was blown. He looked as strong as an ox on the outside, but Noah suspected that whatever had happened had left lingering scars. As for Mack and Jess, all he knew was that both were facing some kind of review for something that had happened on a past assignment. “Just be thankful we have three of the best cops in the entire world available to help us out of this mess.”

“What do I tell them?” Seth asked.

“To get somewhere close and stand by.”

“And what do I say if they ask about my connection to all this?” Seth asked. “You know I don’t work for you.”

Like Seth hadn’t volunteered for this the moment he’d brought it to Noah’s attention.

“Tell them you’re that famous hacker guy I once rescued from the trunk of a car and dragged safely through a hail of bullets.”

Seth chuckled. “Do they know *you’re* not on active duty?”

Noah didn’t answer. He’d landed an important promotion within witness protection, only to discover there was a glitch in gaining the necessary higher level security clearance due to a major financial mess his foster brother Caleb had gotten him

into. It had left him in a bit of a limbo and, for now, he was using up vacation time and not being assigned any new cases until he decided what to do about it. But that didn't mean he wasn't cleared to work.

On the plus side, being off the clock had given him the freedom to take a personal interest in Elias's transfer of Holly, when Seth had tipped him off that there might be a problem. And while Elias clearly hadn't wanted Noah butting his nose in his assignment—let alone showing up in person when Elias hadn't taken him seriously—he was really thankful he had.

Noah reached the third door. His gloved hand grabbed the industrial handle and pulled. It didn't budge. "Am I at the right door?"

"Yup," Seth said.

"Got it." Noah reared back and kicked hard. The door flew open. A long dark hallway lay before him.

"Just to be clear," Seth said. "Once you go in there, I won't have eyes. I might not even have ears, depending on how deep the building goes and if it has a signal jammer. You'll be on your own."

"Got it," Noah repeated. He'd never minded working alone, and he didn't want the sound of him talking on the phone, or even listening to someone on the other end, potentially alerting anyone he might want to sneak up on. "Put me on hold, assemble the troops, stay ready and I'll get back to you soon."

"Sounds good. Stay safe."

“I’ll try.” Noah ended the call, put his phone on silent and slid it into his pocket. Then he raised his weapon high. *Help me, Lord. I don’t know what I’m walking into.*

Noah stepped into the warehouse. Darkness enveloped him. He crept down the hallway, following the lines of the walls as they curved and twisted deeper into the building. His rubber-soled boots moved silently on the concrete floor.

The gray, rectangular outline of a slightly open door finally appeared ahead. Noah sucked in a breath and prayed, eased the door open and stepped through slowly. He emerged onto a catwalk overlooking a warehouse. Cardboard boxes and tarp-covered pallets filled the space below and were piled high around him.

And then he saw Holly.

The corporal sat in a chair facing him, alone in a gap in the middle of the warehouse. Her hands seemed bound behind her back, but her legs were free. She looked up at him, her face full of strength and determination. His heart lurched.

Then her eyes darted to her right and she gave a slight nod, as if acknowledging he was there and indicating she wanted him to see something. He stepped forward, following her gaze, and dread surged inside his core as he saw what she was gesturing to.

It was a video camera.

TWO

A large man stepped into view, blocking Noah's sight of Holly and the camera. He was huge, tall and broad, dressed in a dark navy police uniform with a hat pulled low. This would be the Ghoul, Noah guessed. He felt his breath tighten in his chest, willing the man to move. He had to see Holly's face for just a moment longer. He had to know she'd seen him and that she knew he was there. He needed her to know that he would help her, even if he didn't yet know how he was going to do that.

Holly was at least two stories below him and several rows of boxes and shipping containers away. Noah's phone buzzed in his pocket. He stepped back and reached for it, thankful he'd put his usual ringtone on silent and expecting to see Seth's name or that of a fellow officer. Instead the name Dr. Anne Reed filled the screen. He hesitated. While he was growing up, his family had fostered over a dozen children for different lengths of time.

He'd gotten to know Anne as a teenager, when she'd started dating his foster brother Caleb. Due to her own rough family life, she'd quickly become a nearly permanent fixture in the Wilder home. Anne and Caleb had had a baby together at eighteen and been married at nineteen. She was the closest thing Noah had ever had to a sister, and he considered their children his niece and nephew. But while Anne had excelled in school and become a medical doctor in her midtwenties, Caleb had careened through

life, squandering away every cent and advantage he'd been given, relapsing after two stints in rehab for a gambling addiction and bouncing from one personal mistake to the next. His relationship with Anne was strained. He'd left her and the kids more than once, before always deciding to come back and give it another try. Caleb had also cut off all contact with Noah almost a year ago thanks to a joint business venture that Noah had invested his life savings in to help keep Caleb from gambling away the money Noah's parents had left him and get his life back on track, only to have Caleb mismanage it so badly, it might cost Noah his higher level security clearance.

If Anne was phoning him now, before seven in the morning, after almost a year of estrangement, it had to be urgent. He needed to take the call. Just not immediately.

One emergency at a time. Noah breathed a prayer that Caleb, Anne and the kids were safe, and then declined the call.

A light switched on below him and suddenly the space where Holly sat was bathed in a pool of light, but he still couldn't see past the large man blocking his view of her face. Noah stepped closer to the railing. A cable came into view, then a tripod and finally a video camera that the Ghoul seemed to be fiddling with.

Dread surged up inside Noah's core like a geyser. He steeled himself and stepped to the very edge of the catwalk. A second figure in police uniform came into view, this one slender and smaller, sitting at a folding table with a laptop in front of him. Noah guessed that would be the Wraith. Then, as he watched,

the hulking form between him and Holly stepped aside and for one long moment revealed her face again. Holly's eyes looked up, directly at Noah, seeming to latch onto his gaze just as directly as they had earlier that morning in front of the safe house.

She knew he was there.

He wasn't sure how well she could see his features at this distance, or if she had any idea that he was there to help her. But he felt the need to let her know that she could trust him, that he was safe, had her back and would help her—even if he still didn't know how. He flashed her a quick thumbs-up and smiled. A goofy gesture, maybe, but one he hoped would let her know he was on her side. She nodded ever so slightly in response. Her eyes were on his face, keen and intent, as if they were asking him a question. They were asking him for something, and he knew that no matter what, he wasn't going to let her down.

He nodded back. *Yeah, Holly, I'm here. I'm on your side. And with God's help we're going to get out of here alive.*

The faintest glimmer of a grin crossed Holly's lips. Then she shouted, "Hey! Who's that behind you on the catwalk?"

Holly had told her kidnappers he was there? Why? What reason could she possibly have for tipping them off and blowing his cover? The Ghoul glanced back toward Noah, skeptically at first, but his eyes quickly widening as he realized someone actually was there. *Yeah, me.* The Wraith slammed the laptop closed and took off running into the rows of boxes and shipping pallets. The Ghoul yanked a gun from his belt, raised his weapon

and fixed Noah in his sights.

Holly struck before the thug could fire, leaping to her feet like a fury and spinning, swinging the folding chair around behind her like a weapon. The metal legs caught the criminal in the back of his knees and sent him stumbling forward onto the ground. The gun misfired, and the bullet flew somewhere high above their heads.

Had Holly really been so confident in her ability to disarm the criminal before he could get off a shot that she'd taken the risk of using Noah as a diversion? And a "hey, look behind you!" trick at that? The Ghoul turned back and lunged for her. But Holly was ready for him, with a swift roundhouse kick that sent him stumbling to the floor and the gun flying from his hands. Noah's heart jolted as if someone had just sent an electric current shooting through it. She was fighting back, against an armed kidnapper, with her hands still tied to a chair, even as he could see her strength and energy flagging.

Noah was beyond shocked. He was even beyond impressed.

Above all, he was determined that she wouldn't fight alone. The metal catwalk stretched out on either side of him. Staircases descended into the warehouse at opposite ends. It would take him too long to reach either one, and Holly had been alone without backup long enough.

He vaulted over the railing and let his body drop down into the boxes below.



Holly watched from the corner of her eye as the man on the catwalk dropped out of sight into the piles of boxes. Was she right? Had it been Detective Noah Wilder? She didn't know for sure. But friend or foe, he'd been a distraction she could use to draw enemy attention while she fought for her survival. And thankfully, she'd disarmed the bigger of the two criminals before he could fire at him.

But now what? Pain still pounded through her head and seemed to radiate through her body. The headache was steadily growing worse. She stumbled forward, feeling the weight of the chair straining her arms and nearly yanking her shoulders out of their sockets. The apparently fake police officer who'd kidnapped her lunged at her once more. She swung the chair around again hard, using the metal frame attached to her wrists as both a weapon and a shield. It made impact, she heard a crack and then—thank God—the weight of the chair fell from her arms as the bottom of the metal frame gave way. She shook herself free.

Okay, her hands were still tied, but at least she'd gotten rid of the chair. Now what?

The dull, worrying ache in her skull was like nothing she'd ever felt before and seemed to radiate through her mind, clouding her ability to think. The big guy was down on the ground now, but even though she'd gotten in a few good blows, she didn't expect him to stay there for long. The small guy was nowhere to be seen. She spun back, and the room began to spin with her, sliding in

and out of focus like a scene from an old-fashioned projector movie that wasn't sitting right in its frame.

Something was very wrong. *Help me, God!* Prayers beat like a drum through Holly's aching mind. She had to get out of there. She ran, darting down the closest aisle in the maze of towering pallets. Shipping containers and plastic-wrapped boxes rose around her, seeming to wave and move as she passed, like seaweed shimmering underwater. She pressed on, looking for an exit and pushing herself deeper into the labyrinthine maze, hearing her kidnappers pelting down the rows behind her, growing closer with every step.

Too late, she saw a man leap down in front of her. He landed in a crouching position, on the balls of his feet. Then he unfurled to his full height, filling the space ahead of her and blocking her way. She was trapped. She couldn't turn around. There was nowhere to run. The only way out was through.

The man in front of her raised his hands, and all her mind could focus on was that there was a gun in his right one. She didn't wait to give him the opportunity to point it at her. Holly squared her shoulders, lowered her head and ran right at him, like he was nothing but a tackling dummy back in basic training. *Help me, Lord!*

"Corporal Asher!" His voice, deep and warm, spoke her name. "Holly!"

Detective Noah Wilder? She knew his voice. How did he know her real name? But it was too late for her to stop. She

crashed into him, keeping her head low and her body strong. But instead of knocking him out of the way, she felt his arms part, as if to catch and receive her. She landed against his chest and he wrapped his arms around her. They tumbled onto the ground, with him on his back and her on top of him, her hands still tied behind her.

Two sets of footsteps were coming toward them now.

“I’m sorry,” Noah started. “Are you hurt?”

Sorry for what? Startling her? Catching her?

“You with them?” she asked.

“No—”

“Then let’s get out of here before they kill us.”

“Hang on.” He didn’t even hesitate. “We’re going to roll.”

Hang on how? And to what? He holstered his gun, tucked her head into the crook of his neck and lowered his own head over hers. His arms clasped tighter and then he rolled, taking her with him and sliding their bodies under the shelter of a thick blue tarp covering a pallet nearby. Footsteps and voices grew closer. He yanked the tarp down, covering them like the flap of a tent.

“You’re Wilder, right?” she whispered into his ear.

“Yeah. But I told you to call me Noah.” His voice seemed to surround her in the darkness. “I’m an RCMP detective specializing in witness protection, and I’m here to get you out of this alive.” *Got it.* “Is it okay if I call you Holly?”

“Sure.” Right now that was the least of her worries. Her kidnappers grew closer, until she heard them pass just inches

away from where they hid.

“Where did she go?” The man’s voice was thin, whiny and matched his slight frame.

“I don’t know!” the larger one snapped back.

“She saw our faces! She can identify us! We can’t let her out of here alive!”

THREE

They were right that she'd seen her kidnappers' faces, and yet, as the pain pounded through her brain, somehow she couldn't seem to draw a clear picture of them in her mind. She held her breath and prayed silently as the sound of their footsteps faded into the distance. Then she turned her attention back to the strong man who was lying beside her and still holding her in his arms.

"Don't worry," Noah whispered. "I've got you."

Had he now? Did that mean he had any idea what was going on and how they were going to make it out alive?

"Now," Noah added, "if it's okay with you, I'd like you to roll over onto your other side so I can check your wrists and untie your hands."

He loosened his hold on her body and she rolled away from him. Her head was hurting less now that she was lying down and the world had gotten quieter. The headache was probably nothing and she'd be fine just as soon as she rested.

She felt his fingers move against her wrists. "Hang on... Did you actually ask permission to free my hands?"

"Not a big fan of touching someone who might be upset without asking first," he said. "Well, anyone, really. Now, I'm going to use my knife, okay?"

"Go for it." She listened. She couldn't hear her kidnappers' footsteps or voices anymore, but that didn't mean they'd gone far.

“Who are they?” she whispered. “Why were they dressed as cops?”

“They’re cyber terrorists,” Noah said, also keeping his voice low. “They’re called the Imposters. Two-man crew. Big one goes by the handle the Ghoul. The hacker is the Wraith. Really big on staying in the shadows and not being identified. They tend to disguise themselves as law enforcement or emergency services personnel to infiltrate places without being detected. They also kidnap innocent people to do their online missives for them, which I’m guessing is why they set you up in front of the camera.”

Well, that would explain why she’d ended up tied to a chair with a camera in her face.

“Why did they target me?” she asked. “Why did they kill Elias? Does this have something to do with my testifying to the inquiry against General Bertie Frey?”

Her hands fell free. She rolled back toward him.

“I really don’t know.” Noah lifted the tarp a couple inches, enough to let a little light seep through. He was more handsome up close than she’d expected him to be. He had that slightly rugged look of a man who was over thirty and had seen his fair share of battles. His hair was dirty blond, with a short and slightly ruffled cut that, despite his age, made her think of a fresh recruit, and somehow matched the politeness of his tone. “Once I’m sure they’re gone, I’ll get you out of here to safety. We can regroup and reevaluate from there, as well as get you medical attention.”

“I’m okay,” she said reflexively. “I don’t need medical attention.”

She just needed her head to stop pounding.

“Why were you outside the safe house this morning?” she asked. “And why did you follow Elias’s car?”

The niggling in the back of her mind told her there was something else Elias had told her about Noah that she should probably ask about. But her memory of the whole past hour was a little fuzzy.

“According to one of my informants, there’d been some bad internet chatter overnight about the Imposters targeting your route this morning.”

“But why?” she pressed.

“Like I said, I don’t know.”

She suspected Mr. Polite Detective wasn’t used to having rapid-fire questions thrown at him, but now was no time for waffling. They were hidden and whispering in their impromptu foxhole, but they couldn’t stay there forever. Before she made a tactical move, she was going to learn all she could about the situation they were facing.

And the man who’d leaped to her rescue.

“Did they tell you anything?” he asked. “Do you know what they’d wanted you to read?”

“No.” She frowned. They hadn’t said much at all. “But I was left with the distinct impression they hadn’t been planning on leaving me alive when they were done with me.”

His eyes widened. They were gray like the sky before a winter's storm. She watched as a question floated there.

"What?" she asked.

"You turned down witness protection repeatedly," he said. "Why?"

"Because I love my life in the military, I love serving my country and didn't want to give it up. Even temporarily."

Her frown deepened. But to her surprise he grinned. His smile was warm, cheerful and oddly comforting.

"Now, just in case you were worried, I want to reassure you that I really am a cop," he said. "Not that I have any way of proving it to you right now, besides flashing my badge."

To her surprise, she felt a smile curve at the corner of her lips. "It's okay. I trust you on that."

"Good." He lifted the edge of the tarp slowly. "Fortunately, I got a pretty good look at the layout of this place when I was up on the catwalk. So here's the plan. We get somewhere safe, talk to people I trust, figure out what's going on and make a plan from there."

She appreciated that he'd said "we" and not "I."

"Well then," she said, "let's go."

Noah whispered a prayer under his breath. But before she could figure out what she thought about that, he'd pulled the tarp aside and slid out. "Come on!"

She crawled out from under it, leaped to her feet and ran after him. Immediately, the headache hit her again, as unexpected as

a left hook. Her knees buckled and for a moment she thought she was going to fall.

Noah stopped, turned back and stretched out his hand. “You okay?”

She looked at the palm extended toward her and hesitated.

Come on, Corporal. Just push through the pain.

“I’m fine.” She forced herself forward. “Let’s go.”

Voices sounded in the distance. Her kidnappers were searching the warehouse, no doubt looking for them. She ran on autopilot, pushing her legs to move, one after the other. Noah started jogging, matching his pace with hers. He rounded a tight corner, then stopped at the end of an aisle. A cargo loading bay lay ahead, up a steep ramp that led to a garage-style door. Light seeped through a two-foot gap at the bottom.

“Okay, so we’ve got a clear line to run from here to there,” Noah said. “We’ll have to be fast, then when we’re outside, we can lose them. Got it?”

His eyes searched her face. They were worried. She didn’t like that.

“Yeah, I got it. Let’s go.”

He ran, and she followed, keeping her head low as they pelted across the empty space and up the steep incline. So far, so good. He reached the garage door first, dropped to the ground and slid through. Then he looked back at her through the gap and waved at her to hurry. She was trying to. But it was like her legs weren’t cooperating and the ramp was growing steeper with every

step. She stumbled forward, lost her footing and grabbed a metal loading cart for support. It slipped from her fingers and rolled down the ramp, crashing into the pallets below.

“Hey, over there!” the Ghoul shouted.

A bullet flew past her head, followed quickly by a second. She dropped to the ground and began to crawl.

“Holly!” Noah’s voice drew her gaze toward the gap beneath the garage door.

“I’m coming!” She gritted her teeth and dragged her body across the floor.

Noah leaned his torso through. “Here! Take my hands!”

She did, grabbing on to both his wrists as he grasped hers. He yanked her through the gap and out into the snow. She lay there on the ground for a moment, feeling cold wind and thick flakes lash against her skin as prayers of thanks rose within her. Unexpected tears rushed to the corners of her eyes. She blinked fiercely, feeling them freeze before they could fall.

“Are you sure you’re not hurt?” Noah knelt beside her.

“I’m fine.” She gritted her teeth yet again. “I just have a really, really bad headache and it’s making me dizzy. It got better briefly when I was lying under the tarp. I just need to rest quietly for a few minutes somewhere until it goes away.”

She pulled herself up to her feet. Sirens sounded around her, echoing off the buildings and surrounding her with noise. Her knees buckled.

“Let me carry you,” Noah said.

“I told you, I’m fine—”

“Corporal!” His voice rose. “If you were on the battlefield and a fellow soldier was too dizzy to keep up, would you carry them?”

“If the situation warranted it.” Her chin rose. “And for the record, if need be, I’d carry you.”

“I don’t doubt it,” he said. “Now, please let me help you.”

“Fine.”

She felt one hand slide beneath her knees then and the other along her back, as Noah swept her up into his arms, cradled her to his chest and ran. He dashed through the snow, weaving quickly down back alleys, away from the warehouse, emergency vehicle sirens and flashing lights. Then stopped suddenly in front of a plain, unmarked metal door, where he pressed a button on the speaker box.

“It’s me,” he said. “I’ve got Holly. Let me in!”

The device beside the door looked broken and stayed silent. Then it hissed quietly.

“Look,” Noah added, “I know you can see me, and I know you can hear me. I promise there are no Imposters on my tail. Let me in. Now!”

The door finally opened. A man stood there, slender and good-looking, in an intense and scraggly way. His blond hair was down to his shoulders and his jaw needed a shave. He narrowed his eyes. “You decided to bring her here?”

“Holly Asher,” Noah said, “meet Seth Miles, Canada’s most notorious hacker.”



“Hi.” Holly waved briefly in greeting. Then she glanced at Noah. “I think you can let me down now. Unless we’re going to keep running.”

Noah put her down carefully. They stepped through the door and Seth closed and locked it behind them. Then he turned to Holly.

“Corporal Holly Asher,” Seth said, as he reached for her hand. “I can’t tell you how big an honor it is to meet you. I have huge respect for what you’ve done in risking your career to speak out against a superior officer. I have all the admiration in the world for anyone who stands up to authority and abuse of power. If there’s anything I can do to help you, I will.”

She shook his hand. “Thank you,” she replied. “But I’d like to think I just did what anyone in my position would do.”

“You’d like to think.” Seth shook his head, then turned back to Noah. “So, witnesses are expected to just double up on safe houses now?”

Noah rolled his eyes and didn’t answer.

“I don’t want to put Seth in danger,” Holly said. “Can’t they track us here via security cameras?”

“Not if I’ve already knocked out all the security cameras in the area and replaced them with dummy feed,” Seth said. “I’ll also doctor the footage to look like you guys ran north, not south. I’m not saying it’s foolproof, but them finding you here definitely

wouldn't happen fast and would take a whole lot of fishing. You'll be long gone before they think to check this block."

He flipped open a panel in a wall, revealing a keypad, and pressed in a code.

"I don't remember installing that," Noah said.

It was Seth's turn to snort. He started up a narrow stairway to the top floor of the building, with Holly after him and Noah taking up the rear.

"I gather from the sirens outside that all imaginable emergency services have arrived at the crash site?" Noah asked.

"They have," Seth said. "Bad news is I can't guarantee who out there is the real deal and who's an Imposter. Tell me you saw the Ghoul and the Wraith."

"Not up close," Noah said. "I never saw their faces. But I can tell you that one's big, one's thin and I'm pretty sure both are men."

"Helpful," Seth said.

"Holly got a lot closer to them than I did," Noah added. He waited for her to jump in and agree with him, but she didn't. "Are you any closer to determining if there's a leak in the RCMP?"

"Not quite," Seth said. "But I did pinpoint the person who gave the Imposters Elias's route today and told them how to target him."

"Do we have a name?" Noah asked.

"No, just a handle. Snitch5751."

"Any idea who that could be?"

“Someone with high level security clearance,” Seth said, “and current access to a law enforcement or military server. That’s all I’ve got for now.”

Well, that narrowed it down. Noah and Holly stepped into the wide and brightly lit loft. Tall windows ran from floor to ceiling on one side, with rough redbrick on the other three. The furniture consisted of a couch, two overstuffed chairs and a coffee table that looked like it had once been a door. A futon bed sat high on a platform by one wall, accessible by a ladder. Not a single computer was in sight.

Holly walked over to the couch and sat down. Seth looked down at her and crossed his arms.

“You actually tangled with the Imposters and lived to talk about it,” he stated. “Any idea what they wanted or why they targeted you?”

“None,” Holly replied. “It’s possible their real target was Officer Crane, and I just happened to be the person he was transporting. I don’t think he thought much of the assignment.”

“Elias was past retirement,” Noah said. “He could pick and choose what assignments he took. I think he requested your case personally.”

“Did they get you to read something on camera?” Seth asked.

“They tried,” she said. “But they didn’t succeed. And no, I didn’t see what it was.”

“What would happen, hypothetically, if someone managed to see one of their faces and could identify them?” Noah asked.

“They wouldn’t stop coming after them until they were dead,” Seth said, and Noah felt a shudder run down his spine. “But that still doesn’t explain why your transfer into witness protection was targeted. They don’t risk coming out of the shadows unless it’s a really big job. We’re talking huge. Bigger than big. I mean, that inquiry you’re testifying at is a big deal for General Bertie’s career, but if he could pay big bucks to have you killed, it’s unlikely he’d hire cyber terrorists for the job. Hit men have got to be way cheaper than what the Imposters would charge. And it’s not like either you or Elias was in possession of something worth millions. No offense.”

“None taken.” Holly lay back against the pillows and closed her eyes. Her face was way too pale for Noah’s liking.

“I still think you should talk to a doctor,” he said.

“I don’t,” Holly retorted. “It’s just a headache. I’ll be fine in a moment. Seth? Have the Imposters ever impersonated medical personnel?”

“Yup, all the time,” he answered. “It’s one of their main go-to methods for kidnapping, killing or poisoning people. They’ve been paramedics, nurses, doctors and other hospital staff.”

Was Holly trying to make a point about not wanting to see a doctor? Either way, she’d succeeded in making Noah think twice about just rolling up to a hospital. He looked around the loft, surprised at how hard he found it to drag his eyes away from Holly. “Where are you hiding your computer? Clearly, you have one. Otherwise you wouldn’t have tipped me off.” Not that he

much liked knowing someone he was supposed to be protecting had violated the rules of his agreement.

Seth walked over to a bookshelf and pulled. It swung back on hinges. A neat folding table complete with three monitors and two towers sat inside. One of the screens was cracked and one of the computer towers seemed to be held together by duct tape. Noah noticed the machines were already humming.

“You know the more secrets you keep from me the harder it is for me to protect you,” Noah said. He’d have to report Seth for this, but that could wait until after they got to the bottom of whether someone within the RCMP was Snitch5751. “I don’t even want to know how you put this together.”

“Dumpster diving,” Seth said, and sat down at the machines. “It’s amazing what you can do with what other people leave behind. Also, I want the record to show that I’m acting as an informant and that I revealed all this to you voluntarily, knowing the RCMP can confiscate it for violating the terms of my agreement.”

“Yup, so noted,” Noah said. Not that it would necessarily make much of a difference. “Did you manage to get through to Liam, Jessica and Mack?”

The hacker nodded. “They’re all on standby a few blocks away.”

“Good,” Noah said. “Tell them to come here. We’ll regroup and figure out what’s going on together.”

Thankfully, from what Seth had said, it sounded like none of

them could be Snitch5751.

“Why not?” Seth shrugged. “I’ve already got one cop in my loft. Why not make it four?”

“And a corporal,” Holly added, her eyes still closed. “And considering your background, I figured you’d hate military more than cops.”

Seth glanced back at her over his shoulder, a surprisingly soft smile on his face, and Noah was reminded that the man’s first major target was taking down the corrupt military general father who’d abused him.

Yeah, he was probably really happy to be back to taking down criminals online. Noah couldn’t imagine how hard it would be for someone like Seth to be cooped up here, in witness protection, unable to do the one thing that made him feel the most alive.

“With your permission, Holly, I’d like to plant some false information about you online,” Seth said. “Just some minor red herring stuff so that the Imposters have a harder time finding you.”

“Go for it,” Holly said.

Seth turned back to the computer, and his grin spread. “Right, I’m going to have you applying for a wedding license in Ottawa, booking a flight from Montreal to London and renting an apartment in Vancouver.”

“Sounds like my doppelgänger is having a lot more fun than I am,” Holly said. “Who have you got me marrying?”

“John Smith,” Seth said. “It was the most generic fake name

I could think of.”

Noah’s phone buzzed in his pocket. He glanced at the screen. Anne was calling again. He hesitated so long the call went through to voice mail, and then he turned to Holly.

“Listen,” he said. “I know a doctor. She’s a small-town family physician and she’s like a sister to me. How about you just talk to her on the phone and describe your symptoms? If she agrees you’re fine, I’ll stop pushing you to get medical help.”

“And what if she’s compromised?” Holly asked. “Or the Imposters are able to hack her line?”

Noah suspected the question was more about wanting to avoid talking to a doctor than worrying about her safety. But Seth spun around on his chair to answer.

“Let me explain how a criminal duo like the Imposters works,” he stated. “They’re smart and that means being focused. They’re not tapping the phones of everybody all across the country. They’re looking for anyone the slightest bit related to ‘Corporal Hildegard Asher.’ They’re setting up online traces and snares to catch anything you post or that’s written about you. They’re looking into your family, your friends, people you’ve worked alongside and served with. They’re turning your life inside out, and since Snitch5751 only told them yesterday that Elias was assigned to transport you, they haven’t been at it that long, which makes it the perfect time for me to muddy the waters with fake information, as well. Sure, if they figure out you’re with Noah, they’ll start digging into his life, too. But the estranged wife of

the former foster brother of a detective they probably haven't identified yet isn't anywhere near their radar." He spun back. "Besides, I already have traces running for Noah and the people who matter to him. Of course I ensured her line is secure."

He went back to typing.

Holly opened her eyes and sat up, as if a new thought had suddenly hit her. She looked at Noah. "Seth just said they'd be looking for Hildegard Asher. Which makes sense, since only my closest friends call me Holly. So, why did you?"

Noah gestured to Seth. "He told me to."

"So, it's out there online?" she asked.

"Nope." Seth flashed a grin at her over his shoulder. "Fellow army brat. We went to the same school for a year, even though we weren't in the same grade and didn't have any classes together. My brain's always had a pretty big hard drive and the fact that I heard your birthday was on Christmas made you interesting. We've just got to hope that the Imposters are stopped before they dig too deep."

Holly lay back and closed her eyes again. Seth kept typing. Noah's phone began to ring again. It was Anne, and this was the third time she'd tried to reach him. He whispered a prayer under his breath and answered.

"Hey, Anne," he said. "What's up? Is everything okay?"

"Noah, hi!" The doctor's voice was anxious, but not panicked. "Do you have a minute? I just wanted to talk to you about Caleb and the gym."

That would be Bros Gym, the business he'd invested his entire inheritance and savings in, alongside the money his parents had generously left Caleb in their will, only to watch his foster brother run it into the ground. And why Noah applying for higher level security clearance would mean investigators poking around all the ins and outs of Caleb's gambling addiction, bad decisions and wreck of a life.

"I've found a buyer," Anne continued. "I can't take living in limbo any longer. Caleb's never here anymore. He doesn't want anything to do with the gym. And our son, Drew, has been accepted to a really prestigious film school program for creature design and special effects, and could use the money from the sale."

Yeah, and untangling his finances from Caleb would get rid of the only impediment to Noah getting a higher security clearance. But it wasn't that simple. It would also mean Caleb getting a sudden windfall of money, thanks to the fact that the inheritance Noah's parents had left Caleb had made up Caleb's share of the investment. And Anne, of all people, knew why that was a very bad idea.

"Hey, Noah?" Seth's voice floated at the edge of his consciousness.

Noah held up a finger. "Just one second."

"It's important," Seth said.

Yes, but so was talking to Anne.

"Just give me one moment."

“No!” Seth’s voice rose. “Now.”

Noah glanced at him. The hacker’s face was as gray as the slush outside.

“Sorry, Anne, I’m just in the middle of something,” Noah said quickly. “I’ll have to call you back.” He hung up. “What is it?”

“I figured out what the Imposters were after,” Seth said. “Elias’s laptop and phone. Somehow they used them to bypass encryption and hack into the RCMP witness protection system’s database. My guess is they targeted him because he was the oldest active cop in the program. They might’ve thought his device would be easiest to hack.”

But why hack the witness protection database? The sweeping pile of data was filled with information about the names, locations and identities of hundreds of vulnerable whistleblowers, witnesses and victims whom the RCMP had hidden and protected over the years.

Noah took three steps toward him, feeling dread drag on him with every one. “Whose secret identity and location were they after?”

“Everyone’s,” Seth said. “Absolutely everyone. They’re putting them up for sale on the dark web. On Christmas Eve, the name, identity and location of everyone in the RCMP witness protection database will be auctioned off online to the highest bidder. We’ve got six days to stop these criminals, or hundreds of witnesses could die.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.