

TRUE COVER

By

Ruth Kyser

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**This book is dedicated to my family;
my blood relatives (of which there are MANY),
and family related to me by the blood of Jesus.**

Thank you for all your love.

**You are my inspiration,
and I write my stories for you.**

**A special thank you to my husband.
I continue to be amazed at your patience
with me when I am 'in the zone.'**

Love you!

Psalm 61:4

“...I will trust in the cover of thy wings...”

Chapter 1

Something was on fire in the downtown area.

Sarah Masters looked through her car windshield and craned her neck to try and better see the black plume of smoke rolling up and blocking her view of the clear blue sky. That must have been why she heard the fire siren earlier before she left her house. She sighed and turned her attention back to the traffic in front of her. This didn't look good for the downtown area. Sarah remembered learning from her high school local history class that a fire had destroyed much of the downtown of Herbert, Ohio, back in the late 1800s. The fire had started in a restaurant and had quickly spread, destroying over three city blocks before it was finally brought under control.

Hopefully, that wasn't going to be the case today.

Her hometown, a small city of about 12,000, was where she had lived her entire life. Herbert was a Norman Rockwell kind of 'small town USA,' with attractive storefronts gracing the downtown, housing clothing stores, antique shops, arts and craft stores, and boutiques. There were two gourmet coffee shops and a bakery, and even an old-fashioned ice cream parlor. The main street was decorated with old-fashioned lampposts and tidy flower boxes in front of all the shops. It was a fun place to window shop, and fortunately for the local economy, drew in many folks from out of town on a regular basis. Many of them stayed in one of the various Victorian-style homes, which had been made into luxurious bed and breakfast lodgings.

Sarah loved it here, and she couldn't visualize ever leaving. She had only left town once, and that was just long enough to get her college degree, returning right after graduation. Soon after coming back to Herbert, she had been offered a job at a local law practice as their receptionist/office manager, where she had been employed for the past six years. She really enjoyed her job and especially liked her co-workers.

As she turned her car at the next intersection, she looked out the window again at the smoke pouring into the sky. She was actually on her way back to work at the law office of Brown and Associates, returning from a relaxing and enjoyable lunch hour. Because the one-story modern brick building was also located near the downtown area, her first thoughts after seeing the smoke were of what this would mean for her afternoon. Things might not be so relaxing if their building lost their electricity due to the fire. The downtown area consisted of many older two-story brick buildings built in the early 1900s. The law office was a newer building which had been constructed sometime in the 1970s in a section of town where some of the older buildings had been demolished over time. Because of the law office's location, they had ample parking and a larger lot than the average downtown businesses.

The closer she drove to the office, the more worried she became. It looked like the fire was very close to her building – maybe even in the same block. Her thoughts quickly turned to the flower shop and bakery that were near the attorney's office. She went through another traffic light and drove the next block, where she found the area totally blocked off with barricades and police cars.

Crowds of people were standing around on the sidewalks talking. She finally found a parking spot along the side of the street and let out a sigh of relief as she pulled her car over and parked. Sarah still couldn't see which building was burning though as the fire was a block down and across from where she was parked.

She quickly grabbed her purse, locked her car, and headed down the sidewalk, her heels sharply tapping against the concrete sidewalk. Then she turned the corner and gasped.

The brick building Brown and Associates was housed in was gone; only one corner and the front façade of the building were still standing. The black awning that used to cover the front doors flapped in the flame driven winds. The Herbert Fire Department firemen were aiming their fire hoses, and spraying water on the charred remains and thick clouds of smoke still rose from the smoldering ruin. A westerly wind furiously fanned the flames, and even though they were pouring water on as fast as they could, it was plain to see they weren't going to be able to save the building. It was gone.

She ran down the sidewalk with her heart in her throat. The closest she could get was half a block away, but it was close enough to see debris scattered everywhere around the area. The sidewalks, surrounding street and office parking area to the west of the building were covered in bricks, glass, and smoldering chunks of wood. The firemen had taped off a large area with yellow crime scene tape – the same type she had seen on TV shows. The acrid stench of the smoke and burning debris assaulted her, and her eyes quickly watered. It was a smell she knew she wouldn't quickly forget.

It smelled like death.

Sarah quickly scanned the crowd of onlookers standing on the sidewalks behind the crime scene tape, looking for her co-workers. They had to be here somewhere. As her eyes roamed the faces of the people, a surreal feeling swept over her. The crowd watching the firemen work was uncharacteristically quiet, whispering back and forth as they watched the burning building. Several of the folks she recognized as being people from neighboring businesses but didn't see anyone from her building. She was mainly looking for Margie, her best friend. A quick scan of the crowd told her none of her coworkers were there, but she did finally see the Herbert Police Chief, Stan Warner. He turned and saw her at the same time.

"Sarah! You weren't in the building!" It was more of a statement than a question.

Sarah looked again at the remnants of her workplace and then faced the Police Chief.

"Stan. What happened?" She couldn't control the sob in her voice and knew the tears burning her eyes didn't have anything to do with the smoke from the burning building.

Stan took her by the arm and led her away from the crowd. "Sarah, where were you when this happened?"

Sarah felt dazed as she looked at the older man. It felt like she was watching a horror movie play out in front of her -- other than this time, she was in it.

"I was home on my lunch hour, Stan. I took the late lunch hour today instead of Margie. Wh...what happened?" She sobbed. "Was anyone hurt? Did everyone get out? Where is everyone?"

Sarah was surprised when the older man took her hands in his and looked her straight in the face. She couldn't read people's faces well, but she recognized the look of concern on his face and the sad look in his blue eyes. The muscles were working in his jaw. Whatever he was about to tell her wasn't going to be good news.

"There was an explosion. I'm sorry, Sarah. No one got out," he added in a quiet voice.

She stared at him for a moment before what he had said finally sunk in. What did he mean 'nobody got out'? Somebody had to have been able to escape the building. There were three private offices in the rear of the building, several other small offices, the front lobby, restrooms, and a conference room. The way the building was laid out, there were front and rear exits, so the employees would have two avenues of escape in the case of a fire. Surely *somebody* had been able to get out. Sarah looked across the street at the charred ruins and back again at Stan.

He was serious.

"Wh...what? Nooooooooooooo," she heard a voice wail as if from a far-off distance, realizing it was hers. "No, no, no!"

Sarah heard a buzzing in her ears, and as an unexpected weakness swept over her, felt the Chief grab hold of her arms to keep her from falling. Somewhere in the haze of her grief, she noticed when he motioned to a nearby paramedic standing by a waiting ambulance -- an ambulance that had been called there to take care of survivors. But Stan had just told her there weren't any. Maybe Stan was wrong, though. There had to be survivors. They couldn't all be gone.

"Take Miss Masters to my office and check her out. I'm afraid she's going into shock. Get her some coffee or something and keep her there until I can get back to talk with her."

Sarah felt the young paramedic's firm grip on her elbow, pulling her along with him, and his deep baritone voice as he softly talked to her. As he led her away, she turned and glanced back one more time toward the charred remains of her life. Her last glimpse was of the remaining section of the roof collapsing into the fire, sending a fresh shower of flames and sparks into the air.

How had what had started out as such a beautiful day turn into such a nightmare?

Chapter 2

Sarah sat in a very uncomfortable wooden straight-back chair in the office of the Chief of Police. She hadn't moved since the paramedic had led her to it a short time earlier. Once her heart quit racing, and she began to feel a little more normal, she took the time to glance around her surroundings. Standing up, she paced around the small office. She didn't know how Chief Warner could stand to work in such a gloomy room. The walls were covered in dark paneling, and there were no windows to provide any natural light—which could explain the dead-looking plant in the corner. The only decorations were some framed plaques and awards hanging on the walls, and a multitude of manila folders and paperwork spread across the Chief's desk.

Sitting back down in the wooden chair, she gazed unseeing out the open door toward the central part of the squad room. The nice paramedic who had brought her here had checked her pulse and her blood pressure, shone a flashlight into her eyes, and brought her a cup of coffee that still sat untouched on the table next to her. Phones were ringing, and she could hear voices talking out in the main part of the police station, so she knew there were other people there in the building with her.

But she had never felt more alone.

Maybe she was in shock. What did it feel like to be in shock? She didn't know and didn't know anyone who had ever been in shock. It felt like there was a tremendous weight on her chest, and she couldn't seem to stop the tears that continued to fall from her eyes.

She didn't know what to do—or where to go. Shouldn't she be doing...something? Shaking her head, she tried to think clearly, but it didn't seem to help.

The paramedic, who had introduced himself as Chuck—or maybe it was Chad—had been very kind to her. After making sure she was going to be okay, he had left to go back to the scene of the fire. He reiterated that she was to stay in the office until the Police Chief returned. She didn't know how much longer that was going to be, but she kept feeling like she should be doing something to help...someone. Then she remembered there was no one to help.

How was it possible that all her co-workers were dead? She had been with them just this morning. They had been working at their jobs and talking about the previous weekend's activities. It was just a regular morning. How could something like this happen on such an average day? Sarah took off her wire-rimmed glasses and wiped her wet eyes with the heels of her hands again. She couldn't seem to stop crying. Somehow, though, she needed to get control of her emotions and think.

God, how could you have let this happen?

Praying wasn't going to help her. At one time, many years earlier, she had a loving relationship with God. She had believed that He really cared about what happened to her. But after her parents' deaths, she had made the decision that she had been wrong. God didn't care about Sarah Masters at all. Otherwise, He wouldn't have taken away the only family she had in the whole world. There

wasn't any reason for her to believe that had changed – especially after what had just happened today.

As she heard footsteps coming down the hallway toward the office door, she raised her head to face what happened next. Sarah stood up as Stan Warner, the Chief of Police, entered his office. She was somewhat acquainted with Stan—mostly because he had come into Brown and Associates several times over the years, especially during reelection years. She knew he was a man in his mid-fifties, although Sarah always thought with his full head of white hair, he looked more like he was seventy. The paunch of his stomach spoke of his not being health-conscious, and the years on the job hadn't been kind to his face, which showed the wrinkles of many late hours. She couldn't help but notice that today he looked even older than usual.

“Stan, what happened? How did the fire start? I was only gone for an hour. How could this have happened?” Sarah knew she was beginning to lose control again as she pelted the Chief with her questions.

“Sarah, please, sit back down.” His large hands firmly pushed on her shoulders until she sat in the chair she had recently vacated. She watched him slowly walk around the desk to sit in his chair, running his right hand through his gray hair while he exhaled a deep breath. It was evident to her that what he had seen today had also shaken him.

“We aren't really sure what happened yet. Witnesses said there were two explosions—a small explosion followed by a bigger one—and then the fire. Whatever happened, it happened so fast no one had time to exit the building. We're suspecting a gas leak caused the explosion.”

Sarah dropped her head into her hands and struggled to get control of her emotions. She had sobbed and cried enough, but she couldn't seem to stop.

She looked back up at Stan. “I can't believe this happened, Stan.” Her throat was so tight, she was having trouble swallowing, and her voice sounded to her own ears like it belonged to someone else.

Stan swallowed hard, and she caught his faint nod. “Trust me, Sarah. I understand what you're feeling. Those people were all my friends too.”

There was a moment of silence while they both struggled with emotions. “We won't know for sure until we process the scene, but a gas leak explosion is our first assessment of the situation. The Fire Marshall and some others will be here in the morning to check it out.”

She watched him run his hand through his hair again. “Look, Sarah. I need to ask you some questions about what happened this morning at Brown and Associates. I know it's going to be tough, but you're the only one that can help us recreate what happened today. Do you think you can handle it?”

Sarah looked across the desk at the older man. No matter how difficult it would be for both of them, she knew he still had a job to do. There had been a disaster in his town on his watch, and he was responsible for finding out what happened.

She took a shaky breath and nodded. “I don't know how much help I'll be, but I'll try.”

Stan asked her to review her morning with him. Sarah went through her whole morning, starting with getting to the office and then telling about her usual routine of opening and sorting the mail. There had been four clients with appointments who had come into the office throughout the

morning to meet with the attorneys. She gave him their names, knowing none of them were strangers to him. They all were familiar townspeople. Living in a small town such as Herbert, everyone seemed to know everyone else.

When Sarah got to the point where she was telling Stan why Margie, the young secretary who worked with her in the office, had taken the early lunch hour instead of Sarah, she thought she was going to lose it again. Margie was her best friend, and Sarah was supposed to be a maid of honor in her upcoming wedding. Now there would be no wedding. She closed her eyes and tried to gather her thoughts before she continued.

"Margie had a dentist appointment, so we switched lunch hours. That's the only reason I was gone from the office when I was. I should have been there, and Margie should have been at lunch." Sarah swallowed back the tears. She couldn't seem to help the thoughts that raced through her mind. *She* should have been the one to have died in the explosion, not Margie. Margie had everything to live for—a loving boyfriend and a wonderful future ahead of her.

"Nothing out of the usual happened this morning that you can think of?" Stan's question brought her back to the present.

Sarah shook her head. "The serviceman from the security company was there for his annual review of the alarm system, but it was Jerry, the regular guy. Then a guy from the gas company stopped in to check on something. But I know there couldn't have been a gas leak, Stan. I would have been able to smell it. That rotten egg smell gives me terrible headaches, and there was no smell like that. I'm positive. I would remember."

She watched Stan scratch in a notepad again. Then he looked up at her. "We can check out both of those guys with the security company and the gas company. Can you think of anything else, Sarah?"

After thinking for a moment, she shook her head.

The whole experience felt like she was watching someone else's life play out in front of her. It didn't seem real. How could such a beautiful day have turned into this nightmare?

Stan sat quietly behind his desk for a moment, leaning back in his chair. He seemed to be studying her.

"Did Adam Brown mention anything to you recently about getting a death threat?"

Sarah stared at the Police Chief in shock. What was he talking about?

"A death threat? No, that's crazy! Why in the world would anybody threaten Adam?"

Stan leaned one of his elbows on his desk and spent some time writing down more notes, then looked up at her again as if he'd just remembered she was still sitting there.

"Look, Sarah, why don't you go home? You've answered all the questions I can think of right now, and you've had a rough day. You look like you're about ready to drop."

Sarah wanted to ask him more questions about this death threat he had mentioned, but exhaustion from the stress of the day swept over her. She saw the look of concern on his face and realized she must look a fright with her makeup and mascara running down her face. But what her face didn't show was the way she felt inside. She felt utterly and completely lost. The grief and sorrow she went through when she lost her parents was the only feeling she could think of that even came close to this.

“Do you have some family you can go stay with – or a friend you could call? I don’t really want you to be alone tonight, not after what you’ve been through today,” Stan said.

She quickly shook her head. “No family. And all my friends...” She swallowed hard, trying to hold back the tears. She had almost told him the truth—her only real friends had been in that building when it exploded.

“I’ll be okay—really.” She stood up.

She wanted to go home.

“You’ll let me know what you find out, though. Right, Stan?”

He nodded. “Of course.” He reached across the desk and shook her hand, his eyes kind as he looked at her. “Thank you again for your help, Sarah. And I’m sorry for the loss of your friends. I’ll have one of my deputies escort you to your car. Please give me a call if you think of anything else, okay?”

She numbly nodded her head and followed Stan through the open squad room. Several uniformed officers sat behind desks, either typing away on computer keyboards or talking on the phone. It seemed to Sarah that they all stopped what they were doing and looked up and watched as she walked through their area with the Chief at her side. The Police Station was housed in an old two-story building in the center of the downtown area of Herbert. She had never been in the police department building before today – and she kind of hoped she would have no reason to return. But she was pretty sure that the smell of this musty old building would always be a part of her memory of this day.

Home was a small one-story cottage in a quiet neighborhood at the edge of Herbert. Sarah wasn’t able to purchase a house on her modest salary, so she had been excited to find this house to rent four years earlier. With its two bedrooms, a small living room and dining room, kitchen, and a tiny laundry room off the kitchen, it was small - but perfect for her. It had such a charming presence with a covered front porch, small yard, and white picket fence out front. Her landlord kept the wood siding on the house and trim on the front porch painted a bright clean white, and the shutters at the windows painted a country blue. Sarah worked hard to keep the weeds out of the flowers she had planted inside the fenced-in front yard. Every summer, she hung lush green ferns from the porch roof over the railing and filled the flower boxes under the windows with red geraniums, blue lobelia, and white sweet alyssum. She loved sitting on the front porch and watching the neighbors around her.

It was a cute little house, but those blue wooden shutters on the double-hung windows were what had initially drawn her to the place. The shutters had cutouts of little hearts, which made the house look like a romantic cottage. Too bad she had never been able to find a man to share the cute little house with. She had already had her experience with the wrong man, so she wasn’t in a big hurry to find another one right away. As she had often heard her mother say during Sarah’s teen years, ‘It’s better to be alone than with the wrong man.’ After her experience with her last boyfriend, Sarah was taking that advice to heart.

Over the years, Sarah had filled the little house with her few pieces of furniture, adding to her collection with garage sale and flea market finds. Photos of her deceased parents and grandparents graced the off-white walls, and bookshelves full of her favorite romance novels sat in a corner. The rooms were small, but it was her haven, and she loved it. Sarah took lots of pride in how she had made the little house all hers and was hoping someday to be able to talk the owner into letting her buy it from him instead of just renting it. It had been his elderly mother's home, though, and so far, Sarah hadn't been able to convince him to part with it.

She headed home in her car, the shock of what had transpired since she had parked the car on the streets of Herbert only a few hours earlier coursing through her. Even now, it didn't seem real to her. Maybe it would feel more real tomorrow or the day after. Maybe. Right now, though, she just wanted to go home to her little house and crawl into bed and forget everything that had happened.

Sarah pulled her car into the small one-car attached garage and reached up to push the button on the visor to close the automatic garage door. She entered her house through the door in the garage, which took her directly into her kitchen. Her little Yorkshire terrier, Sparky, was glad to get out of the laundry room and greet her, happily chasing around her feet in ecstasy because his favorite person in the whole world was finally home. Sarah couldn't help smiling at his happy yipping. He was a handsome little dog with his flowing black hair and tan little face, and he was always so sincere in his glee at seeing her again after a long day alone.

Dropping her keys and purse on the kitchen counter, she let him out the back door into the small fenced in yard for his run. While Sparky was outside, she took the time to check his water bowl and put out some more food in his dish before heading to her bedroom. It didn't take her long to trade her work clothes for her pajamas.

After letting Sparky back in, she spent the next hour sitting on the couch, cuddling with Sparky and crying. Her little animal friend seemed to sense her grief as he licked her face and snuggled with her, never leaving her side.

Sarah couldn't help replaying the events of the day over and over in her head. Where was God in all this? Why had he allowed her to lose her parents years ago and now all her friends? What did He want from her, and why was he punishing her? What had she ever done to Him?

Her thoughts returned to her past—those days when she still attended church with her parents. The pastor had always preached that God was a loving God who wanted to be a part of our lives and have a personal relationship with us. What type of God destroyed everything that meant anything to you and then asked for a personal relationship with you? She had tried—until she lost her parents. Then she had decided she was done with God if that was the way it was going to be. She didn't need Him.

At about eight-thirty, she finally gave up crying and crawled into her bed with Sparky curled up at her feet. It was just starting to get dark outside, and much earlier than she usually went to bed. But it felt like she'd lived a lifetime today, and she just wanted to escape into sleep. Maybe by sleeping, she would get some relief from the constant pain of grief in her chest and her throat. Hopefully, tomorrow would be easier to face. Right now, she didn't think she could handle anything else.

After a time, sleep finally took her.

Chapter 3

The next morning Sarah woke with a throbbing headache. As tired as she had been, she hadn't slept very well. Sparky had started whining and fussing about five o'clock in the morning, and Sarah had finally gotten out of bed to let him outside. When Sparky just wanted to run around the back yard barking, she had finally made him come back in. She had firmly hushed him, hoping her neighbors hadn't been disturbed by his barking. The last thing she needed was complaining phone calls. Sparky was usually such a good little dog, but she had to assume he was picking up on her confused state of mind. After that episode, she had gone back to bed but had never really been able to completely get back to sleep.

Now she was awake, she lay in bed for a time and replayed yesterday's nightmare in her head before she finally decided she might as well get out of bed. It was only about six-thirty in the morning—her regular time to get up to get ready for work—but today, there was no reason for her to get up. It was a Tuesday with no job to go to; no friends to see. It was so difficult to believe that just the day before, she had awakened to normalcy. If someone had told her when she woke up yesterday morning what was going to happen that day, she never would have believed them.

Lying in bed wasn't making her feel any better, though, and Sparky was ready for his morning trip to the back yard. Hopefully, he would be quieter about his necessary business today. She was still annoyed with her little friend for interrupting her sleep the previous night.

So, Sarah finally decided she might as well get up and shower and dress. The hot water pelting her weary body helped her wake up and made her feel a little more ready to face the world. Twenty minutes later, she was dressed in her favorite pair of softly worn denim blue jeans and a well-worn tee shirt she'd received in the Walk for Cancer Drive the Herbert Chamber of Commerce had sponsored the summer before. She didn't take the time to fuss with her dark brown shoulder-length hair but merely pulled it back into a ponytail.

Her head was still pounding, and she knew it was probably an after effect of all the crying she had done the day before. Right then, Sarah made the decision that she was done with crying and the pity party. An awful thing had happened, but she had to go on with her life—alone—again. When her headache didn't seem to lessen in its intensity, she finally gave in and dug around in the medicine cabinet for an aspirin, hoping that would help. She was eating a breakfast consisting of a cup of coffee and nibbling half-heartedly at a piece of buttered cinnamon toast when she heard her phone ring.

Sarah headed to the kitchen counter where the phone sat, thinking it was probably one of her neighbors, or maybe even somebody from the local church she attended several times a year—calling to check on her and find out more about what had happened the previous day. She looked at the phone for a moment before she picked it up, really hoping it wasn't someone from the church. The way she felt this morning, the last thing she wanted to hear was someone telling her they were praying for her.

When she answered the phone, though, she discovered she was way off base on her guess of who was calling. It wasn't a neighbor or a church member calling to check on her. It was a reporter from the local newspaper asking for her comments on "yesterday's tragedy," as he called it. Sarah quickly stated, "No comment" and hung up.

When it rang a second time only minutes later and was the local radio station asking the same question, she decided to change the setting on the phone, so it would go directly to her answering machine. The last thing she wanted to do was talk to any of the news media about the occurrences of the previous day. It was difficult enough for her to face the fact that her friends and job were gone; she didn't need to be asked questions about it from the media. Didn't these people have any feelings? She just wanted to be left alone.

Sarah went to the back door and let in a yipping Sparky, checking to make sure his paws were dirt free first so he wouldn't track all over the clean kitchen floor. She watched as he scurried across the kitchen floor to his water bowl, stopping in his lapping of water once or twice to look up at her. Sarah couldn't help but smile at the look on his little brown face. Sometimes she was sure Sparky looked like he was smiling at her.

At least she still had Sparky.

She turned from watching Sparky at the sound of the front doorbell. Walking through the kitchen toward the front entryway, she realized it was a reporter standing on her front porch wearing a blue sports coat and carrying a cordless microphone. Another man carrying a news camera stood right behind him. Sarah halted mid-step and quickly turned and went back to the kitchen where they wouldn't be able to see her.

What was she going to do now? The last thing she wanted to do was talk to a reporter with a camera!

Okay. Plan of action needed.

It was obvious she wasn't going to be able to answer her telephone or her door today. She closed her eyes and leaned back against the refrigerator door. Here it was only eight o'clock in the morning, and it was already looking to be another terrible day.

Sarah looked longingly toward the side door, which opened into the garage. If only she had somewhere else to go. She had been telling Stan the truth yesterday afternoon when she had said she didn't have any family to go stay with. And she couldn't think of any friends she felt comfortable enough with to wake them up this early in the morning. Margie had been her only real friend, and now she was gone. Besides, she thought, Sarah Masters was not a person to run from adversity, and she wasn't going to let anyone intimidate her. She would just have to stick it out here for a few days and hope the news media eventually got tired of trying to get her to talk.

Sarah went over to the counter and picked up the remains of her breakfast and threw it in the garbage, dumped her leftover coffee from her mug into the sink, and quickly rinsed out her cup. Her appetite was gone.

The next few moments were spent wiping down the kitchen countertops and straightening up the kitchen. Five minutes later, she lifted her head at the sound of footsteps on the front steps and porch, then her front doorbell ringing again. This time, though, the doorbell was followed by someone knocking on the door. These people were relentless! Why wouldn't they leave her alone?

She took a deep breath of courage and headed toward the front door. She'd had enough! They were going to quit harassing her, or she was calling the police.

The party on the other side of the door knocked again. "Miss Masters, Federal Agents. Please answer the door."

Sarah stopped in her tracks. Had she just heard what she thought she'd heard?

She stooped down and quickly scooped up Sparky and shut him in the back laundry room where he'd be out of the way. Once she reached the front door, she unlocked it, opening it just a little, skeptical of whom she might find on the other side. On her front porch stood a tall, dark-haired man who appeared to be in his late thirties and a tall, slim Afro-American woman who looked to be about Sarah's age. They had both turned to look at the same reporter, and cameraman Sarah had seen at her door earlier. Sarah watched the young woman hold up her hand, palm out, and shout toward the reporter, authority oozing from the tone of her voice.

"Sir, this is private property. I suggest you stay on the street side of the sidewalk and don't come into this yard again. Otherwise, the homeowner has the right to press charges against you for trespassing – and I will be forced to arrest you."

Sarah had to suppress a smile at the frightened look on the reporter's face as he and the cameraman quickly backed away and left her yard. At least that annoyance was taken care of.

The man standing on her front porch, dressed in dark slacks and a sports coat, turned his attention back to the now fully open door and Sarah. As she felt his eyes quickly scan over her face, she felt strangely unsettled.

"Sarah Masters?"

"Yes. Who are you?"

The man and woman both pulled badges and photo ID's out of their pockets to show her. "I'm Special Agent Sam Morgan," the man said. "And this is Agent Jessica Thorne. We're with the Critical Incident Response Group Division of the FBI and would like to talk with you about the explosion yesterday at Brown and Associates. Could we come in for a moment? We'd like to ask you a few questions."

Sarah hesitated. Why would the FBI be investigating a gas explosion here in Herbert? And how did she know they were legitimate federal agents and not some of the news media trying to get a scoop? Or maybe they were crazies. You couldn't be too careful anymore. She tried to calm her paranoid thoughts. They had shown her their badges. If they weren't legitimate, they had gone to lots of trouble to look the part just to get a chance to talk with her.

She finally opened the door the rest of the way and motioned to them to enter. Leading them to her small living room, she took a seat in a small overstuffed chair and waved them to have a seat. They both sat down on her little floral fabric covered couch. The man who had introduced himself as Sam Morgan looked rather large perched on such a delicate piece of furniture and more than a little out of place. She had to suppress a smile. Good. Maybe if he weren't comfortable, they wouldn't stay very long.

He spoke first. "Thank you for taking the time to talk to us, Miss Masters. If it weren't important, we wouldn't be bothering you today. We know you had a rough day yesterday." He

paused and looked at her for a moment before he continued. “You were employed at Brown and Associates, is that correct?” he asked.

“Yes.” Sarah looked from him to the other agent. She was still confused as to why the FBI was involved in all this. It was a gas explosion at a small business in a small town, so what were they doing here? And why were they asking her questions?

What was going on?

She looked down at her hands, clasped tightly in her lap. Was it ever going to get any easier, talking about what had happened yesterday?

“I lost all my friends yesterday. I still can’t believe they’re all gone, and I’ll never see them again.”

“We’re very sorry for your loss, Miss Masters. However, we aren’t convinced that it was an accident. Were you aware that Adam Brown, the owner of the firm, had recently received a death threat?”

Sarah quickly raised her head and looked across the room at Agent Morgan. She felt her heart start to beat loudly in her ears and struggled to breathe. There was that phrase again—‘death threat.’

“What? That’s the same question the Police Chief asked me yesterday. Listen, Agent Morgan, there has to be some mistake. Why would anyone threaten Adam Brown?” She looked from one agent to the other. They were serious.

“What is going on?” This whole line of questioning was confusing her, and she was starting to get angry at the intrusion on her life. What did they want from her anyway?

Sarah heard the chirp of a cell phone and saw Agent Morgan frown as he dug in his pants pocket.

“Excuse me for a moment. I have to take this.” She watched as he stood and walked over near the front foyer, his cell phone to his ear.

Sarah sat quietly in her chair, well aware that she was being watched closely by Agent Thorne. She decided to stare back at the other woman. What she saw was a tall, attractive woman with dark eyes, full lips, and abundant wavy black hair that was pulled back in a ponytail with a clip. Her brown eyes gazed steadily at Sarah with an air of authority that made her feel intimidated, even sitting in her own house.

Sarah finally broke eye contact with her and shifted awkwardly in her chair while trying to hear what was being said in the phone conversation, but Agent Morgan didn’t say much other than “thanks” before he disconnected the call. He turned back and looked at her, his gray eyes studying her in a way that made her feel like he was trying to make a decision.

“Miss Masters, would you be willing to come down to the police station with us and answer some questions?”

Sarah looked up at him standing there and started to feel a small amount of fear building in the pit of her stomach. Now he was talking about taking her to the police station. This wasn’t sounding good at all.

“Agent Morgan, what exactly is going on? Am I under arrest?”

He quickly shook his head. “We just want to ask you some questions about what happened yesterday. Since you are the only one that was there, you are the only one who can tell us. Surely you understand.”

Sarah nodded and tried to keep her voice steady as she slowly replied. “I do understand, but I was questioned yesterday by Police Chief Warner. I told him everything I could remember. Maybe you should talk to him.”

He nodded and smiled a little, obviously trying to make her feel more at ease. Well, it wasn’t working.

“I understand, Miss Masters. But we would still like to go over everything with you again—and get it all on tape this time. Maybe there were some things you didn’t remember to tell the Chief yesterday. I know it was a stressful time for you. Sometimes the next day, you can remember more.”

Sarah swallowed hard and asked the question again. “Am I a suspect, Agent Morgan? Am I under arrest?”

Agent Thorne spoke for the first time. “Everyone is a suspect...”

Sarah swiftly glanced over at the female agent and felt a moment of fear. She looked back again at Agent Morgan, who had turned and given the woman agent a scathing look of displeasure. The female agent spoke again, a chagrined look on her face.

“...until they aren’t.”

Sarah felt another moment of fear, which quickly turned to anger. How dare these people come into her house and threaten her—especially after what she had just gone through yesterday!

Then Agent Morgan surprised Sarah by sitting down on the end of her coffee table in front of her chair, so his face was at eye-level with her. She couldn’t help but notice the kindness in his gray eyes. This was a man she should fear. He could very well hold her future in his hands, but for some unknown reason, she felt like she could trust him. She looked into his eyes as he spoke to her, his deep voice soothing.

“Miss Masters, that phone call I just received was from my other field agent, Bill Parker. He’s been working with the State Fire Marshall the last hour, processing the scene of yesterday’s fire. They found a timing device, the type used to set off plastic explosives. What that means is what happened yesterday was not an accident.”

Sarah’s mind spun. “A timing device?” she repeated out loud. “You mean like a bomb?” She couldn’t help her voice squeaking a little.

He looked at her steadily. “We need your help if we’re going to find the people responsible for this. Will you come with us?”

She looked him in the face a few seconds longer before she closed her eyes and nodded.

“Just let me get my purse.”

She watched him stand before he motioned to Agent Thorne. “Jess, pull our car into the drive as close to the garage door as you can get.” She watched him throw a set of what she assumed to be car keys toward Agent Thorne, who deftly caught them out of the air with her right hand and headed out the front door.

Sarah walked to the kitchen to find her purse and keys. On the way through, she grabbed a navy blue zippered hooded sweatshirt from a hook near the back door. She might not need it now, but who knew what the weather would be like later when she came back home. It looked overcast, and the weatherman had predicted the possibility of rain. Opening the laundry room door, she peeked in to check on Sparky, who was curled up on his rug in the corner and looked quite content. There was plenty of water and food in his bowls, and hopefully, he would be a good dog until she returned.

When she went back into the living room, Agent Morgan was waiting for her near the front door. She locked the door from the inside, pulled the door closed tightly behind her, and quickly followed him as he led her to the rear passenger door of a large dark blue SUV parked in her driveway. Agent Thorne was already in the driver's seat with the engine running. Sarah quickly got it and started to put on her seatbelt. Seconds later, Agent Morgan got in the vehicle on the passenger side of the front seat and shut the door. Sarah felt the car backing out of the driveway before Agent Morgan had even settled in his seat.

They weren't wasting any time leaving.

"Try and get us out of here and past the media as fast as you can," he murmured to the female agent.

Sarah closed her eyes as they backed out the drive and quickly took off. She knew the cameras and media were out there, but she didn't want to see them. For the first time in her life, she understood what the rich and famous had to endure daily from the paparazzi. But she didn't want to be famous. She just wanted her nice quiet life back again.

Chapter 4

Sarah had lived in Herbert her whole life and had never been to the police station before yesterday's visit. Now she was headed back there for the second time in less than twenty-four hours.

The station was located in a turn of the century two-story brick building in the center of town. They pulled up in front of the station, and she sighed in despair. Here she was again. She glanced up at the brick building as she exited the vehicle. When she turned around, she found Agent Morgan at her side, his warm hand firmly on her elbow as he walked with her toward the glass double doors of the station. Sarah couldn't figure out yet if she should be afraid of him or not, but she was fearful of the power he represented. It was a sobering thought to realize he had the authority to put her in jail.

There was a small amount of comfort for Sarah in the presence of Police Chief Stan Warner, who appeared in his office doorway as they walked into the building. He greeted her with a nod of his head and a partial smile, and Agent Morgan paused long enough to reach out and shake Chief Warner's outstretched hand.

"I appreciate the use of your facilities, Chief."

"No problem, Agent Morgan. Let us know if you need anything."

Then Chief Warner turned and went back to his office, and Sarah was left with the impression he was no longer involved in the case. She couldn't help but feel that bit of news didn't bode well for her.

Regardless of what Agent Morgan had told her, they were treating her as if somewhere along the way, she had become a suspect.

Well, they were crazy. Sarah hadn't done anything wrong, and she wasn't going to be afraid of any of them. She stiffened her back and shoulders as Agent Morgan once again took her gently by the elbow and led her through the station to a small room near the back of the building. Sarah had to assume it was the small town's version of an interrogation room. She had never been in one before and had only what she had seen on TV shows as a reference. A video camera and laptop computer sat on a table at one end, with another small rectangular table and a few chairs placed in the center of the room. As her eyes took it all in, some of her bravado left her, and she quickly walked over and sat in one of the chairs, feeling like her legs were made of rubber.

There was no sense trying to deny it. Sarah was scared. She didn't know what they wanted from her, and she was terrified of what they were going to ask her. Yesterday had been difficult enough. And one thought kept racing through her mind, and it terrified her.

Did they really think she had anything to do with this?

God, why did you let something like this happen? And what is going to happen to me now?

Sarah hadn't talked to God in years, but she knew she needed some help. She just didn't understand what was going on. Her friends were dead, and she had been taken to the police station. With no one to call for help, what was she going to do?

Agent Morgan took the chair across from her, and Agent Thorne sat in a chair next to the table with the video equipment. Sarah watched the female agent push some buttons and then nod at Agent Morgan. He turned his attention back to Sarah.

"Do you need anything before we start, Miss Masters—a drink of water, coffee—anything?"

Sarah shook her head and tried to calm her racing heart. "No. Thank you, Agent Morgan. I'm fine."

He gazed at her a moment before he continued. "Okay, then. First, tell me the names of all the employees that were in the office building yesterday. Then start with what you did when you got to work yesterday morning and go through the rest of the day. I need to get a feel for what your typical day in the office was like."

Sarah closed her eyes in pain. 'A typical day,' he had called it. Yesterday had been anything but an ordinary day.

She opened her eyes and quietly gave him the names of all her friends she'd lost. "Adam Brown, the senior partner. Jim – James Walters and Ben Curtis, the other two partners. There are...were three paralegals; Tyler Stewart, Heather Winchell, and Cody Spencer. Then there are three other secretaries in addition to myself; Alice Mason, Julia Smith, and Margie Williams." She swallowed back her tears. It was so hard to believe she was never going to see any of them again. These people weren't just names to her. Most of them were friends she had worked with for the past six years.

"Was there any indication that any of your co-workers weren't getting along—a grudge against one of the partners, perhaps?"

The question caught Sarah by surprise. She would never think of any of her co-workers doing anything to hurt anyone. "No way. We all got along great. It was like a big family, Agent Morgan. We did things together, even went out for dinner several times a year." She wiped a tear from her face. "I can't believe any of my friends would have done something like this. There has to be some mistake. Besides, they were all there...except for me." She stopped talking for a moment as the implication of what she had just said hit her. She wasn't helping her situation any. "I should have been there too," she whispered.

Agent Morgan looked at her steadily for a moment. "Has there been any employee fired recently who might have a grudge against the firm?"

Sarah blinked a couple of times and then shook her head. "No, I don't think so."

He stared at her a moment, and Sarah got the feeling that he was going to push her for more information, but then he said, "Go on. You were going to tell me about your day."

Sarah looked down at her hands, clasped on top of the table, and then glanced over at him and nodded. "I stopped at the post office and picked up the mail like I do every morning. When I went to the office and my desk. Margie was already there with her morning coffee and a donut." Sarah swallowed hard. "Margie Williams is the other secretary in the front part of the office. She was

going to be married in three months.” Blinking her eyes, she tried to stop the tears she could feel accumulating. “I was supposed to be her maid of honor.”

Sarah tried to gain control of her emotions before continuing. “Sorry.” She swallowed back her tears again and continued. This was so difficult. Didn’t he realize how hard this was for her? Sarah gritted her teeth. She didn’t know Agent Morgan and didn’t want to, but right now, she sure didn’t like him very much for putting her through this again.

“I checked my email and sorted the regular mail like I do every morning. Those items that are addressed to the partners are given directly to them. The rest, I open myself and distribute to the proper people, depending on the item.”

Agent Morgan interrupted her. “Was there anything special in the mail yesterday morning that you can remember? Any packages or large envelopes?”

Sarah shook her head. “No. Actually, there wasn’t much mail at all, so it didn’t take me long to sort it.” She paused again to focus and get back her train of thought. “The first appointment of the day came in at 9:30 – Mr. and Mrs. Burdick – they were there to see Ben Curtis. He’s been working on their will and setting up the paperwork for their trust. They were there for about an hour and then left.”

Agent Morgan nodded at her. It was so hard to go back and recall every moment of what ended up being her last day with these people; they had all been so close. As a matter of fact, she and Margie had been best friends. They’d gone shopping, to the movies, and had frequently gone out to eat together. Margie had always teased Sarah about constantly being on a diet and had told her countless times that she didn’t need to lose weight, but Sarah knew better. She was what some would describe as ‘chunky.’ No matter what anyone called it, in her own eyes, she was fat.

It was so hard to believe Margie wasn’t going to be around to tease her anymore. She kept thinking someone was going to walk in the door of the interrogation room and tell them it was all a mistake – everyone had gotten out of the building before the explosion, and they were all safe. But nobody was telling her that.

“Go on. What happened next?” Agent Morgan’s words brought her back to the present.

Sarah blinked a couple of times. She needed to focus. “I answered some more emails and took phone calls from several people – setting up appointments for them. I had a few letters to type up and mail for Adam, so I worked on those. At 10:30, Mr. Charleston came in to see Jim Walters for his appointment. He was there to talk about settling his mom’s estate. She passed away three weeks ago. He was with Jim for about a half an hour and then left.”

Sarah looked over at the video equipment and wondered who would see this video. Hopefully, families of the victims would never see this and have to hear about the events of their loved ones’ last day.

She looked back at Agent Morgan and continued. “Margie took an early lunch and was gone longer than usual because she had a dentist appointment. She got back about twenty after twelve. Everyone else took their regular lunch hour at noon. Usually, the partners and the paralegals go to lunch together. I think they did it yesterday too. The other two secretaries also went to lunch at noon.

“Because of Margie’s appointment, I took my lunch later than normal. One of us always stays over the lunch hour, so we don’t have to close the office. I was originally planning to leave about twelve-thirty when Margie got back, but the security alarm repairman was there to do his annual check-up of the system, so I waited until he finished. He left about 12:40. Then I was on the phone for a while with a prospective client answering some questions.”

She paused, and Agent Morgan looked up from his note-taking. “The repairman from the alarm company—anything out of the ordinary there?”

“No, it was Jerry, the regular serviceman. He’s been doing the service on our security alarm for years.”

Agent Morgan nodded and turned his attention back to his notepad. “Go ahead.”

Sarah sighed again. Chief Warner hadn’t been nearly as specific in questioning her the previous day. “Like I said, I was on the phone for quite a while with this prospective client. While I was on the phone, the guy from the gas company came in. I just waved him through to the basement and didn’t really talk with him much.”

Morgan sat up straighter. “Tell me about him.”

Sarah blinked a couple of times as she remembered. She hadn’t really thought much about the guy from the gas company before. As a matter of fact, she couldn’t even remember if she had mentioned him to Chief Warner the day before. She thought she had, but she wasn’t sure.

“I don’t know what to tell you. I was on the phone. He came in and stood in front of my desk. I was on hold with a client, so I was able to talk to him for just a few seconds. He told me he was there to check the meter because they thought there was a problem with it.”

Agent Morgan’s head came up from his note-taking as Sarah gasped and looked across the table at him.

“Oh, my gosh! The meter! He said he was there to check the meter.” The words came rushing out of her mouth as the significance of it started to hit her. “The gas company used to have a meter reader come into the office every few months to read the meter and check it because it was in the basement of the building. They moved it outside four months ago so they wouldn’t have to come in and bother us anymore...” She heard her voice go up in octaves as she kept talking.

The realization of what she had just said hit her. “Oh, no. Do you think he’s the one that did this?” She felt her body start to shake again, and Agent Morgan looked over at Agent Thorne.

“Get her some water, Jess,” Sarah heard him say quietly.

As Agent Thorne left the room, Sarah tried to control her panic. Why hadn’t she thought of it sooner? There was no reason for anyone from the gas company to come into the building. The meter was no longer in the basement, and anyone from the gas company should have known that. Why hadn’t she realized it yesterday and stopped the man? Could she have prevented this whole thing from happening?

Agent Thorne returned with a glass of water and handed it to Sarah, who slowly took a sip. As she held the glass in her hand, Sarah was disturbed to see her hand was shaking again like it had most of the previous afternoon. When Agent Morgan started to speak to her again, she turned to look back across the table at him.

“Miss Masters...Sarah—may I call you Sarah? As soon as you feel up to it, I need you to tell me as much as you can about this guy from the gas company,” he said.

Agent Morgan’s eyes were looking at her steadily, and for the first time since he had started questioning her, she finally felt like he believed in her innocence.

Sarah spoke slowly as she remembered. “I was on the phone like I said, so I didn’t really have a lengthy conversation with him or anything. But I think I can remember some things about him. He was wearing dark blue jeans with a long-sleeved light blue cotton shirt with a patch that looked like the one the gas company uses. The shirt wasn’t tucked in, and he looked kinda sloppy. I think the shirt also had a name on it...” She thought for a moment but shook her head. “I’m sorry. I can’t remember.”

“That’s okay,” Agent Morgan said. “Take your time and tell me everything you can remember. You don’t have to hurry.”

Sarah nodded. “Like I said, he stood in front of my desk for just a few seconds. He was wearing a hat, like a baseball cap—it was light blue too, like his shirt. He had long dark hair, black, I think, pulled back in a ponytail at the base of his neck. I remember thinking it looked rather stringy like it needed to be washed. I think he had a badge thingy clipped on his belt too, but I didn’t get a good look at it.”

“How tall would you say he was?”

“About five foot eight, maybe five foot nine. He was standing, and I was sitting, so it’s hard to be sure, but I don’t think he was very tall. He looked like a Latino or Hispanic—kind of dark and swarthy if you know what I mean.” Sarah watched Agent Morgan nod as his pencil raced across his notepad.

“I remember the top buttons on his shirt were unbuttoned, and I could see he had some kind of tattoo on his upper chest.” She grimaced. “I don’t really like guys with tattoos. They give me the creeps.”

She noticed Agent Morgan lift his lips a little at her remark, then he looked back down, all the time his pencil scratching away. When she stopped talking, he looked back up and gave her a nod to continue.

“You’re doing great, Sarah. How much would you say he weighed?”

She sighed. Guessing weights had never been one of her talents. “Maybe 170 pounds, I think. That’s just a guess, you realize. I think he had a goatee – you know small mustache and a little beard just around the mouth area...” She ran her right index finger around her own lips and chin area. “...although, he looked like he hadn’t shaved in a few days. I remember thinking at the time, he didn’t look very professional.”

“How about his eyes. What color were they?”

Sarah thought for a moment. She could remember he had been wearing sunglasses when he first came in the office building and had folded and stuck them in his shirt pocket while he had stood in front of her desk. He had looked right at her when she was on the phone.

“They must be brown. I remember they were dark-colored, so they must be brown, and he had bushy black eyebrows.”

“Was he carrying anything?”

Sarah replayed the moment in her mind when she had first looked up to see him standing in front of her desk. “I think he was carrying something like a meter reading thingy in one hand and a small toolbox in the other. The toolbox was silver-colored. I remember thinking it looked kind of nice like it was relatively new.”

“Did he speak to you?”

She nodded. “Yes. I was on the phone—on hold like I said. But he said he was there to check the meter and asked how to get to the basement. I pointed out the door to him down the hallway, and he headed in that direction. That’s the last time I saw him.” She shook her head over and over. “I never should have allowed him into the basement. I should have remembered there was no gas meter down there and called the police. This is all my fault.”

Agent Morgan slowly shook his head. “Don’t go there, Sarah. You are not to blame, and right now, I need you to focus on telling me everything about this man. Do you remember anything special about his voice?”

Sarah thought for a moment. “He had a deep voice with an accent like Spanish was his native tongue.” She turned the corner of her lips up a little at the surprised look on Agent Morgan’s face. “I took two years of Spanish from a Mexican/American when I was in college. No matter how hard my professor tried, she couldn’t get rid of that accent.”

He nodded his understanding, and she continued. “So, he went to the basement, and I finished my phone call. I looked at the clock and realized it was one o’clock and time for me to leave, so I grabbed my purse and went home for lunch. Everyone else in the office had already come back from lunch when I left.”

“Where were you parked?”

“The office parking lot on the west side of the building. Everyone parked there. Oh.” She stopped and looked over at him. “There was this white paneled van. I assumed it was the one the gas repair guy drove. It was kind of old and had some rust on the rear tire wells.”

“Any markings on it? Do you know the year, make, or model?”

She shook her head. “No, I’m sorry. I’m not very good at recognizing types of cars. It looked like it might have had some orange paint on the doors, though, kind of like the gas company’s logo, but it was almost all worn off. That’s why I assumed it was his truck. It had a ladder rack on the top, I think, but no ladders.”

“Did you happen to see the license number?”

She shook her head. “No, I’m sorry. I didn’t look. If I had known how important it was going to be...”

“That’s okay, Sarah. You’re doing great. But you never saw the guy from the gas company leave, correct?”

“No. He arrived just a few minutes before I left and was still in the basement when I went to lunch.” She swallowed hard. “And then when I got back, it was all gone.”

Sarah watched Agent Morgan write something more in his notebook, and then he looked back up at her. “Sarah, do you think you can remember the name on his shirt?”

Sarah closed her eyes. *You can do it*, she could remember her Dad telling her when she was little. He used to have her play a memory game with him to train her to remember things. He would put

twelve or more different items in the middle of the dining room table, and then call her into the room to look at the table. She'd have thirty seconds to memorize the items. Then he'd have her leave the room while he removed one or more items from the table. He would call her back, and she would have to try and tell him what items were missing. Her dad had been so much fun and had cheered her on whenever she got them all correct.

You can do it! Just try and remember.

"Paul. It was Paul."

Agent Morgan rewarded her with a small smile. "You're sure?"

Sarah nodded and explained. "My Dad used to have me play a memory game with him when I was little." She quickly told him the gist of the game. "I have appreciated his teaching me to remember details many times over the years. Back then, it was just a game, you know, but now..."

He nodded his understanding. "You've done a great job, Sarah. I can't believe how much you've remembered after all you've been through. More than likely, Paul's not his real name anyway, but it's still helpful information."

He paused for a moment and flipped the pages of his notebook. "I have just a few more questions for you. Did Adam Brown ever mention to you or anyone else in your hearing that he'd received a death threat from a Mexican drug cartel?"

She stared at the Federal Agent in front of her. There was that question again. Why did everyone keep asking her that?

"Absolutely not! Why in the world would a Mexican drug cartel threaten him? He's just a small-town civil attorney. My goodness, he never had any dealings with drug pushers or anything! Brown and Associates specialized in contracts, mortgages, wills and leases, and tort and patent law. It's crazy to think he would be involved with something like that!"

"You don't know of any communications or heard of anything dealing with the cartel or any questionable business dealings?"

Sarah shook her head again. "Absolutely not," she repeated. Why did everyone keep asking her about this? She had handled most of the paperwork for the law practice over the years, and there had never been anything that even resembled what Agent Morgan was implying. The firm handled civil cases and estates for local people, not dealing with drug traffickers. Were they all crazy?

He looked down and flipped through his notepad again, then looked back up at her. "Do you remember an attorney named Matt Calvin who used to work for the practice?"

Sarah flinched on hearing the name she had thought she would never hear again. "Yes, I remember Matt."

She saw Agent Morgan lock his eyes on her. "What about him?"

Sarah felt uncomfortable under his studying eyes but continued making eye contact with him. She didn't want it to appear like she was hiding anything, but she also wasn't ready to talk about her past relationship with Matt. It was none of the FBI's business, after all.

"Matt Calvin was one of the firm's partners. He left the law practice about nine months ago. It wasn't on very good terms."

"What happened?"

She shrugged. “I don’t know all the specifics other than one afternoon Matt and Adam Brown, the senior partner, got into a shouting match in Adam’s office. Matt yelled something about quitting and stormed out of the office.”

What Sarah was leaving out was, that same night, Matt had broken off their engagement and left her life forever. She was also omitting how devastated she had been. Before Matt left town, the wedding plans had already been set in motion. The announcements had been ordered, and her dress was in the process of being altered. He had left her behind to clean up the mess his running out on her had created. It had taken her months to finally come to the conclusion he had done her a favor by leaving. Months—and a whole lot of tears. He had hurt her deeply, and she had never been able to forgive him.

“I think he moved to Miami to take a job in a law practice there,” she added.

She saw Agent Morgan nod. “He was working for a firm there that has had questionable dealings in possible money laundering and heavily involved defending members of a local drug ring. We’ve been trying to bust them for years.”

Sarah caught the word ‘was.’ “Where is he now?”

Agent Morgan hesitated, and she caught the quick blink of his eyes. He finally answered, and his words were spoken slowly like he was choosing them carefully. “He was found dead in his car after his brakes went out on a hilly road. There was never any proof found—at least not enough to convict, but it was thought he was killed by the drug Cartel he’d been working for.”

Sarah gasped. What in the world had Matt become involved in?

“So you think that this death threat against Adam has something to do with Matt’s involvement down in Florida?”

Agent Morgan nodded. “We believe Calvin was already involved with the cartel while he was still working here for Brown and Associates. After he moved to Florida, he must have decided somewhere along the way that he wanted out of the dealings with the Cartel, but he was already in too deep. You don’t just walk away from involvement with these people.

“I need you to try and remember, Sarah—did you overhear enough of that last conversation between Mr. Brown and Calvin to know if it had anything to do with his activities with the Cartel? Anything at all? Or do you remember any overheard conversations of Calvin’s which, looking back now, sound suspicious?”

She shook her head. “They were shouting at each other that day. I didn’t hear any of the actual conversation, though.

“I can’t believe any of this is happening, Agent Morgan. This is just a small town. Things like this don’t happen around here.”

“Think about it for a minute, Sarah. Did Matt ever mention anything to you that might lead you to believe he was using Brown and Associates in his dealings with the cartel?”

She shook her head, feeling far too stunned to even think anymore. Matt had never fit in with the rest of the attorneys. Sarah could recall overhearing Adam Brown talking with one of the other partners about Matt. He’d said Matt spent too much time looking for the easy way to make a dollar rather than doing the honest thing. It would seem Adam had understood more than she what type of man Matt Calvin was.

Then Agent Morgan spoke again.

“I have just one more question for you, Sarah.”

She quickly looked over at him, feeling tendrils of fear again when she heard the serious tone of his voice.

“Did you have a nameplate on your desk?”

Well, that wasn't the question she had expected.

She nodded. “Of course. Everyone but the partners had nameplates on their desks...” She stopped talking and blinked a couple of times as she felt the blood draining from her head. When her ears started to ring, she was sure she was going to faint.

“He would have seen it. He knows my name,” she almost whispered.

Agent Morgan quickly stood and came around to lean against the table next to where she was seated. He reached out and lightly touched her shoulder. “If you feel faint, Sarah, put your head down between your knees.”

Sarah took another sip of the water. She couldn't help but notice her hand was shaking again as she set the water glass back down on the table in front of her. She stared at the rings of water on the table her glass of water had caused and concentrated on taking one breath, then another.

I will not faint. I refuse to pass out.

Agent Morgan glanced over at Agent Thorne, who reached down and stopped the video camera, then he straightened up to stand next to Sarah's chair. Sarah looked up at him and could read the look of concern on his face.

“We aren't going to let anything happen to you, Sarah. I promise,” he spoke firmly.

He reached out and touched her shoulder again, and she was surprised by how much it comforted her to have contact, however brief, from another human being. What she really needed was a hug.

He looked down at her. “Will you be okay here for a bit? I'll be back, but I have something I need to do.”

She nodded and saw him motion for the woman to follow him as they both left the room.

CHAPTER 5

Special Agent Sam Morgan closed the door to the interrogation room behind him and turned to his colleague, Special Agent Jessica Thorne.

“What do you think?”

He and the members of his team were exactly that. A team. True, he was the boss, but he still respected their insight.

“I think she’s telling us everything she can remember, Sam. Although I’m not so sure she was entirely forthright with you about what she knows about Calvin. But I don’t think she had anything to do with the explosion.”

He nodded in agreement, and they both walked through a nearby door into a room adjacent to the interrogation room. In the connecting wall was a glass window on this side so they could see and hear everything that went on in the attached room. The young woman he had just questioned still sat where they had left her, staring down at the table and not moving a muscle. Sam’s heart went out to this young woman. She’d obviously had a terrible day yesterday, and he had just made today equally as bad. But it was good to know that his first instincts as an investigator had been right. She was as much a victim as those that had died in the explosion the day before.

Samuel Clemens Morgan had been with the Federal Bureau of Investigation for over ten years. Ingrained into his psyche was the ability to read people. It was a part of his training and had rarely let him down. Along with that, FBI education and years of experience were his inner instincts and beliefs. As a Christian, he counted on God for everything—even weeding out and finding evil and especially getting the bad guys. God had never failed him yet.

“I thought the same thing, Jess. Do you think they were romantically involved?”

Before she had time to answer his question, the outside hallway door burst open. Sam and Jess both turned as Bill Parker, the other agent in their team, rushed in.

“Sam, you need to see this.”

“What?” He and Jess both followed him from the room as Bill continued talking.

“Sarah Master’s house blew up this morning right after you and Jess picked her up. They’ve been showing it over and over again on one of the news stations.”

Sam pushed past him toward the main squad room. A TV was on, and the two officers on duty were standing in front of it. They quickly moved out of the way to make room for Sam and the other two agents.

“This morning, the house of Sarah Masters exploded just moments after Miss Masters left the house with two FBI agents. The following fire was caught on film by our reporter and cameraman who were on the scene at the time of the explosion.”

“Miss Masters was an employee of Brown and Associates, a Herbert law firm, where an explosion occurred yesterday which rocked the downtown area and killed nine employees—all except Ms. Masters. Herbert Police Chief

Stanley Warner's only comment is that both of these explosions are still under investigation. As far as we know, no charges have yet been filed against Miss Masters..."

The news report showed a film of Sarah's cute little house totally engulfed. The fire department hadn't even arrived yet at the time the footage was shot. It was obvious to Sam that when they did arrive, there wasn't going to be anything left of the house to save.

Sam clenched his jaw and turned away from the television. His thoughts turned immediately to the young woman in the interrogation room. This whole incident had just become personal, and he felt his adrenaline shoot up a notch.

He turned toward Bill. "Check out the scene. See if it was a job done by the same perp. I don't believe it was either an accident or a coincidence. See if you find anything that links it to the Brown explosion."

Bill nodded and left the room, and Sam looked at Jess. He knew Bill would find any hint of a bomb. Bill Parker was a part of the FBI's SABT team – Special Agent Bomb Technician. Sam disliked what this latest development told them, but at least with this knowledge, they knew the steps they would have to take. One of the first steps was to take Sarah Masters into protective custody. She was the only material witness to the murder of those people at Brown and Associates, and their only way to link it to the Cartel.

He ran his right hand through his hair again. "She's a target, Jess. He knows she's still alive, and he knows she's the only one who knows what he looks like. She's also the only one that can place him on the scene moments before the explosion." Sam ran the palm of his hand across his chin, feeling the stubble of a beginning of a beard. He hadn't taken the time to shave this morning because they had wanted to get here before the Fire Marshall or anyone else disturbed the scene. His team was a part of the CIRG—Critical Incident Response Group—of the FBI and had been working in the Cincinnati office when the call had come in from headquarters about the possible bombing. The Bureau had already been notified several days earlier by the local Police Department of the death threat to Adam Brown, so since they were the closest team to the area, he had quickly taken the assignment. It had already been a long morning for his team, and the day was just about to get longer.

"Jess, see if you can find a sketch artist to work with Sarah, so we have something to run through our photo recognition databases. We need to get an ID on this guy ASAP. And find some pictures of vans for her to look at. If we can get a make and model of the vehicle, we can put out a BOLO. We need to find this guy."

Jess pulled out her cell phone and started pushing numbers. Sam pulled out his own cell phone and hit a number on speed dial.

"Johnson, I need a safe house. What do we have available in the area?"

Agent Morgan returned to the interrogation room a little later. Earlier, Agent Thorne had brought in a policewoman who had worked with Sarah to come up with a sketch of the guy she had seen in the office. When the sketch artist showed her the finished drawing, Sarah nodded her head, amazed how much it looked like the gas company repairman a/k/a bad guy.

“That’s him,” Sarah said. Chills ran up and down her back at the sight of the dark eyes staring out of the sketch.

She saw Sam nod at the young female officer who had done the drawing. “Good job, Kate. Please run that through all the photo databases we have as soon as possible and see if we can get an ID.”

As he turned to look back at her, Sarah felt his gray eyes studying her again. What was he thinking? Did he really think she had anything to do with this awful thing? What kind of person did something like this anyway? She didn’t even want to know.

The realization swept over her again that her co-workers and friends were actually gone. What had happened was overwhelming. She really didn’t want to think about it anymore. But she had to. These FBI agents were making her relive it all over and over again.

Sarah just wanted to go home and crawl into her bed and forget any of it ever happened. When were they going to let her go home? Or were they? Surely they didn’t believe she had anything to do with any of this, did they? Maybe she was going to be arrested and end up in jail. Then who would she call for help?

“When can I go home, Agent Morgan? I’ve told you everything I can remember.”

He glanced up at her from the paperwork in his hands, just looking at her for a time before answering her. “First, we’ll see if we can get a match from that sketch. From that, maybe we’ll know a little better what we’re dealing with – who this guy is and who he works for.”

She watched as he pushed several photos of white vans across the table toward her. “I also want you to look at some photos of vans for me. See if any of these look like the one you saw in the parking lot yesterday.”

Sarah picked up the photos and looked through them slowly, setting several aside that didn’t match the one she had seen. She finally settled on one that appeared to be the nearest to what she could remember. The caption under the photo showed it was a Ford E250 van, a 2003 model. It might not be the right year of the one she saw, but it was close.

“This one looks like it, I think.”

He looked at the photo Sarah had picked out of the stack and rewarded her with a tilting upwards of his lips.

“Good job. This will be a lot of help.” Agent Morgan stood up and headed toward the door.

“Why don’t you take a break and relax for a bit, Sarah. I’ll be back in a little while. We’ll get an all-points bulletin out on this vehicle, and hopefully, somebody will have spotted it.”

Sarah nodded as she watched the door close behind him.

Relax, right. He had to be kidding.

Sam glanced down at his watch as he headed back toward the interrogation room. It was twelve-thirty in the afternoon. Sarah Masters had been sitting in that room for over three hours, and he hadn't heard one word of complaint out of her. Other than a trip to the restroom, she'd stayed right there. Jess had rounded up a sketch artist, and Sarah had painstakingly described the man to the artist again and again until they had come up with a resemblance Sarah was happy with. She'd helped Sam identify the type of van the guy had been driving. So far, she was one of the most cooperative witnesses he had ever dealt with.

They were making a little progress toward finding out who was behind this. Sarah was a real trooper, but he didn't know how much longer she was going to feel that way. When he shared the latest news with her, she might not be able to keep up the brave front anymore. Sooner or later he was going to have to tell her she couldn't go home to her little house because it no longer existed. Eventually, he was going to have to explain to her that she was going into protective custody because this guy was now trying to kill her.

Sam took a deep breath. He needed to keep his perspective on this case. His first instinct when Sarah Masters had realized she was the only one who knew what the bomber looked like and would be his next target was to go over to her and wrap his arms around her in a hug. It had been instinctive and immediate and had rocked him to the core. He was a professional – a federal agent. What in the world had he been thinking?

He took a moment to steady his thoughts as he walked down the hall toward the room where Sarah Masters sat waiting. Right now, he needed to focus on going through the evidence they had collected so they could catch this guy. He was hopeful the lab would be able to get a match for one of the prints they'd found on the front door handle of Brown and Associates. The large front glass windows and glass door had been blown out in the explosion and fire, but fortunately, the steel door frame and the handle had remained intact. If they could get a decent print that matched a face, then they would know positively who and what they were dealing with. The lab would run the prints through the FBI's Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System (IAFIS), as well as the Automated Biometric Identification System (ABIS). Hopefully, they would be able to find a match - quickly. The sooner they knew what and who they were after, the better they would know what their next move should be.

Sam stopped with his hand on the door to the interrogation room and sent a short prayer heavenward. *Lord, please comfort this young woman. She's been through so much. And give me the wisdom I need to protect her from this evil.*

He carried the sandwiches and coffee he'd purchased at the nearby diner with him into the interrogation room. Pulling out the chair next to Sarah's, he placed the sacks of food on the table in front of her and sat down. The food wasn't anything fancy, but they both needed to eat as his growling stomach had recently reminded him.

“I brought us some lunch, Sarah. I’m sure you’re hungry. I know I am.” He smiled at her, trying to make her feel more comfortable around him. He realized being questioned by an FBI agent could be a little intimidating.

When he had first met her at her house that morning, he had instantly felt she wasn’t involved and hadn’t wanted to scare her. Then when he had started questioning her, he hadn’t been sure. He had initially been suspicious because she was the only one not killed in the explosion. That, plus her hiding her relationship with Calvin, had left him thinking of her as a possible suspect. But it hadn’t taken him long before he had come to the conclusion that she hadn’t had anything to do with it and been very fortunate that she also wasn’t killed in the explosion.

“Sarah, I want you to know that I really appreciate your help on all this. I know it’s been tough.”

She glanced at him as she slowly took the paper wrapping off her sandwich. “Whatever I can do to help catch the monster that did this...”

Neither one spoke for a moment as they each took bites of their sandwiches. Sam finished chewing a bite and decided to ask her the question that had been bugging him.

“So Sarah, tell me about you and Matt Calvin.”

CHAPTER 6

Sam heard her gasp and knew he had hit a nerve.

She looked across the table at him with her sad eyes. “How...how did you know about Matt and me?” she finally squeaked out.

He studied her face carefully. There was no guilt there, just sadness.

“Just a feeling I got when you talked about him. Over the years, my job has made me pretty good at reading people and figuring out when they’re trying to hold something back from me.”

Sarah gave him a sad-looking smile and nodded. “Well, in this case, you were right.” Her fingers played with the sandwich wrapper for a moment before she spoke again.

“I wasn’t really trying to hide anything from you. I just didn’t want to have to talk about it. Matt and I started dating when he first joined the firm about two years ago.”

Sam couldn’t help but notice the look on her face was full of sorrow as if remembering a bittersweet time. He disliked having to make her rehash bad memories after all she’d gone through the last two days, but he had to know the truth – all of it. Was she aware of Matt Calvin’s dealings with the cartel? He had to know how much she knew and if she was being honest with him, and from that, he would know if she could be trusted.

“Matt and I started dating regularly, and things got real serious pretty quick. I was so sure he was ‘the one,’ as the gals at the office called it. He sent me beautiful flowers and romantic cards and took me to fancy restaurants. I was sure I’d found the love of my life. Then he asked me to marry him about six months into the relationship. I was ecstatic.” She laughed a bitter sounding little laugh.

It was clear that Calvin had hurt her. Badly.

“I was swept away with the idea of marriage, a wedding, having someone beside me for the rest of my life, eventually having a home of my own and a family, you know—kids, the whole dream.” He watched her hands flutter gracefully over the table as she talked.

“I’ve been alone since my parents died when I was still in college. I guess I soaked up the attention I got from Matt like a sponge. Looking back at it now, I realize I didn’t really love him—not like you should love the person you’re promising to spend the rest of your life with. But I thought I was in love with him at the time.”

Sam finished chewing the bite of sandwich in his mouth and swallowed. “So, did he love you?”

Sarah’s eyes locked with his across the table for a moment before she answered. He could see the hurt in those eyes, and he could almost feel her pain.

“Obviously not. I really thought he did, but you don’t desert the person you love. After he had left town, I realized he was just using me.” She shook her head. “I’m pretty sure he had no intention of actually marrying me. He was just playing with me and my emotions, and I was dumb enough to let him.”

He saw Sarah clench her jaw as if readying for what she was going to tell him. “The day he and Adam got into the argument I told you about earlier, Matt left the office in a rage. I’d never seen him so angry. We were supposed to meet for dinner that night at a small restaurant here in town – Bailey’s Bar and Grill. He was late, but he did finally show up, so I thought everything was going to be okay between us. Then about halfway through dinner, he dropped the news that he was leaving town the next day and that the wedding was off. He never even told me he was sorry.”

She shook her head, her fingers still playing with the sandwich wrapper. “I don’t really remember much after that, but I’m pretty sure I made a scene. I know I yelled at him and then cried and begged him to reconsider and not to leave me. Obviously, what I said that night didn’t make any difference to him because he left town the next morning, and I never saw him again. He left me behind to clean up the mess he’d made of my life. I had to tell all my friends the wedding was off, return my dress, cancel the arrangements for the church and the reception, and try and forget Matt Calvin ever existed.” She swiped at a lone tear rolling down her face. “It took a while.”

He heard her sniff and watched as she reached into a pocket of her jeans to pull out a tissue and wipe her eyes. Then she took a deep breath and lifted her chin. “I was just starting to feel like I might be able to forget him and how much he hurt me. Now you’re telling me that because of what Matt was involved with in Florida, all my friends are dead. How am I supposed to forgive him after that?”

Sam took a swig of the cup of coffee he’d brought into the interrogation room with him. He hated to do it, but he had to keep pushing her for more information. “What exactly happened between Matt Calvin and Adam Brown, Sarah?”

She glanced over at him as if her eyes were searching his for answers. “I’m not sure. Matt told me he was pushing Adam to start letting the practice handle more criminal law cases, but Adam said he wasn’t interested. I thought that was what finally drove Matt to leave Herbert. I think he was very disappointed. Adam was firmly against changing the practice. It was evident to me that Matt had bigger aspirations than Brown and Associates was going to be able to provide him.”

Sam looked down at his coffee cup, running his fingers along the lip of the cup and wondered how much more he should tell her. He finally decided the only way he was going to know how much Sarah knew about Calvin’s dealing was to just keep prying the information out of her.

“Do you know if Matt ever traveled to Mexico?”

He watched as she looked across the table at him. Her eyes behind those glass lenses blinked a couple of times, and he saw her hesitation before she answered.

“He did. He and his best friend from college, Brandon Joseph, went there on a vacation shortly after he joined Brown and Associates.” She paused and tilted her head a little. “Now that you mention it, he seemed different when he came back.”

“How so?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know how to explain it other than he seemed more driven to succeed than before. And that’s when he started pushing Adam, trying to convince him to change the firm’s philosophy on what type of business they would accept. It was like he wanted Brown and Associates to become something it wasn’t. It was just a small-town firm, and that’s all Adam Brown ever wanted it to be.”

Sam continued to watch her as she nibbled on her sandwich. He knew about Brandon Joseph. Joseph was heavily involved in money laundering and had direct ties to the cartel. Well, past tense. He *had* been heavily involved until he came to an early demise in a dark alley in Miami.

She looked across the table at him, her eyes never wavering from his.

“Am I suspected of being involved somehow, Agent Morgan?”

He quickly shook his head. “No, Sarah, you aren’t a suspect.”

Her relief at his response was noticeable and he watched as her brow wrinkled again in concentration. “So, what does this all have to do with Brown and Associates? I still don’t understand. Why were we a target?”

Sam looked at his coffee cup as he slowly placed it down on the table in front of him. She wasn’t involved in any of this. He was sure now, just by her reaction to everything he had told her so far. His business was knowing when people were lying to him, and Sarah Masters didn’t know how to lie. He made the decision right then to tell her as much as he could at this point. Her life had been irrevocably changed today, and she had a right to know why.

“We may never know the truth for sure, but we have a theory that Calvin was pushing Brown and Associates to take on criminal law so he could use the practice to help defend some of the scum bags who work for the cartel. Who knows, he might even had plans to use the firm for money laundering. That, in addition to his close relationship to Joseph, leads us to believe he was heavily involved with the cartel, even while he was still living in Herbert. His association with the cartel was probably why he moved to Miami. We’ve been watching the law practice he went to work for down there for many years. If we could get a firm link to all this being connected, we could blow this case wide open. The hope is, when we catch whoever did this, he will talk.”

He saw Sarah’s confused look. “I still don’t understand why the people in Mexico would harm anyone here in Herbert. We didn’t have anything to do with what Matt and his friend were doing in Miami.”

Sam suddenly realized how naïve she really was. She really didn’t get it. Living here in a small town, she had no idea about how many bad people there were out there in the real world. But then again, that was why he did the job he did—so that most Americans would never have to deal with any of it and could live their lives without fear.

“Unfortunately, the scumbags in the Mexican Cartel are rather paranoid, and they didn’t have any way of being sure of that. Their knee-jerk reaction is to take out anyone and everyone who might be a threat to them and the dirty business they handle. When a person chooses to leave the organization, anyone who might be aware of the ‘business relationship’ also has to go.”

He watched her shake her head again. Matt Calvin had been a fool for getting involved with the cartel. And he was a bigger fool for the way he had treated Sarah Masters. She deserved a man who loved her and treasured her, not a man who deserted her.

Sam cleared this throat and took another sip of his now lukewarm coffee. He hadn’t told her everything about Matt Calvin’s death—or the death threat to Adam Brown and how the FBI was so confident they were related, and he probably never would. There was no reason to tell her more gruesome details than what she was already aware of. She had been through enough.

The real question now was, how was he going to give more bad news to this young woman? Sometimes he hated his job. He wished he didn't have to tell her the rest.

"I'm afraid I have more bad news for you, Sarah."

He watched her put her half-eaten sandwich back down on the table and look over at him, a frightened look sweeping over her face.

"This morning, after we left your house, there was a fire." The realization of what he was telling her slowly spread across her face. "I'm sorry, Sarah. Your house is gone."

Sarah's shoulders slumped, and her sigh echoed through the room. "I was afraid you were going to tell me someone else was dead. I don't think I could have handled that," he heard her say in a quiet voice.

She shook her head. "My house is gone? I was only renting the house, but everything I owned was there; my car, everything." She shook her head again as if she was having trouble taking it all in. "Oh no! Sparky, my Yorkie! I've lost him too?" Tears started running down her cheeks. He hadn't known there was a pet involved. That would make it even harder for her. In the space of twenty-four hours, this poor gal had lost everything.

He saw her head come up, and there was a spark of anger in her eyes. Good. Perhaps she was a survivor after all.

"What happened, Agent Morgan?"

Sam hesitated a moment. She had to know the truth, but he sure hated to be the one to tell her. "One of my agents is at the scene checking it out, but it looks like the fire was caused by another explosion. We're considering this to be a bombing like the one that destroyed Brown and Associates. We're guessing it's the same perpetrator. It looks like he attached an explosive device to the gas main at the side of your house and set it off with a timer. Just like the office explosion. If we hadn't come to the house and brought you here...or it could have exploded while we were all still there. We were all fortunate." He tried to keep his voice steady. She had no idea how fortunate they all had been.

But Sam knew they hadn't been lucky. God had truly protected them.

Sarah's tear-filled eyes grew round behind her wire-rimmed glasses. Sam had always felt that if you looked into someone's eyes, you could almost see into their soul. Her hazel colored eyes told him of sorrow and torment and way too much loss in a short period of time. He just hoped and prayed she was strong enough to hold up under the stress of the last two days.

"That must be why Sparky was so restless. He woke me up about five o'clock this morning, and when I let him out into the back yard, he kept running around and barking. Do you suppose somebody was in the other yard right then, and that is why Sparky was so upset?"

He watched her eyes grow large as she processed all the information he had given her and came to the only conclusion there was. Even after just a short time with her, he knew she was smart enough to realize what this latest news meant to her.

"It was the same guy, wasn't it? And he was trying to kill me. I'm the only one that knows what he looks like." Her voice sounded flat to him as she almost whispered the words.

Sam hoped and prayed she could hold up without losing it. This was a lot for a seasoned agent like him to take in. How was she going to handle it?

“That’s what we’re thinking.” Sam pulled his chair closer and turned it, so he was facing her. “Sarah, I want you to know that we’re going to protect you. Once it gets dark, we’re taking you to a safe house for the night. You can stay here at the police station until then. No one is going to get to you, do you understand me? We’re going to keep you safe, I promise.”

He watched her closely as Sarah gazed at him for a few seconds, took a couple of deep breaths, swallowed hard, and then slowly nodded.

Feeling that she would be okay now, he decided to get back to business. They had more to discuss.

“We got a hit when we ran the sketch through our photo recognition software. And we were able to lift a partial print off the remains of the front door handle on the office door. We got a match for that too.” He stopped talking for a moment and reached across the table to touch her hand lightly with his left hand, and pulled a photo out of his jacket pocket with his right hand and placed it on the table in front of her.

“Is this the same man who came into the office posing as a gas company repairman?”

Sarah’s face paled as she looked at the picture, and he heard her gasp. She pressed her fingertips to her temples, and he watched the emotions sweep across her face as she looked down at the photo of the man who had changed her life forever.

“Yes,” she almost whispered. “That’s him.”

“You’re sure, Sarah?”

“I’m positive, Agent Morgan. I will never forget that face.”

Sam patted her hand. “Thank you. What that means is we now have an ID and know exactly who we’re looking for. His name is Paolu Manuel Manaquez. He is a well-known hitman who works for the same Mexican Drug Trafficking Organization I was telling you about earlier.” He stopped talking for a moment and let that sink in. What he wasn’t telling her was that Manaquez was on the FBI’s Most Wanted List for his many alleged criminal activities, including racketeering, drug trafficking, and money laundering, and was thought to be responsible for several other murders. He was one bad dude; Sam would like nothing more than to catch him.

“At least now we know who and what we’re dealing with, Sarah. No more mysteries.”

He reached over and grasped her hand as she turned her tear-filled eyes toward him. Her hands were cold, she was shaking, and he could tell she was trying not to lose control of her emotions. If it weren’t for the need for professional propriety, Sam would have pulled her into his arms in a hug.

“We will not let him hurt you, I promise. You have to trust me, Sarah. I wouldn’t blame you for not trusting anyone at this point, but you *have* to trust me.”

She nodded again, and he sensed the moment she had her emotions under control by the stiffening of her back.

“I understand.”

Later, after putting a call into FBI Headquarters and consulting with Bill and Jess, Sam walked back into the interrogation room. Sarah sat quietly in the chair, staring at the empty table before her. She looked as tired as he felt. It had been a long day for all of them, but there hadn't been one word of complaint from her. She might be petite in stature, but her heart was huge, and she had perseverance and maturity he had rarely seen in one so young and innocent. He was very proud of her and hoped sometime in the future to be able to tell her that.

He had been an agent long enough and seen enough victims and survivors to know what was running through her head right now. She was filled with guilt because she had survived two explosions, and none of her friends and co-workers had lived through one. He also knew she was going to have to go through a great deal more. He just hoped she was strong enough to withstand it all. What Sam wouldn't tell her was what he knew for a certainty – her life would never be the way it had been before.

"Sarah," he said gently.

She looked up at him, a faint smile on her face even though he could see the weariness in her eyes.

"I just wanted you to know we're leaving in a little while to take you to a safe house for the night – in another town." He sat down in the chair across from her. "I know this is hard. But I want to let you know what's going to happen, so you won't be scared."

She nodded.

"I appreciate that, Agent Morgan."

A little of his heart melted when he saw how trusting her eyes were as she looked over at him. She looked like a lost little girl.

"We will wait until it's dark, and then we'll leave. All right? You can't stay here at the police station—or even here in Herbert."

She nodded again.

"Agent Morgan, can I ask you a question?"

"Of course you can, Sarah. Anything."

Her eyes locked on his. "What about Adam Brown's family and the rest of the employees' families? Are they safe? Is he going to go after them too?"

He took a deep breath. This little gal continued to amaze him. Here she was, being hunted by a madman, and all she could do was worry about her friends' families. It was evident she had a tender heart. How many people in the same circumstances would even be thinking about the safety of their friends? Most people he knew would only be worried about saving their own skin.

But this question he had an answer for.

"Yes. They have around the clock police protection and have had ever since the explosion. They're safe, Sarah. Please don't worry about them."

She nodded and exhaled a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Agent Morgan. I've been concerned about them. I wish I could let them know how sorry I am for their losses. It was like a family, you know? We used to get together at Christmas parties and cookouts during the summer..." She sniffed. "I won't even be able to go to my friends' funerals, will I?"

Sam shook his head. “No, Sarah. You won’t. I’m sorry.” He waited for a moment. “Anything else?”

He watched as Sarah slowly shook her head. She seemed to be content with that piece of information—at least for now.

Sarah Masters was placing her life in their hands without even batting an eyelash, and he felt the tremendous weight of the responsibility on his shoulders.

After darkness had fallen, a dark-colored SUV with tinted windows pulled up to the side door of the police station. Sam and the other two agents, Jess and Bill, shepherded a small figure in an oversized dark blue hooded sweatshirt into the back seat of the SUV. Within seconds, the vehicle pulled away from the curb and took off.

Sam sat in the front seat along with Bill, who was driving. He glanced back at Sarah, who sat in the back seat with Jess and watched as Sarah pulled the hood off her head and tugged her long dark hair loose. She wasn’t very big and looked to him about old enough to be in high school. He knew she had to be older than that—probably her mid to late twenties. Maybe it was just the vulnerable look she had about her that made her seem so young to him. Or perhaps he was just getting old.

“We’re on our way,” he said, hoping to give her some sort of reassurance.

He saw her faint nod in the darkness, then turned back to the front and looked out the windshield. While he watched the road ahead appearing in the light of their headlights, he thought about their charge.

She was a quiet one. She didn’t ask a lot of questions and did pretty much whatever they asked of her without asking the “what” and “why” of everything, unlike so many of the folks they’d protected over the years. Because she was a principal witness in this case, they had to keep her alive until they could catch this guy. Once she identified him, and they were able to convict him and send him off to prison, she could go back to living her life. They just had to keep her alive until that happened.

Piece of cake.

CHAPTER 7

Paolo Manaquez was not a happy man.

He was hiding out in a fleabag motel at the edge of some tiny little town about thirty miles from Herbert when he saw the newscast.

Slamming his can of beer down on the wobbly table in the room, he paced the well-worn carpet and thought about his next move. She was supposed to be in that house when the bomb went off. For that matter, she was supposed to be in that lawyer's office when it blew up. How many lives did this chick have, anyway? When he had come back upstairs from the basement after planting the bomb, he had noticed she wasn't at her desk, but he had assumed she was in the bathroom or another office. He had been wrong. The news people had reported she was still alive, so he had planted a bomb at her house, sure that would eliminate her. Then the Feds arrived and took her from the house, so when the bomb had gone off, he'd missed again.

He had to get rid of her. She was the only one who knew what he looked like and could positively link him to the bombings.

Manaquez smirked. His boss would have been very pleased with him if the bomb at her house had not only taken out her, but also the FBI agents! Then the smile left his face. He hadn't killed any of them, though. He'd failed, and because she was still alive, he was in big trouble with the boss. True, he had done a good job of getting rid of the lawyers by blowing up Brown and Associates, but it wasn't good that he'd left a witness. If the Feds caught him, she could put him behind bars for the rest of his life—or worse. The boss didn't like having direct ties to the organization sitting safely in jail.

Manaquez knew he would never last a week in prison. His boss man had far-reaching tentacles that could find him anywhere at any time. Even if he managed to survive a trial, he would never survive prison. There were too many who would gladly kill for money or favor with the boss.

What that meant was very simple. He had to get rid of Sarah Masters, and soon. When the boss had heard she had survived the office building bombing, he hadn't been any too happy. Manaquez had received a text before he had even ditched and torched the van and left Herbert.

Terminar el trabajo. "Finish the job."

He couldn't go home to Mexico until he did what he was sent here to do, and his boss wasn't a patient man. If Manaquez didn't complete the task - and soon—his own life wasn't going to be worth a *peso*. The organization took care of their people—as long as they did what the cartel wanted. People who didn't do what they were paid to do would suffer countless times before the organization's henchmen would finally kill them. Worse, the cartel would also go after his family back in Mexico. They would torture them just to get back at him for his failure.

It wasn't going to be easy to find her now that the *Federales* were involved and guarding her. But they would slip up sooner or later. He had already been in touch with his contact in the States, who had access to all kinds of electronic tracking equipment. His contact was tracking her cell

phone. If she turned it on, they would have her location, and he could finish what he had started—once and for all; because one way or another, Sarah Masters was going to die.

Sarah looked out the window of the SUV, and then at Agent Morgan and the other man in the front seat. Bill Parker, the other FBI Agent she had been introduced to, was driving. He looked a little younger than Sarah, but it could have just been his fair-haired All-American boy look. His almost blond buzz haircut and boyish face made him look young, but she couldn't help noticing his physique looked like he was built like a Mac truck.

It wasn't long before the SUV pulled up in front of a building where she assumed they would be staying in the downtown area of the nearby city of Jefferson. The 'safe house,' as the FBI agents had called it, looked to Sarah to be more of an apartment building than a house. It was a three-story rose-colored brick building attached to similar buildings on both sides and was in a quiet residential area of the older part of town. The building looked like it was built in the early 1900s, but was in great shape. The surrounding neighborhood was well-lighted and quiet, with little traffic.

Agent Morgan turned in the front seat to look back at her. "Stay put until they sweep the place. They'll tell us when we're clear to go in."

Agent Thorne and Agent Parker got out of the car and moved toward the entrance to the building. She was pretty sure she saw them pull out their guns before they entered the doors. Well, she supposed she was going to have to get used to people who carried guns.

Looking down, Sarah realized she was clasping her hands tightly in her lap. She needed to relax. The last thing she needed to do was get the shakes again. Her nerves were so brittle; it wouldn't take much for her to shatter into a million pieces.

In just a few moments, the two agents were back. "We're clear to go in, Sam. Looks quiet," Agent Parker reported through the open car window.

Sarah put her hand on the car door to open it but found she was too late as Agent Thorne opened the car door for her and stood in front of her on one side while the other agent protected her from the other side. Agent Morgan took up his post in the lead, and they quickly entered the building. The four of them walked down a short hallway, entered an elevator and went up one floor, crossed the corridor, and went through a door and into an apartment.

Sarah glanced around as they entered the main room. Surprisingly, even though the apartment smelled somewhat musty to her, it looked to be relatively modern in its design and decorations. Off white painted walls, the dark brown carpeting, drapes, and furniture were all relatively new. Maybe she had watched too many movies over the years, but she had always had the impression that safe houses were portrayed to be seedy holes in the wall. She was glad that at least this time, that wasn't the case. In her current state of mind, a dark and dingy place would not have been very appealing and would have depressed her more than she already was.

The exterior apartment door was closed and locked, and everyone around her seemed to relax as they holstered their guns. Agent Thorne gently took hold of her shoulders and pointed her toward an overstuffed chair in the corner.

“Relax, Sarah. We’re here.”

She sat down in the offered chair but sure didn’t feel like relaxing. She was exhausted but still felt the need to sit on the edge of the chair, ready for flight. Was she really safe here? Would she be safe anywhere?

She saw Agent Morgan turn to the other two agents. “Jess, you watch from the front. Bill, you’ve got the back. If I remember right from the sketch I saw of this place, there’s only one window toward the rear. It’s through that door, in the kitchen.”

Bill grinned. “Kitchen is a good place for me.” He headed that way. “I’ll see if I can rustle up any grub.”

Agent Morgan sat down in the chair across from Sarah, his eyes searching hers. “How ya doing, Sarah?”

She took a deep breath. “I really don’t know how to answer that, Agent Morgan. But I guess I’m good. I’m still alive.” She knew the smile she gave him was a shaky one.

“Why don’t you call me Sam? The four of us are going to be spending some quality time together. The other two agents are Jessica and Bill. First names will make it easier, don’t you think?”

She nodded. His deep voice was somewhat comforting to her. Sarah knew he was trying to steady her nerves and make her feel a little less stressed, and she appreciated his efforts. It wasn’t working, though. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t forget the truth. In the last twenty-four hours, she’d lost all her coworkers, her job, her house, her pet, and all her possessions—and somebody out there was determined to kill her. Nothing he could say was going to make any of it easier.

Bill stuck his head through the kitchen doorway. “Looks quiet out back right now, Sam. And the good news is, there’s stuff for sandwiches in the frig. You guys want to come out and fix some for yourselves?” He held up his hand, holding a partially eaten sandwich. “I already started without you.” He grinned and headed back into the kitchen.

Agent Thorne, or Jess as Sarah had heard Sam call her, was stationed near the set of windows that faced the street. Sarah saw her glance over at Sam then turn back to peek through the slats of the closed window blinds.

“Can you fix one for me, Sam?” Jess asked. “I don’t want to leave here right now.”

Sam stood up and reached for Sarah’s hand, who stared at it unseeingly for a moment before she realized he wanted her to take it and follow him. His hand felt strong as he grabbed her smaller one and pulled her to her feet. He led her to the kitchen where they found a loaf of bread, several kinds of sliced deli meats, and condiments spread across the kitchen table. Bill had finished his sandwich and was gazing intently out the small back window.

Sarah quickly fixed a ham and turkey sandwich and ate it, even though she didn’t have much of an appetite. She sipped the accompanying bottled water and watched as Sam made himself a second sandwich.

Sam spoke quietly to Bill as he put the two slices of bread of his sandwich together. “I’ll watch things here for a bit, Bill. Why don’t you scout around the alley out back and see if you notice anything out of the ordinary? The local P.D. was supposed to send over an unmarked car with a couple of suits to help out for the night. See if you spot ‘em.” He pointed to his ear. “You got your throat mike and earbud?”

Bill nodded, and Sarah noticed for the first time that both Bill and Sam wore a contraption around their necks and had small earpieces that looked like tiny hearing aids in their ears—presumably so they could communicate with each other even when they weren’t together. She watched Bill leave and turned her attention back to Agent Morgan—or Sam, as he’d asked her to call him.

She remained quiet, not wanting to start a conversation because she wasn’t sure if Bill was talking into Sam’s ear or not. A few moments later, Sam spoke, and she could tell he wasn’t talking to her. If it weren’t so terrifying being in this situation, she could have actually found it fascinating.

Kind of like being in a television drama.

“Hmm, that’s not great. Empty dumpsters lying around in dark alleys are not my favorite things...” Sam’s voice drifted off as he left the kitchen and headed back into the living room, Sarah presumed so she would be out of hearing of their conversation.

She stood from the table and cleared up the remains of Sam’s and her meal. Sarah was in the process of throwing their paper plates into the plastic trash bin next to the refrigerator when Jessica came into the kitchen. Sarah was a little in awe of the female FBI agent who was tall, attractive, and very self-assured. Sarah couldn’t remember when the last time was she had felt the self-assurance Jessica Thorne exuded. Probably never. She sure didn’t feel that way today.

Jessica gave her a broad smile as she sat down at the table and reached for the knife and loaf of bread. “Sam told me it was my turn to eat. Did you already eat something, Sarah?”

She nodded. “I did, thanks. Do you want me to stay here while you eat, or would you prefer to eat alone?”

Jessica smiled again, and Sarah couldn’t help but notice how white and straight her teeth were. It was a beautiful smile.

“Please, sit down and keep me company,” Jessica said.

Sarah sat down at the other end of the small table and watched as Jessica prepared her sandwich and ate. She was an attractive young woman with chocolate brown blemish-free skin and long wavy, shiny black hair clipped into a ponytail at the nape of her neck. Her big brown eyes held hints of gold in them, and when she smiled, her whole face glowed. With her high cheekbones, she was a knockout and easily could have made her living as a model. Sarah couldn’t help but wonder how she had ended up being an FBI Agent.

“I’ve got a bag out in the car with some extra clothes and toiletries in it. I always keep one packed and ready to go when we’re involved in a PSD. Sorry—a Protective Security Detail—just in case we have a female without any personal belongings of their own handy,” Jessica said.

Sarah chuckled a little. “Well, I would certainly qualify, since the only ones I have are the clothes on my back. I really appreciate your help.”

“No problem.” Jessica glanced over at her. “I’m sorry about you losing your house and all your stuff. I don’t have much myself, just a small apartment where I rarely get to spend time. But I sure would hate to lose what few things I do have.”

Sarah watched as the other woman chewed another bite of her sandwich.

“Do you have any family, Sarah?”

Sarah shook her head. It still bothered her after all this time to explain. She was totally alone in the world and certainly had never felt more alone than she did right then. “No—well other than an elderly aunt on my mother’s side that lives in an assisted living facility in California. She has Alzheimer’s, so I’m pretty sure she doesn’t even remember me, so I guess when it comes right down to it, I don’t have any family.”

She felt the agent’s eyes on her for a moment. Sarah wasn’t sure what to think about this female agent who looked so feminine, yet handled a gun like most women handled a curling iron.

“How about you, Jessica? Any family—maybe a boyfriend?”

Jessica chuckled a deep throaty chuckle that sounded almost musical. “Boyfriend? No, at least not a steady one. Haven’t had time to get serious with anyone, and my job doesn’t exactly leave me a lot of time to spend with one right now anyway. As far as family goes, I have two brothers and a sister who live in Seattle, and my dad, who lives in Florida. My mom passed away several years ago from breast cancer.”

“I’m sorry. I know how hard it is to lose a parent.”

It was quiet in the room while Jessica finished eating. She stood up and started to clean up the remains of her meal before Sarah shook her head.

“I’ll get that if you want to go get that bag you were talking about earlier from the car.”

Jessica smiled at her. “Thanks, Sarah. And I’m glad we talked. I’m here if you ever want or need to talk with someone, okay?”

Sarah nodded, feeling a little embarrassed by the other woman’s kindness. How could she be so kind to her when she didn’t even know Sarah?

After Jessica had left, Sarah finished cleaning up the kitchen table and put the leftovers in the refrigerator. She glanced around the kitchen, satisfied she had cleaned it up the best she could, then headed back to the living room where she overheard Sam talking to someone on his cell, his back to her.

“I’m not happy with the set up here. With this guy’s MO, it would be far too easy for him to plant something in a dumpster in the alley or on the building’s gas main and take down this whole block.” She saw him nod. “Okay, but we’re going to need someplace else to go in the morning. One night here is enough.”

He turned, and Sarah saw his expression change as he realized she was within hearing distance. He quickly closed his cell phone.

“You okay?” his forehead wrinkled with concern.

“I guess.” She studied him carefully for a moment. “You don’t like this place, do you, Sam? Is it safe for us to be here?”

“No problems. It’s just a feeling I have. It’s too closed in around us – hard to see what’s out there.” He smiled at her, and she knew he was trying to reassure her with that smile. “We should be all right tonight, but we’re going to take you someplace else tomorrow.”

Sarah watched him walk over and stand to one side of the window. He lifted the window blind a tiny bit and peered out. It appeared he didn’t see anything out of the ordinary since he let the blind fall back down, and when he glanced back at her, she knew he was more than likely seeing the fear on her face. She was trying so hard to keep up a brave front, but she was afraid, and there wasn’t any way she could hide it.

He gestured toward the sofa. “Why don’t you sit down and relax? It’s going to be a long evening if you plan on standing there in the middle of the room the whole night.”

Sarah finally walked over and sat down on the sofa and watched him. She couldn’t help the sigh that escaped her lips. What she wouldn’t give to be able to be back home in her own house. Even better would be if she woke up in her own bed only to discover this was all a nightmare. She ran her hands up and down her arms, trying to warm them. It wasn’t really cold in the apartment, but she felt chilled from the inside out.

A few moments later, Jessica came back from the car with two duffle bags and headed toward the bedroom with them. She nodded toward Sam.

“I brought in some clothes and things for Sarah, along with my bag.” She grinned at him. “Figured you gents could go out and get your own stuff.”

Sam nodded, gave her a little smile, and turned his attention back to Sarah.

“Have you come up with any more questions, Sarah?”

She looked up at him, standing there in front of her so large and strong. All these FBI Agents were so self-assured and seemed to know exactly what they were doing. So, how could she tell him she had so many questions she didn’t know where to begin? What was going to happen to her? Was this guy going to find her and kill her—or maybe one of them in the process of trying to kill her? What was she going to do for a job, where would she live? She’d lost her little pet, Sparky. She’d lost all her photos of her parents and grandparents, all her mementos of her life, things she could never replace...

She shook her head and then nodded. Then shook it again. “I don’t even know what to ask, I guess.”

Sam sat down on the sofa next to her, and an overwhelming feeling of comfort and safety swept over her. She had known this man less than twenty-four hours, but for some unknown reason, she felt safe with him beside her. All he had shown her so far was his kindness and patience, and she was happy he was on her side. He appeared unfazed by everything, but then, he was used to all this drama, she was sure. It was all a part of his job. She was just a simple person who had lived her entire life in a small town; a town where, until this morning, the most exciting thing to have happened in the last twenty years was when the President of the United States made an unexpected visit to a local manufacturing plant.

“Sarah, look at me.”

She turned her head and looked at him. What she saw was a very masculine-looking man with a ruggedly handsome face. He looked as tired as she felt, but his clear eyes held an expression of assurance in them. He actually looked at her like he cared what happened to her.

"I meant what I said back at the police station. We are not going to let anything happen to you. Do you understand that?" She heard him sigh and hoped he wasn't becoming impatient with her.

Then he surprised her with his next words. "I know you're scared right now, Sarah, and I'd really like to pray for you if that's okay. I'm a Christian, and I believe firmly in the power of prayer."

Sarah flinched. God and she weren't on the best terms right now. But then again, what harm would it do for Sam to pray for her? She supposed she could use all the help she could get, so she finally nodded her agreement. He surprised her even more, when he reached over and took both her small hands in his larger ones. His were warm and strong and quickly warmed her colder ones. She automatically bent her head and closed her eyes as his deep voice began to pray.

"Father God, we don't know why this bad thing has happened to Sarah. But we know that even in terrible circumstances such as this, You are still in control. I ask that you place your protection on Sarah right now and give her peace and rest as she faces the night ahead and continue to keep us all safe in the cover of Your wings. We ask all this in Jesus' name. Amen."

Sarah quickly opened her eyes and looked up at him as he let go of her hands. Surprisingly, she felt better. She wasn't sure if it was because of the prayer, or if it was because of the presence of the man beside her. Either way, she felt calmer and less terrified.

"Thank you, Agent Morgan. It's been a long time since anyone has prayed for me."

Sarah stared at the man before her in wonder. When she had first seen Special Agent Sam Morgan standing on her front porch (was it really just that morning?), she wouldn't have believed he could be such a kind understanding man. Initially, when he had introduced himself and Agent Thorne as FBI agents, she had been sure the government was out to get her—to somehow blame her for what had happened at Brown & Associates. Obviously, she wasn't a very good judge of people as he wasn't anything like she had thought he would be. Maybe he was different because he was a Christian.

She hadn't had much of anything to do with Christians lately. There was a time when going to church every Sunday, and reading her Bible was a big part of her life. Back when she was growing up, and her parents were still alive, she had blind faith that God loved her. When had that changed? She knew the answer. It changed the day both her parents were killed in a car accident with a drunk driver. It changed when she was left to make her way in the world alone.

Sam's voice brought her back to the present. "Like I've told you before, we are going to do everything we can to keep you safe."

Sarah thought about that beautiful little word 'we.' It was just two little letters, but to her lonely life, it had a power she had forgotten. Ever since her parents had died, she had been totally on her own. She hadn't had the luxury of anyone else to look out for her or to go to for advice. She had made her own decisions, and suffered the consequences for the wrong ones, for years. There hadn't been anyone else on whom she could rely, so she had become quite independent. Sarah was used to making her own decisions and rather relished not having to answer to anyone, but right now, she was going to have to rely on these FBI agents. They were her only hope of surviving this.

Sam spoke up and interrupted her thoughts again. “Right now, though, I think it’s time for you to find the bedroom and try and get some sleep. Jess is going to sleep in the second twin bed in there tonight—at least until it’s time for her shift.” He grabbed hold of her hands and pulled Sarah out the chair, then gently pushed her by the shoulders in the direction of the bedroom door.

“Go. Get some sleep.”

She numbly nodded, thanked him again, and did as she was told, even though she was sure she wouldn’t be able to sleep. Sarah discovered, though, after she changed and put on the too-large pajamas she found in the duffle bag and brushed her teeth with the new toothbrush and toothpaste she also found, she was more tired than she thought.

The surprising realization that Agent Morgan, a man she didn’t even know, had taken the time to pray for her safety, was the last thing she remembered before sleep finally overtook her; that, and the thought that maybe God really did care what happened to Sarah Masters after all.

CHAPTER 8

Jess wasn't in the other twin bed when Sarah woke up the next morning, but Sarah could tell the bed had been slept in sometime during the night by the messed up covers. She had to assume Jess was taking her turn at the 'guard duty' Sam had mentioned the night before. Because the room was so small, she must have been exhausted to have slept hard enough to not be disturbed by Jess moving around.

Sarah lay in bed a short time before getting up. She had awakened just once during the night, confused because she wasn't in her own bed at home with Sparky lying on the foot of her bed. Then it had all come rushing back to her—the fire, the trip to the police station, her own house, and Sparky gone, and she had felt the fear and panic sweep over her. Then she remembered the words Sam had said in his prayer for her the night before. He had asked for peace for her and for God to keep her 'safe in the cover of His wings.'

As it all came rushing back to her this morning, though, she didn't feel very peaceful or safe. The pain of losing everything began building again in her chest, and the tears she thought she was done shedding built up again behind her eyes. She groaned, clenched her teeth together, and took several deep breaths. Losing control of her emotions was not going to help her get through this. She had survived losing both her parents, and she would survive this loss too.

Finally deciding it was time to get her day started, she grabbed some clean clothes and toiletries out of the bag Jessica had brought in for her from the car and headed for the bathroom. Twenty minutes later, she had showered and twisted her damp hair into a French braid. The jeans and lightweight denim blouse were a little large, but at least they were clean.

She was once again ready to face the world and feeling awake enough to know she was hungry. Sarah headed down the hallway toward the kitchen, where she found Sam pouring steaming coffee from the coffee pot into a mug that advertised a local printing place. He glanced up as she walked into the room and gave her what looked to her to be a tired smile.

"Coffee, Sarah?"

She tried to smile back at him but was only able to come up with a half-hearted lifting of her lips. "Yes, thank you."

As she wrapped her hands around the warm mug he gave her, she took a sip of the hot coffee. Looking around the kitchen, she was very aware of the large man leaning back against the kitchen counter, his gray eyes studying her carefully.

"Mmmm, good coffee. I like it strong. Where are the others, by the way?"

"Jess is downstairs checking things out front, and Bill's doing the same out back." He nodded toward the stove. "Hungry? I'm not a great cook, but I can fix you something."

Sarah sat her mug down on the table and walked toward the refrigerator and opened it. A quick glance inside found eggs, bacon, shredded cheese, and other various items that would make a great breakfast for all of them.

“If it’s okay with you, Sam, I’d like to make breakfast for everyone. It seems like it’s the least I can do for all of you.”

He rewarded her with a tired smile. “If you’re sure, that would be great. Just let us know when it’s ready.”

Sarah nodded and started opening cupboards and drawers looking for pans and utensils as he left the kitchen.

Fifteen minutes later, Sam turned from his post at the front window as Sarah came into the living room and announced breakfast was ready. He followed Jess and Bill into the kitchen, where a table was set for four. Plates heaped with scrambled eggs, pancakes, and bacon sat in the center of the table, awaiting them.

“All right!” Bill announced before eagerly pulling out a chair and sitting down.

Sarah turned toward Sam, and his heart warmed at the sight of a small smile on her face. If making them breakfast was able to make her smile, she could cook for them anytime. He was pretty sure Bill and Jess would appreciate it too since none of them were great cooks. Sam chuckled a little at the look of joyful expectation on Bill’s face at the sight of the food. Bill might be a big tough guy, but when it came right down to it, he was really just a kid at heart—with a big stomach.

“I wasn’t sure what you all would like to eat, so I fixed a little bit of everything. Hope this is okay.” Her eyes looked to Sam for reassurance.

Sam quickly spoke, wanting to assure her it was appreciated. “Sarah, this is great. Thank you.”

He and the gals joined Bill, who was already seated at the table, and before they all dug into the food, he asked Sarah if it would be okay if he said a quick grace to bless the food. Jessica and Bill were used to his habit of saying grace before every meal, but he didn’t want to make Sarah feel uncomfortable. After she agreed, he bowed his head and said a quick prayer of thanks for the food and asked for safety for all of them throughout the day.

The platters were quickly passed around, and it didn’t take long for the delicious food to disappear. Sam couldn’t remember the last time he’d had a home-cooked breakfast this good. He noticed, though, that Sarah didn’t eat much other than a strip or two of bacon, some scrambled eggs, and a few sips of orange juice. Bill made up for it though and ate like he hadn’t had a meal in days. Sam smiled and shook his head.

Oh, the ability of young men to be able to put away food and not worry about gaining weight.

Sarah watched the other three dig into the breakfast she had prepared. It made her feel good to do something for them, and she enjoyed cooking. After all, they were putting their lives on the line for her, so it was the least she could do. She pushed her food around on the plate and nibbled at a piece of bacon. It wouldn’t be a bad thing for her to lose some weight, she knew - but she also needed to keep up her strength, so she needed to eat.

From the conversation around the breakfast table, it sounded like they were heading out today for another safe house. Sarah was relieved to hear they weren't staying here. She knew Sam didn't like the place, and if he didn't feel they were safe here, she didn't feel safe either. In a matter of just a day, she had decided to trust him. For one thing, she didn't have any other options. Besides, there was a strength about him she couldn't explain that made her feel safe.

After they had finished eating and the three agents had left the kitchen, Sarah cleaned up the table. Because they were leaving, she threw out what few leftovers there were, then quickly washed the dishes and put them back in the cupboards for the next person to use. By the time she had the kitchen cleaned up and went back into the living room, the others were ready to leave, and it was a reverse exercise from when they had arrived the night before. Sam remained inside with Sarah while Bill and Jessica left the apartment first, checked the vehicle, and did a perimeter sweep of the street to make sure it was clear for them to go.

Sam and Sarah quickly followed, and once they were safely strapped in the vehicle, Bill drove the car away from the curb. Sarah and Sam sat in the back this time with the other two agents seated in the front seat.

Sarah listened as Sam placed a call on his cell.

"Yeah, this is Morgan. Just wanted to thank you guys for the coverage last night. We appreciated it." He paused for a moment, and Sarah knew the party on the other end must be speaking. "Yeah, well, tell your guys they did good. It was great to have a couple more pairs of eyes looking out for us."

"What was that about, Sam?" Sarah couldn't help asking after he disconnected the call.

Sam glanced over at her while he put his phone back in his pocket. "The Jefferson P.D. provided us with an unmarked car out front all last night with two plainclothesmen in it. Just wanted to let the Chief know we appreciated it."

She nodded her understanding. "So, where are we going now?"

Sam didn't answer her right away but gazed out the side window of the car. It seemed to Sarah that he was always checking out the surroundings. She supposed it was second nature to him because of his job. If he wasn't always on the lookout, it might cost him his life someday. Eventually, he turned back to face her. "Just a couple of hours away. We'll be out in the country with more open space around us. I think it will be a much better set-up than the safe house we just left."

Sarah nodded and tried not to worry. She couldn't help but wonder if there were truly any place they could take her where she'd be safe from this madman. But Sam had made it clear. He took the job of protecting her very seriously. It would be wonderful to find out that Manaquez had gone back to Mexico, but she didn't think that was going to happen until she was dead.

As little tendrils of fear swept through her again, she realized worrying was going to drive her crazy if she didn't get her mind on something else quickly.

"So tell me, Sam. How did you get into this line of work?"

Sam looked across the car seat in surprise at the woman who only yesterday had looked like a lost little girl to him. Today, with her long dark brown hair fashioned into some kind of braid, and dressed in cast-off clothes, she looked more like the attractive woman she really was. He mentally shook himself and tried to remember what she had asked him. Oh yes, about how he'd gotten into this line of work.

"I started out in the D.C. police department right out of college. A buddy of mine worked for the FBI, and we worked a case together. When the Bureau offered me a job shortly after that, I decided to take it."

"Do you like what you do?"

He thought about her question for a moment as he gazed out the car window again. Did he like it? He didn't like having to shoot people, sometimes to kill them. He didn't like having to go after evil people who were always out to hurt or kill other people. He had another agent tell him once that if he didn't think about quitting his job at least once a month, he wasn't doing something right. But Sam knew somebody had to do the job, and he seemed to be pretty good at it. He felt God had allowed him to make a difference in the world through what he did. Until that changed, he'd keep doing what he was doing.

Sam looked back at her and shrugged as he gave her the only answer he could think of. "Most of the time. It's what we do."

Sarah watched Sam turn his face away from her, so she turned her attention to the front seat. Something told her she wasn't going to get much more out of him this morning. Sam appeared to be a humble man of few words.

"How about you, Jessica? How did you get your job?"

Jessica laughed and scooted around a little in the seat so she could look back toward Sarah and Sam. "It was a dare by my boyfriend—well, my boyfriend at the time. He didn't think I would even try out for the training program at the academy in Quantico—let alone get in." She smirked. "Guess I showed him. It was tough," she added. "Twenty weeks of intestinal fortitude while they teach you everything under the sun having to do with self-defense, martial arts, etc., etc."

Bill chuckled, his strong hands firmly on the steering wheel. "I was a Marine before I joined the Bureau. Just got back from Iraq when a buddy of mine said he was going to the training school to try out for a position in the FBI. I thought, hey, I should do that too. Lo and behold, they hired me!"

Sarah smiled at Bill in the rearview mirror. He still looked like a Marine with his buzz-cut blond hair. Perhaps he didn't wear the uniform anymore, but he still walked tall.

It seemed to Sarah that they had been driving for hours on the four-lane highway when Bill finally took an exit and headed down a two-lane road through a residential area. They drove on for a time, and then took a narrow paved road with no middle white line. Mile after mile of countryside flew by the car windows with occasional farmhouses, barns, and telephone poles being the only

distraction from the wide-open fields. This part of Ohio was flat, and you could see for miles in all directions. Sam was right; there would be no closed-in feeling out here in this rural countryside.

Eventually, they turned down a narrow tree-lined gravel road. Another two or three miles and they turned into what looked to Sarah to be a private drive which led through an open area with freshly planted fields spread out on both sides. Ahead was a one-story ranch house with a covered porch running the entire length of the front of the house. The cedar wood siding was faded and gray, but the house was of newer construction. There was a small fenced-in area at the rear of the yard at one end of a weathered and faded red barn. The whole yard had a wide-open feel to it, and she could see why Sam had chosen it over the previous night's arrangement.

It looked like they had arrived at their destination.

The agents followed the same procedure they had at the other safe house with Sarah and Sam staying in the car until Bill and Jess had checked out the house. With the word 'clear' announced by Jess as she opened the back door of the car, Sarah and Sam followed her up the wooden steps, across the front porch, and through the old-fashioned heavy wood door into the house.

Sarah walked through the doorway into a small foyer that opened into a good-sized family room with a cathedral ceiling and a rustic stone fireplace at one end. She wandered from room to room, amazed that this was a safe house. It looked like any other family home with two comfortable looking bedrooms. The smaller of the bedrooms was at the front of the house; the other ran the full width of the house and was huge with an attached master bathroom. A large open kitchen sat at the rear of the house with a small breakfast nook at one end. Shiny hardwood floors ran throughout the house and were covered with large multicolored braided rugs. The overstuffed sofa and chairs in the living room were covered with tan-colored canvas slipcovers with bright pillows and accessories offering little pops of color in the décor. A cherry-finished coffee table sat in front of the sofa and chair grouping.

The family room also opened up into a dining room where an oak arts and crafts style table sat surrounded by wooden chairs and benches. It was a bright, sunny room with lots of windows, Sarah noticed. They wouldn't have any trouble seeing anyone coming toward the house from any direction, especially since the land was flat, and there were no large trees anywhere near the house and barn. The only wooded area appeared to be east of the barn and a long way from the main house.

The largest bedroom, which Jess stated was theirs, was an attractive room with painted walls in a warm heritage blue. Two twin beds with high-backed white headboards were made up with crisp white cotton linens covered with colorful patchwork quilts. The bathroom had a tile-walled walk-in shower stall, double sinks, and fluffy towels on the shelves.

It was quite the safe house!

While the others brought in their bags and luggage, Sarah headed for the kitchen, hoping for a stash of food. She was hungry and wanted to make lunch for everyone. The kitchen was beautiful, with walls and kitchen cabinets, both painted the same soft white color. Dark gray granite countertops offered plenty of working area and relatively new stainless steel appliances, including a dishwasher added to her joy. A well-worn round oak table with four chairs sat at the end of the

kitchen in a small nook. It was perfect and had the circumstances been different, it would have been a real pleasure to cook in a kitchen this beautiful.

She was disappointed though with what she found, or in this case, didn't find, after rummaging around in the cupboards and freezer. There was enough food she could come up with something for their lunch, but somebody was going to have to make a grocery run. This place wasn't stocked nearly as well as the apartment they had just left.

Sarah had made the decision that morning that she would do the cooking for them. The three agents assigned to protect her had the tough part; they had to keep her alive. The least she could do was make sure they had full stomachs to do their jobs, and she had to do something to keep busy, or it would drive her crazy.

Sarah reached into the freezer and pulled out a loaf of bread she could quickly thaw in the microwave. With that and the cheese she found in the refrigerator, she went to work making grilled cheese sandwiches. Some canned soup would have to complete the menu for the noon meal. Digging around in the freezer some more, she also found some packaged pie crusts that she pulled out to thaw, along with some canned apple pie filling in a cupboard. She would have much preferred to prepare a pie from scratch, but she would have to use what was at hand. A freshly baked apple pie for dessert with dinner sounded pretty good. Now, if she could just come up with something to prepare for dinner's main course.

About that time, Sam strolled into the kitchen, leaned up against the lower cupboards, and watched her closely. His face wore a bemused expression.

"Looking for something in particular, Sarah?"

She glanced over at him, always thrown a little off balance by his slow, irresistible smile. "I hope one of you can go to town and do some grocery shopping. There isn't a lot here to feed you all."

Sam nodded. "Write up a list of what you need, and I'll send Jess into town after lunch. You okay?" he added, reaching across the space between them and gently touching her arm.

She nodded. His touch was gentle but affected her in ways she didn't understand. What was it about this man?

"I think so. It helps if I keep busy, and I enjoy cooking."

He gave her one of his handsome grins. "Good. We enjoy eating—especially Billy Boy."

She laughed a nervous little laugh thinking that yesterday she didn't think she would never laugh again.

"I'll have some lunch ready for us shortly."

He threw that smile her way again and strode from the room. She felt the heat come up into her face and was glad he had turned away and left. Sam Morgan was a good looking man. Good thing he couldn't read her mind.

Sarah dug around in the kitchen drawers until she found a small pad of paper and pencil and proceeded to make a list of all the items she needed to get them through a few days' stay. She didn't know how long they would have to be here as Sam hadn't been too forthcoming with information, but she supposed she really didn't need to know at this point. She guessed it would be at least three or four days, if not more.

She tore her list off the notepad and walked over to stick her head out the kitchen door.

“Lunch is ready, you guys. Just soup and sandwiches, but it will have to do.”

As the three agents trooped into the kitchen, Sarah handed the list to Sam and then sat down to join the others at the table. After a quick prayer by Sam, they all dug into their food.

Sarah nodded toward the grocery list sitting on the table next to Sam’s soup bowl. “I hope it isn’t too much, Sam, but there really isn’t a lot in the freezer and cupboards.”

He glanced down at the list briefly, then back up at her. “No problem. Like I said, we have to eat.” She felt his eyes sweep over her face before he turned his attention to Jessica. “Jess, when you get a chance, please run into town and pick up these things. We don’t know how long we will be staying here, and we can’t eat without food.”

Bill looked up from his food. “You want me to go, Sam?”

Sam shook his head. “After lunch, you and I are going to scout out the rest of the farm. I want to explore every nook and cranny of this place.” He glanced over at Sarah, and his gray/blue eyes seemed to glow when they locked with hers. “This is really good, Sarah. You’re a good cook.”

“Thanks, Sam, but it’s not much. Get me some supplies, and I’ll do even better, I promise.”

Sarah smiled shyly at him and felt her cheeks grow warm at his compliment. She couldn’t remember when the last time she had blushed, but it seemed Sam Morgan had the ability to make her do so. She was very attracted to him but knew she needed to guard her heart. The last thing she needed was a romantic relationship right now, after all. She had just gotten over losing Matt, and she couldn’t afford to open her heart to be shattered by another man. Sarah quickly dropped her eyes and picked up her spoon to eat her soup.

It didn’t take long for them to finish their meal, then Sam and Bill headed out the back door. Jess helped her clear the table and then grabbed the grocery list Sarah had written up and also headed out the back door. Sarah glanced out the window and saw Jess meet up with Sam and Bill coming around the corner of the barn. The three of them stopped and talked for a few moments, then she saw Jess hurrying back toward the house.

“Everything okay?” she asked the other woman as she came back in the door.

Jessica grinned at Sarah as she rummaged around in a kitchen drawer. “Yup. Sam just wants me to put our vehicle in the barn and take the pickup truck that’s stored in there instead. Local license plate and such. No sense drawing attention to ourselves by driving a vehicle with an out of state government issued plate.”

Sarah watched as Jess hurried out the back door again. It seemed these agents thought of everything. She wouldn’t have even thought of something like that, but then they were the professionals.

After cleaning up the kitchen, Sarah went into the family room and sat down in an overstuffed chair. She had kept so busy in the kitchen she hadn’t taken the time to actually look at the main part of the house yet. The sunlight pouring through the windows made the hardwood floors glow. The attractive room held a sofa, and a couple of overstuffed chairs cozied up to a large coffee table in front of the sofa. A bookcase lined one of the inside walls and looked to be stuffed with books, jigsaw puzzles, and board games. She would have to investigate them later.

It looked like the FBI agents had moved right in and set up shop. There was a laptop computer sitting on the coffee table in front of the sofa. Other satchels and bags sat on the floor at one end of the sofa. She couldn't help but wonder what was in them, but then again maybe she didn't really want to know. They were probably filled with more weapons, bigger guns, and other tools of their trade.

Sarah wandered around the room, stopping for a moment with the tips of her fingers resting on the wooden mantel above the fireplace. Having a fireplace mantel with no photos on it was odd. If this were an ordinary family home, there would be photos of happy events cataloging the family's lives. But this wasn't a normal home. No matter how cozy the décor, no matter how comfortable the chairs, this was still a safe house where she was hiding out from a bad guy. She sighed, trying to relax, then stood and walked over to the row of windows that faced the side yard. She couldn't seem to sit still. Of course, it might have had a lot to do with both her house and her place of employment being blown up and the fact that somebody out there was trying to kill her. How was that supposed to make her feel?

She watched Sam and Bill walk back into the yard, and it wasn't long before she heard their footsteps coming up the porch steps.

"So, what does it look like out there?" she asked.

Sam and Bill both took seats on the sofa with Bill taking up residence in front of the laptop.

She watched Sam take a deep breath and lean back into the ample cushions of the sofa before answering her.

"I like this setup much better than the last one. It's flat and open. There are one hundred and sixty acres of farmland around us—mostly leased and farmed by a neighboring farmer. The only wooded area is at the East end of the property, and the only other way onto the property is a dirt road going through those woods. That trail has a chained and padlocked livestock gate across it at the roadside." He leaned back with his arms behind his head and stretched. "That leaves just the primary drive into the farm. One way in and one way out. Much better."

Sarah nodded. "I suppose I should feel much safer, right?" She sighed and tried to keep her high-strung emotions out of her voice when she asked the question that haunted her. "So, how come I don't?"

CHAPTER 9

Sam sat back up and looked across the room at Sarah. He knew there wasn't any good news to tell her. He had put through a call earlier to HQ to find out the status of their investigation. So far, they didn't have any leads on Manaquez. It was like the dirtbag had dropped off the face of the earth.

He didn't respond for a moment, but when he did, he tried to make sure his voice was firm and convincing. She had been so patient with this whole process of having her life totally torn apart, and he hated to scare her, but he wanted to make sure she recognized the danger she was in. No matter how good they were at their jobs, she wasn't safe anywhere.

"Sarah, I'm going to be honest with you. There is no way we can keep this lunatic from trying to kill you again. We know, and you know, he's going to try. But we are ready for him this time. That's the difference. It's going to be on our turf and on our terms. He's not going to get close to this house without one of us knowing it. And he's not a sniper so he won't be sitting out there somewhere waiting for that perfect shot. That's not what he does. His specialty is bombs, not guns."

Sarah didn't say anything, just kept looking at him with those big green eyes. He was pretty sure she was thinking he wasn't telling her anything she didn't already know, but he was also pretty sure she didn't like what he'd just said. He watched her stand and stroll around the room, touching the lampshade and running her fingers lightly across the bindings of some books in the small bookcase along the wall. She turned back to face him and Bill and with a look of frustration on her face.

"It's just so difficult to sit here and wait and not know when it's going to happen. It's like waiting for...I don't know...something bad that you know is going to happen, and you just want it to get over so you can go back to the way your life was before! It just makes me so angry!"

Sam saw Bill glance his way, then back at Sarah.

"If I can butt in here, Sam?" Bill asked. Sam gave him a quick nod. He knew that sometimes it meant more if the words of wisdom came from someone other than himself. And he trusted his two agents. They had saved his behind more than once, and he was pretty sure they would again. Besides, he knew Bill's history and was pretty sure what he was going to share with Sarah before he even started speaking.

"Sarah, back when I was in Iraq, we had to drive through some really bad neighborhoods during night patrols. We knew there were people out there that wanted to kill us. We didn't know how they were going to attack us, or when, but we knew the attacks were coming."

Bill took a deep breath. Sam knew that even though several years had passed, the exercise of recalling those times was difficult for him. "I used to be so irritated with the whole idea of the night patrols because there was no way of knowing when or where or how the attacks were coming. I'd get so nerved up before those patrols, I was almost sick. Then a buddy of mine told me we couldn't

control what the enemy was going to do. All we could do was control how we were going to react to it—how we were going to handle the attack when it came. He stressed that we had to be ready at any time and any place, but not let the knowledge that the attack was coming, to control our lives.”

Sam watched Bill gaze across the room toward Sarah. He saw Bill take a deep breath before he continued, and it was evident to Sam what this was costing Bill to tell his story.

“I also feel that God is still in control. We have to have faith that no matter what happens, nothing happens without Him knowing about it.” Bill looked down at his hands, then back across the room at Sarah. “I don’t know if that helps any or not, but that always has stuck with me whenever I’m in a tight spot.”

Sam saw Sarah sit back down in the chair she had recently vacated, and he hurt for her as he saw her shoulders droop. He could tell she was really struggling with her emotions. So far, she had been able to control her fear and hide it from them, but it was obvious it was just below the surface.

“I understand what you’re saying, Bill, but I don’t know how to react. I don’t have a gun in my hand, and I can’t do anything to protect myself. I have to depend on you guys to protect me. It feels like I’m a sitting duck, just waiting...and I hate the thought that any of you could get killed in the process of trying to protect me! And as for God, He sure didn’t do anything to protect my friends, now, did He? If nothing happens without Him knowing about it, why didn’t he do anything to stop this from happening?”

Sam’s eyes locked with hers across the room. Those green eyes of hers practically screamed out her pain to him. He motioned to her as he stood up. “Come on. It’s time for a walk.”

He reached over and picked his gun up from the side table and stuck it quickly in his side holster on the way out of the room. Sam knew that without him wearing a jacket to hide it, she was going to know he had the gun with him, but it was such a part of him and his job, he couldn’t worry about how she felt about it. He glanced behind him once to make sure she was following him and then walked through the kitchen and out the back door.

Sam stopped at the bottom of the back steps and waited for her to catch up with his long strides, then they slowly walked together toward the barn. He took in their surroundings, scanning the yard and landscape for anything unusual. This set up was much better than their previous safe house, and for that, he was thankful. The farm was the vacation home of a former retired Federal agent. When he passed away, his widow had signed the property over to the Bureau, and with its open layout and wide-open spaces all around, it was absolutely perfect for a safe house.

He glanced over at the woman walking beside him and noticed that instead of looking around her, she walked with her head down, looking at the ground at her feet. It was evident that she was hurting, and he wasn’t sure what to do to help alleviate her pain, but he was going to try. He felt a tenderness toward this young woman he hadn’t felt for a woman in a long time.

When they finally reached the barn, Sam pushed the heavy wooden doors open and entered before her, checking the place out before allowing her to enter. The barn was dark and cool and smelled of hay and old manure. Stepping into the cool interior of the old building, he was instantly transported back to his childhood and the home farm where he had been raised. Right now, though, he didn’t have time to reminisce about summer days spent in the barn with his father.

Sam led Sarah over near a window where dust particles floated in the light pouring through the dirty glass. A couple of sawhorses sat there, and she perched on one while he straddled the other.

“So. Tell me what’s going on, Sarah?”

He watched as several emotions swept over her face, and then she shook her head. “I’m not doing very well with all this.”

She pulled her braided hair back behind her shoulders with one hand and then let it drop onto her back again, a nervous habit he had noticed.

“I’m furious.” He heard the stress in her voice and knew her emotions were on the verge of an explosion. “I’m angry that these people I don’t even know are hunting me down. I’m furious that they killed all my friends and destroyed my life. My entire world is collapsing around me, and I don’t know what to do about it.” Her voice cracked with emotion.

His heart did a little jump as he heard the vulnerability in her voice. It was good that she was finally showing emotion, starting to get angry with her circumstances. But that anger could get in the way of protecting her, and it was his job to make sure that didn’t happen. There was something about her that drew him to her. Sarah Masters was someone he would enjoy getting to know better under different circumstances. But he couldn’t go down that road. His job—his ONLY job—was to protect her from this guy that wanted her dead. He wasn’t exactly sure what there was about her that attracted him. Sure, she was cute, but she wasn’t like any of the women he’d been known to date in the past - not that he’d dated much in the last two years. After his divorce, he had avoided anything that even hinted at another long term relationship. And if he ever were to get serious about a woman again, she would have to be a Christian with the same beliefs as him. He didn’t even know Sarah well enough to know where she stood spiritually.

She took a deep breath and spoke again. “I don’t know how you and Bill and Jess do it. You always act so calmly and confidently, Sam. I wish I could.”

Sam chuckled. If only she knew. Most of the time, he felt like he didn’t have a clue what was going on around him. Must be, he was a better actor than he thought.

“It may look that way, Sarah, but trust me; I’m not always calm inside. If I appear calm, I think it’s because of who I am now.”

“You mentioned yesterday that you’re a Christian. I suppose that’s what you’re talking about.”

Sam hesitated before answering her. He wouldn’t have brought up the subject to Sarah, but since she asked, maybe this was an opportunity to share his faith with her.

“Being a Christian isn’t about religion. It’s admitting your mistakes, turning your life over to God, and living for Him. It’s having a personal relationship with Him.” He stopped. “I know it’s hard for us to admit we’re sinners, but it’s absolutely essential if you ever want to get over your past mistakes and start over. Otherwise, they consume you and don’t allow you the freedom to live. And believe me, I made a ton of mistakes before I became a Christian.”

“Really? Like what, if I’m not being too nosey by asking?”

Sam looked over at her, taking in her earnest expression. He was going to have to dig deep to reach her, and he wasn’t sure he could do it. Over the years, he had closed his heart to close relationships. He didn’t talk about his personal life or his past with anyone. Even Bill and Jess

didn't know a lot about his past. But something made him want to share his story with Sarah Masters.

Lord, give me the right words.

"It's okay. You can ask. I firmly believe we don't meet people by accident. God has them cross our paths for a reason. Right now, maybe the reason I'm here is for you. If answering questions about my life and my faith help you in your search for faith, then I'm doing my job."

Sam stood and went over to the window and rubbed some of the grime off the glass with the palm of his hand. He looked through, did a cursory scan of the yard, and then looked back at Sarah. He really didn't want to get into all this with her, but then again, maybe it would help her in her search. He didn't have a clue what her relationship was with God, but perhaps his story would give her the courage to keep searching.

"I married right after I joined the D.C. police force. When I left the police department and joined the Bureau, I kind of let the job take over my life. My wife finally got sick of it and divorced me."

He shook his head as the memories rushed at him. He hadn't thought about any of this and certainly hadn't talked about it with anyone in years. After he had accepted Christ as his personal savior, he had kicked himself for the way he had treated his wife. If he had been a Christian when they were married, he would like to think his marriage might not have ended. Perhaps his ex would even be a Christian now. He felt like he'd failed her.

"I should have been there for her, Sarah. I made a vow to her, and I didn't keep it. And that's just one of the mistakes I've made. I can't help but feel that if I'd been a Christian at the time, I would have had my priorities straight, and it might not have happened."

"Are you close—you and your ex?"

"No, not close. I've only seen her maybe twice in the last few years. She married again and has three kids and the good life I never gave her. She's happy."

"And how about you, are you happy?" Her quiet question was sincere as it echoed across the barn to him, and he glanced over at her quickly. She was watching his face intently, and it was obvious that the question wasn't asked idly. She really seemed to care about his answer. He thought about it for a moment.

Was he happy?

"At peace, would be a better way to describe it. I've placed my life in God's will. I've come to the realization that He is control, and I've quit trying to fight Him. Coming to that decision has given me a peace about everything that happens to me."

"Peace, huh? I sure could use some of that." Sarah sighed and looked down at her hands. "So, back to this Christian thing. I was raised with Christian values, you know, 'do unto others' and the Ten Commandments and all that. I've always thought of myself as a Christian. My parents made me go to church when I was young; I read the Bible and everything. So doesn't that make me a Christian too?" She sighed again. "Although I have to admit after my parents were killed in the car accident, I kinda turned away from God. I guess I blamed Him for what happened. I felt like He should have stopped the accident."

Sam went back over and sat down across from her. He wanted so badly to be able to reach her and help her understand. It wasn't often he had an opportunity like this, but she seemed to be searching. He had learned years ago that if the Lord placed someone in your path that was looking for Him, you had best take the time to give them the answers they needed.

"Let me see if I can put it in perspective for you, Sarah."

He thought for a moment, trying to come up with the right words to explain to her. "You are an American because you were born here in the United States to parents who were American. You didn't have to do anything to become an American. It was granted to you at birth by being born here. But becoming a Christian takes an active commitment on your part to accept God into your life and heart and turn your life over to Him. It's allowing yourself to be born again—into His family. It's more than a religion—it's an on-going personal relationship with Him."

Sam pulled his small copy of the New Testament and Psalms out of his pocket and handed it to her.

"Keep it. I don't know how familiar you are with the Bible, but if you really want the answers to your questions, start in the book of Romans and read the verses that are highlighted. I've listed them on the front cover of the book, so they will be easy for you to find. You might also find the book of Psalms comforting. A man called David wrote it. He was also being hunted down by his enemies—just like you. And he spent plenty of time angry at God too, but God never stopped loving him—and believe it or not, God still loves you.

"Listen, Sarah, I don't want to push my beliefs on you. But you did tell me you want peace. I don't know any better way to find peace and truth than through a personal relationship with God."

He watched as Sarah ran her slender fingers across the cover of the small book. It was far from new as Sam had spent many hours reading it. This particular one he'd carried for more than a year. But it was obvious she needed it more than he did right now. He never kept his small New Testaments long before he found someone who needed the Word, and he would pass it on.

"Thank you, Sam. I did ask you—and I really do want to know and understand. I have to say, I envy your faith and relationship to God."

Neither of them spoke for a brief time.

"Are Jess and Bill also Christians?"

He nodded. "Bill was led to know Christ as his personal savior by an Army Chaplain when he was stationed in Iraq. And even though she was raised in a Christian home, Jess became a Christian during her college years. They both have fascinating stories. But you should ask them to tell you because they are *their* stories."

Sam took a deep breath and smiled over at her. "Feeling better?"

He watched as a full smile spread across her face. She almost looked surprised at the smile, and it made him feel good to see it. After all, she had been through, it was nice to see her face light up like that.

"Yes, I actually do. If nothing else, you took my mind off my own troubles for a while. Thanks, Sam."

Sam reached out and took hold of her hand and pulled her up to a standing position, and then reluctantly let go of her hand. It had felt so good in his, almost like it belonged there. He took a deep breath. It was best if he kept his mind on the job at hand. Best for both of them.

His voice sounded husky to him as he pointed toward the door.

“Time to head back inside before the others come looking for us.”

Sarah made another delicious dinner for them that evening, consisting of Italian spaghetti, garlic toast, salad, and pie for dessert. Jess once again helped Sarah clean up the kitchen, and afterward, they headed into the living room to join the two men. Sarah sat in one of the chairs, and Jess sat down on the sofa in front of the laptop, where she immediately started pecking away on the keys.

“You seem to know your way around that pretty well, Jessica.”

Jess smiled at her. “I should. I have a degree in Computer Science and minors in Math and Physics. Right now, I’m just searching for our internet connection, so I can contact HQ and check on the status of the investigation.”

Sarah sat up straighter. “You have an internet connection—even out here in the middle of nowhere?”

Jess flashed a grin. “That’s one of the perks of working for the Federal Government. We can connect to Wi-Fi almost anywhere. If all else fails, there are always satellite connections I can get in through.”

Jess suddenly looked up from the laptop, and Sarah saw her lock gazes with Sam. “HQ sent us a memo, Sam. They’ve found the stolen van Manaquez was driving. It was parked on a dirt road outside of Herbert and torched. Doesn’t sound like they were able to get any prints off of it, though.”

He glanced over at Sarah and then looked back at Jess. “No other word about his whereabouts?”

She shook her head. “Sorry.”

Manaquez was standing in front of her desk, his face a sneering smile. She tried to call out to everyone to get out of the building, but there was no sound coming from her mouth. Then she tried to get out of her chair and run and tell them, but her legs wouldn’t work, and she couldn’t stand up.

She saw him turn and leave the building, knowing what was going to happen, and there wasn’t anything she could do about it. An explosion rocked the building around her, and she could hear the screams of her friends as the heat of the flames reached her. Sarah knew she was going to die, and there wasn’t any way she could stop it from happening. She screamed one last time...

“Sarah! Wake up—it’s just a bad dream.”

Jessica’s voice finally reached Sarah’s subconscious, and she opened her eyes to see the female agent sitting on the edge of her bed. She had hold of Sarah’s shoulders.

About that time, the door to their bedroom crashed open, and both Bill and Sam burst through the doorway with their guns drawn. Jess quickly stood up and held up her hands.

"It's okay, guys. She just had a nightmare."

Bill lowered his gun and left the room. Sarah sat up slowly and pulled the sheet up around her, feeling Sam's eyes on her. She finally raised her eyes to meet his.

"Sarah, are you okay?" The sound of his deep voice comforted her and drove away the remnants of fear she still felt from her dream.

She nodded. "I'm fine now. Sorry everyone, for waking you all up."

Sam glanced at Jess, lifted his chin in a little nod, and left the room, quietly closing the door after him.

Sarah watched as Jess pulled her black hair off her face and sat cross-legged at the end of Sarah's bed.

"Bad dream, huh? Do you want to talk about it?"

She shook her head. No, she didn't want to talk about it. Talking about it would make it more real. She supposed it wasn't surprising that she was having nightmares. Wouldn't most people if they were in her situation? The part that scared her most, though, was the fact the FBI didn't even know where Manaquez was located. She kept hoping he had returned to Mexico and just forgotten all about her, but the realistic part of her knew that wasn't going to happen. He wasn't going to leave until she was dead.

Sarah sat there for a moment before she answered. She wasn't sure she could explain to the other woman what was going on in her head. She felt like she was searching for something to fill the tremendously large hole in her heart and her life. She just didn't know what. She felt so much bitterness toward Matt Calvin for breaking her heart, and Manaquez and God for her recent losses—it felt like the hate in her soul was going to destroy her.

"Jess, how did you become a Christian? I mean, what happened to make you want to, and how did you know it was real?"

The other woman smiled, and her whole face radiated joy. Sarah thought again about what a beautiful woman Jessica Thorne was. Her long wavy dark hair hung loose tonight around her shoulders, and her dark brown eyes snapped with brightness as she began to tell her story.

"Well, let's see. I should give you a little background, I think. I was raised in a strict church attendin', Bible readin' home. My Dad was a Deacon of the church, so my brothers and sister and I were expected to toe the line and be perfect kids." She laughed. "I went to church along with the rest of the family every time the church doors were open. But now I know I didn't get much out of it. I really didn't want to be there.

"Eventually, I left home and went off to college, and I really enjoyed the freedom to be my own woman. I didn't go wild, mind you; no drugs, parties, or anything like that. But I refused to go to church while I was gone. When I went back home, I had to; but when I was in college, I did whatever I wanted on Sunday. For me, going to church was something my parents made me do. There was nothing personal about it."

Sarah found her head nodding in agreement. She'd been in that same position growing up.

Jess continued. “Then I met Marcus, the head of the college’s Campus Christian Group. He invited me to go with him to one of their meetings. I didn’t expect anything different from what I’d seen in the church back home. Boy, was I wrong. These other college kids had something I didn’t have – peace, joy, passion about their beliefs, and a purpose for their lives. That first meeting made a huge impression on me, and I found myself going back to the next meeting—and the next. After just a few meetings, I made my decision to turn my life over to God, and I’ve never been sorry.”

She laughed, her dark eyes twinkling. “My parents weren’t sure what to make of me when I came home and started asking them questions about scriptures I’d been reading. I think my Dad might still be in shock.”

She reached over and patted Sarah on the leg. “I’ve never been sorry I turned my life over to God, Sarah. I know in the occupation I’m in, I could meet my death any day. I guess that’s true for all of us, but I especially think about it because of my job. But I don’t have to wonder now about what will happen to me when I die. When I asked God to forgive my sins and come into my heart, all that was taken care of. I know when I die, I will go be with the Lord in heaven. That makes facing death every day a little easier. Don’t get me wrong, Sarah. Life didn’t magically become perfect when I made that decision. People still do bad things to me; I still get upset and do and say things I shouldn’t. But the difference is I know now I’m forgiven for my sins, and in my heavenly Father’s eyes, I am perfect. And He’s greatly blessed me. I’ve met some wonderful Christian people who have helped me on my journey.”

“Like Sam,” Sarah said quietly.

Jess’s smile widened as she looked at Sarah. “Like Sam. He’s been a wonderful mentor. I know he’s not that much older than me—maybe twelve years or so. But Sam has kind of been a father figure to me. You’ll never find a more humble Christian, or a more fiercely loyal, and honest man. He cares about the United States of America and the people of this country, and I think he’d do anything to protect them from our enemies.”

Neither one of them spoke for a time before Jess finally continued her thought. “You know, the Bureau’s motto is ‘Fidelity, Bravery, and Integrity.’ I think, at least in my own mind, that motto pretty much sums up Sam Morgan.” She chuckled and dropped her voice to a deeper pitch. “Bill’s favorite saying about our boss is ‘he woulda made a great Marine.’”

Sarah smiled. She could almost hear Bill saying that. It was evident that Jess and Bill had developed a great working friendship, and they both seemed to look up to their boss and admire him for the man he was. She was quiet for a time while she soaked up all that Jess had told her. She wanted to hear more about Sam but was afraid to show her interest in the man by asking too much. She didn’t want Jess to get the wrong idea.

“Has Sam ever been shot?” She couldn’t help but worry about his line of work.

Jess nodded. “The year I started working for him, he was shot in the shoulder during a shootout with a terrorist suspect.”

“Did you get the guy?”

Jess chuckled. “Oh, yes. Sam Morgan doesn’t take too kindly to being shot by bad guys. And he doesn’t like it when they get away. We got him, and let’s just say we didn’t have to wait for the wheels of justice to hand him his just rewards.”

Sarah nodded. That meant the bad guy had ended up dead. It might not be the way to feel, but she couldn't help hoping this current situation would end the same way—with the bad guy dead. She secretly hoped to never have to go to trial and be a witness against him. Something told her the guys he worked for wouldn't like it very much, plus she wasn't looking forward to having to look Manaquez in the face across a courtroom. The nightmare she had just experienced made her realize she never wanted to see Manaquez again, if at all possible.

"Thank you for telling me your story, Jess. It means a lot to me." She picked up the little Bible from the nightstand that Sam had given her. "I've been rereading the Bible and trying to understand it all."

Sarah felt a smile sweep over her face as memories came back to her. "I went to church with my parents when they were still alive and Vacation Bible School when I was a little kid. I used to stay with my grandmother during my summer vacation, and she always sent me to VBS, so I'm very familiar with the Bible stories. But I don't think anyone ever explained how I could know Christ as my personal Savior and accept Him into my life, until now. So thanks.

"And in case I haven't told you before, thank you for this; for taking time out of your life to protect me. I don't know how you do this job, dealing with the stress and the unknown danger out there. 'Thanks' just doesn't seem like a strong enough word."

Jess patted her on the leg. "Just remember, forgiveness is a decision. We can't expect God to forgive us if we don't forgive others. As for thanking me, Sarah—thanks aren't necessary. As Special Agent Samuel Morgan often says, 'It's what we do'".

Jess smiled at her again before she gracefully stood back up and moved across the room to her own bed.

CHAPTER 10

Sarah had decided some of the best things about this safe house—besides the dishwasher in the kitchen—were the washer and dryer in the attached laundry room. The few clothes she could now claim as her own were dirty, so she spent time the next morning doing laundry for both her and Jess. Sarah was especially pleased to be able to wash the one pair of jeans and the top that were truly hers—the clothes she wore the day she went to the police station with the FBI agents. The other clothes were hand-me-downs from Jessica’s stash but were equally important to her since they were now the only possessions she had.

After lunch, Sarah and Jess spent some time at the dining room table in a very competitive game of Scrabble. Sam was sitting close by in the living room, reading a book, and Bill was wandering around as he was apt to do, looking out windows. Even in this short period of time, Sarah had noticed the young agent had a nervous energy that didn’t seem to let him sit still for long.

Sarah glanced across the room when she noticed Bill freeze near the front window and pull out his gun.

“Sam, company’s coming up the driveway.”

Sarah’s hand paused on the wooden Scrabble tiles she was getting ready to place on the board. Sam and Jess both pulled out their guns, and she watched as Sam quickly joined Bill at the window. Jess came over to Sarah and took her by the arm, pulling her out of her chair in the direction of the kitchen and the back door.

Sam nodded toward her. “If I give the signal, Jess, you take her out to our SUV in the barn and get her out of here.” Sarah’s heart was beating so loudly, she was sure everyone in the room could hear it. Then she felt Sam’s eyes quickly glance over her face as if to reassure her, she would be okay. She kept her eyes locked on his until Jess pulled her from the room.

Sam stood near the front window next to Bill and watched the dark blue four-door sedan stop in the gravel drive not far from the front steps. The driver’s side door opened slowly, and a pair of cowboy boots exited the vehicle along with the rest of the man—a tall, lean, middle-aged man wearing a cowboy hat, dark brown pants, and a tan shirt. Sam caught sight of the badge clipped to the man’s belt and took a breath of relief. The feeling of an immediate threat left him, although he knew they still needed to remain on alert. For all they knew, it might be a trap.

“Looks like it might be Sheriff Wilson, but keep her in the kitchen, Jess.”

He holstered his gun, motioned for Bill to stay behind him in the doorway with his gun at the ready, and went out the door and down the steps to meet their visitor.

The older man’s face broke into a smile at the sight of him.

“You must be FBI Special Agent Sam Morgan.” He held out his hand. “I’m Sheriff Wilson of Parkston. We spoke on the phone the other day.”

Sam smiled at the slow, drawn-out speech and the carefully groomed graying mustache of the older man before him. He shook the outstretched hand, surprised at the strength he felt there. Obviously, the man might be getting up in years but was still an active and vital man.

“Sheriff, glad to meet you. Although your unexpected arrival almost got you shot.”

The Sheriff dropped his chin and then glanced at him a little sheepishly. “Oh, man. I knew I should have called first, but I was in the area and thought I’d drop by and make sure you were all okay and find out if you needed any help.”

Sam shook his head. “I appreciate that, Sheriff. But I think right now, we’re good. We’re just hoping the stay isn’t much longer, if you know what I mean.”

He watched as the Sheriff took off his well-worn cowboy hat, ran his fingers through his graying hair, and plopped the hat back on his head.

“Yup. I know what you mean.” The Sheriff looked around at the surrounding fields. “This was Will Tate’s place, wasn’t it?”

Sam nodded. “Yes, it was.”

The sheriff leaned back against the side of the car, and Sam joined him.

“Yup, he was a good man,” the sheriff said. “Back when he was alive, we used to go deer and turkey hunting together every fall.”

Sam nodded and let his eyes scan the fields and roads around them, still on alert for anything out of the ordinary. He felt assured this man was the sheriff he had spoken with on the phone. It would be difficult to duplicate that Texas drawl.

“Well, the main reason for my trip out here is, I’ve been listening to the chatter on the police radio about the perp your people have been lookin’ for. It sounds like a truck driver outside of Herbert on Route 15 gave a man fitting that description a ride the night after the first bombing. He was headed south if that helps. According to the trucker, he only rode with him a few miles out of Herbert, then said he was gonna wait for some friends to pick him up. Maybe he’s already headed back to Mexico, and you’re free and clear.”

Sam watched the older man’s face as he talked. He didn’t know if the Sheriff was trying to make him feel better or what, but it wasn’t working.

“Sounds about right. He’d have had to either hitch a ride or steal another car. He dumped the getaway vehicle outside of Herbert and then disappeared. As far as him heading back to Mexico, well, that would be nice, Sheriff. But you and I both know that’s not what he’s up to. He’s not going home until the job here is done.”

Sheriff Wilson nodded. “That’s kind of what I thought you’d say, Agent Morgan. And I have to agree. Just wanted you to know if you need any back-up out here, all you gotta do is call me. I don’t have a lot of men, but the ones I’ve got are good—and they’re yours if you need ‘em.”

Sam smiled and reached out to shake his hand again, then watched as the Sheriff opened his car door and got in. “I’ll remember that, Sheriff. Thanks again for stopping by.”

He raised his hand in a wave as the Sheriff slowly turned the car around and started back down the drive. Sam watched the dust trail behind the car until the vehicle turned onto the main dirt road

and disappeared from his view. Then he stood for a moment and looked around at the yard and the surrounding fields. Everything still looked tranquil and serene, and for that, he was thankful.

Sam didn't really believe Manaquez was going to drive up to the house and go after Sarah, but stranger things had happened in his many years with the Bureau. He'd learned you could never be too careful, and you couldn't count on the bad guys to do the usual thing. And with this guy—who knew what he would try to get to Sarah.

After that excitement, the Scrabble game was forgotten, and Sarah spent most of the remainder of the day in the kitchen whipping up several different dishes for lunch and dinner. She liked to cook—and it appeared the other three liked to eat, especially Bill.

Sarah had always wanted siblings, especially a brother, so she was actually enjoying having Bill and Jess around. Bill Parker would have been a great brother. Even though he was only four years younger than her, he still had a lot of little boy left in him.

But he was all Marine when the job required it. She had found him doing push-ups and sit-ups in the family room just that morning, and could easily see why he had such a muscular build. Even though he was slim and trim, the upper part of him looked strong with broad shoulders and muscular arms. He stood a good three inches taller than Sam, who was far from short. Yes, Bill was a good man to have on her side.

And Jess had a heart of gold. She was always ready with a smile and willing to help Sarah with anything that needed to be done. If it weren't for the circumstances for which they were together, she couldn't help but feel Jess, and she could become great friends.

That afternoon Sarah was in the kitchen making another batch of lemonade when she heard a noise in the backyard. Panic immediately swept over her, but when she tiptoed to the kitchen window and cautiously peeked out, she realized it was Bill. He was in the back yard, leaning over a lawnmower. Moments later, she heard the lawnmower start up, and she stood at the window and watched as he made several passes around the house, pushing the old mower through the long grass. He was dressed in a white tee-shirt and shorts. Even though it wasn't visible, she was pretty sure he had his gun tucked into his belt beneath the shirt. These agents never went anywhere without their weapons.

She took a couple of deep breaths to settle her nerves and turned away from the window. Grabbing two glasses and a pitcher of lemonade from the refrigerator, she headed to the family room.

“You two thirsty?”

Sam’s head rose from the newspaper he was reading. The slow smile she had come to know so well crept across his face, and her heart did a little jig. Sarah shyly smiled back. She definitely needed to slow down her thoughts regarding Agent Morgan.

“Sounds great!” Jess announced while pulling her long ponytailed hair up and off her neck. “Why is it so hot? It’s only May!”

After deserting her perch on the couch in front of the computer screen, Jess quickly joined her at the dining room table. Sarah placed the glasses and pitcher of lemonade on the table and pulled out a chair. She glanced up in time to see Sam put down his newspaper, then come over to sit across the table from her. He pulled one of the glasses toward him and poured the cold liquid into the glass with a splash. Sarah watched Sam sip his lemonade, and his eyes closed in enjoyment.

“Mmmm, this hits the spot, Sarah. Thank you.”

She nodded in response, then quickly turned her gaze back to the pitcher of lemonade and watched as ribbons of condensation dripped down the side of the clear glass pitcher. She glanced up at him again and found him watching her, that slow smile on his face. Sarah could only hope her face wasn’t turning pink with the embarrassment she felt on having those gray eyes lock on hers. Sometimes he could totally unnerve her just by looking at her.

“Yes, thank you, Sarah,” Jess agreed. “This is really good.”

“You’re both welcome. I think I’ll run some out to Bill too if that’s okay.” She looked over at Sam for his permission.

Jess started to stand. “Do you want me to take it out to him, Sam?”

Sam shook his head and waved his hand, motioning her to sit back down.

“No. Let Sarah take it to him. It will do her good to get a little fresh air.” He looked her in the eyes, and she noticed the serious steely look had returned to his. “Just stay beside Bill. No wandering. You understand?”

She grinned and raised her right hand to salute him. “Yes, boss!” then headed to the kitchen for another glass of lemonade to take to Bill.

Bill saw her coming down the back steps and quickly pulled the lawnmower to a stop and turned it off. She watched as he grabbed a handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped the sweat from his face before coming over and sitting down in the shade of the house on the steps next to her. He took off his sunglasses, folded them, and hung them on the neck of his shirt before he took the offered glass from her.

“Thanks!” he said with a grin. “I was getting parched.”

She smiled as Bill tipped the glass and drained it in a matter of seconds.

“You want more?” She laughed.

He grinned. “Maybe in a little while.” He sighed. “I think I’ll take a break for a few minutes, though. It’s hotter out in the sun than I thought. I’m not used to the heat yet.”

Neither of them spoke for a few moments, and Sarah watched as a little gust of wind blew dust devils across the rear drive toward the barn. Jess had been right when she had complained about it being too early to be this hot.

She sighed as she realized that in two weeks, it would be Memorial Day. In the past, the employees from Brown and Associates had always hung out together sometime during the long weekend. They usually went to one of the partner's houses and had grilled hamburgers, hot dogs, and brats, along with salads and desserts. There would be no Memorial Day get-together this year or any future years, though. They were all gone.

Sarah swallowed back her grief and raised her eyes to the sky and watched as a hawk circled in the distance. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have that kind of freedom – to just fly anywhere you wanted without worrying?

That brought her mind back to her search for God. She wanted to ask Bill about his faith in God, yet she couldn't figure out how best to bring up the subject. Sam had told her to ask, though, so she finally decided the only way she would ever find out anything is if she brought up the subject to him.

"Sam told me you became a Christian when you were in Iraq in the army."

Bill quickly glanced at her before returning his gaze to their surroundings.

"Yeah."

Sarah waited for him to expound, but when he didn't, she decided he was going to need a little more encouragement to get him to talk.

"So, what helped you make your decision?"

It was silent between them for a few moments, and Sarah wondered if he would even answer her. Maybe she'd made a mistake by asking. She knew a lot of veterans had a difficult time talking about their time in action.

When he finally spoke, his voice was husky with emotion. "My best friend was killed by an RPG, a rocket-propelled grenade. He was a great guy."

She glanced over and saw the sadness reflected in his face.

"He was a Christian?"

He glanced over at her in surprise.

"Yeah, how did you guess?"

Sarah shrugged. "Just the way you said 'he was a great guy.'"

She watched Bill turn the empty glass round and round in his hands. "Joe would do anything for anybody, all with a big smile on his face." He paused, and she glanced over to see him watching the hawk flying above them. "I've often wondered if he sensed something was going to happen to him. The last few days, he read his Bible to me even more than usual and kept telling me I needed to get myself right with God; that none of us knew how many days we had left. But he didn't push it at me, you know?"

Sarah nodded. Yes, she knew. Sam was the same way with her, giving her the information she sought after, but not pushing his beliefs on her.

"But I knew Joe was different. He had something I wanted; peace, for one thing. Peace to face whatever tomorrow brought us, even if it was death."

Bill paused before he spoke again. "After Joe died, I went to talk to the Chaplain at the urging of my CO. The Chaplain explained to me why Joe had that peace—which came from his faith in God. And I could have that same peace too."

“I’ve never been sorry I made the decision to give my life to Christ. Knowing that my sins are forgiven and knowing where I’ll go when I die has given me peace to face whatever happens. And knowing that He lives inside my heart and soul and is there to turn to no matter what, that is the best knowledge in the world. What we do isn’t easy—fighting evil in the world. But people like Sam, and me too I suppose, are kind of like God’s soldiers. We are called to do our jobs and fight evil in any way we can.”

He stopped talking for a moment and then turned on the steps to look at her.

“I hope that answers your question, Sarah. All I can say is that I’ve never been sorry I did it. I sure don’t understand why He does, but knowing God loves me, makes my life worth living. God loves you too, Sarah. More than you know.”

“Thank you, Bill,” she said quietly, touching him lightly on the back as she stood up. “I really appreciate you sharing that with me.”

Sarah headed back into the house, feeling more confused than when she had started. Maybe it was time to read more of the Bible Sam had given her. She needed some answers, and she was guessing that was where she’d find them.

Sarah headed to the bedroom she shared with Jess. She found the Bible she’d left it on the nightstand and curled up on the bed, flipping through the pages randomly before she remembered Sam mentioning the book of Psalms. It had been years since she had read a Bible, but she was able to find it. She stopped on a verse and read it through, then reread it.

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

Then another one.

Deliver me, O Lord, from the evil man; preserve me from the violent man.

She went back to the beginning of the book of Psalms and read chapter after chapter slowly, allowing the words to comfort and challenge her. As she read about King David calling upon his Lord and God, tears poured down her face. Psalm chapter six and seven touched her heart, particularly chapter six, verse six: *I am weary with my groaning...I water my couch with my tears.*

That sounded a lot like her. She also had watered her pillow with tears every night and every morning since this terrible thing had happened to her. Had God really been listening and hearing her cries? If so, did God really care about what happened to Sarah Masters? All these years, she had felt like she was waiting. Maybe she had been stuck in a rut and living her life in a cocoon. Perhaps He was what she had been waiting for all along.

But God, this seems like an extreme way to get my attention, don’t you think?

It was difficult for her to understand why a loving God would allow terrible things to happen. Sam had told her that it was because there was evil in the world, and you were either on the side of good or the side of evil. There was no middle ground. Those who chose evil would pay the ultimate price when they died – separation from God for all eternity.

She sighed and closed the little book, wiping tears from her eyes. There was still a lot think about before she would be ready to turn her life over to a God who didn’t stop evil from happening. But she was starting to feel differently about forgiveness. She just wasn’t sure what she wanted to do about it yet.

After their dinner that evening of grilled pork chops, applesauce, scalloped potatoes, and generous pieces of peach pie, they all gathered in the family room. Since there was no television in the house, the three of them sat around and talked, told stories from their pasts, or played cards and board games. They had found a wealth of old games in a cupboard under the bookcase, along with several jigsaw puzzles. This evening, however, when Sarah came from the kitchen, she realized Jess had her gun apart and strewn over the coffee table in pieces, and Bill had a rifle on the floor, doing the same.

“What are you guys doing to your guns?” she asked.

Sam looked up from across the room where he sat in his usual chair, reading a book. “They’re cleaning their guns. It’s just usual maintenance.”

Bill nodded. “When your life depends on your weapon, you want to make sure it’s going to work when you need it.”

Sarah walked over and sat down on the couch next to Jess. “So tell me, Jess. What type of gun is yours?”

Jess glanced up from her work and grinned at her. “Well, if you really want to know, it’s a 9mm Glock.”

Sarah nodded, trying to act like she knew what that meant, then grinned back at her. “So, what’s a ‘Glock’?”

She heard the other woman’s low musical chuckle. “Well Sarah, it’s a semi-automatic pistol made in Austria—widely used in law enforcement. Although not all of us carry a Glock, right boss?”

Sam’s eyebrows raised over the top of the book he was reading, and she heard Jess chuckle again. “Sam carries a Sig Saur, another kind of pistol. Guess we all have our favorites.”

Sarah nodded. A gun was a gun to her. And she sure didn’t have a favorite.

“So, you’re cleaning it?”

“Hmmm, yes, I am.” Sarah watched the other woman run a brush across the gun several times. Earlier, Jess had the gun laid out in front of her in pieces but had now reassembled it—other than the portion which Sarah could see held the bullets.

She pointed to it. “What’s this called?”

Jess picked up the piece from the coffee table, shoved it into the base of the gun with a snap, and put the gun back in her side holster. “It’s the clip. It holds up to 20 rounds.”

Ah, Sarah thought. The bullets. The important part of the gun.

Sarah looked over to where Bill sat on the floor, parts of his rifle still spread out around him.

He grinned across the room at her. “You want me to explain about my gun, Sarah? It has a lot more parts and pieces, as you can see. Much more exciting than a simple Glock.”

She gave him a weak smile and shook her head. “I think I’ll pass, Bill. Guns aren’t really my thing, you know. I wish there weren’t such things in the world.”

Sarah saw Sam glance up again from his book. It was obvious that he had not only been reading but had also been tuned into their conversation, which didn't surprise her. Sam Morgan seemed to always be aware of what was going on around him.

His deep voice pulled her eyes back to him. "Guns are tools, Sarah. Just like a computer in the wrong hands can be used for evil, so can a gun."

She nodded. "I know, Sam. But guns kill people. Maybe if there weren't guns in the world, people wouldn't get killed!"

He chuckled, a deep chuckle in his chest. It was a sound she had only heard from him a couple of times, and it usually made her smile, but not this time.

"People kill people, Sarah. And trust me—anything can be used to kill a person; a crowbar, a baseball bat, a car, a knife, even a screwdriver. Should we, as a society, not allow those things in our world?"

Her eyes locked with his for a moment. "I know what you're saying, Sam. And of course, you're right. I'm very thankful that you guys know how to use guns to protect me. I just wish the bad guys out there didn't have them too." She especially wished there was no way Manaquez could get his hands on a gun, but she was pretty sure he wouldn't have any trouble at all.

She saw Sam nod, and his voice sounded very weary when he responded. "Trust me, Sarah. We wish the same thing—every day."

Sarah got up from where she sat on the couch and walked over to sit on the wide arm of the overstuffed chair where he sat. She wanted to be close to him, yet found it to be unsettling in a way she couldn't grasp. It was so hard to figure out what there was about the man that affected her so. She admired him, yet he frightened her.

"So, I was wondering, Sam. Are Jess and Bill the only team you've had?"

A look she couldn't decipher swept briefly across his face, he dropped his eyes from hers, and she sensed his hesitancy before he answered.

"No."

Sarah noticed Bill raise an eyebrow and glance across the room at Jess with what could only be called a look of surprise, before she turned her attention back to Sam. She hesitated only a second or two before she questioned him again. "So, what happened to your other team, Sam? Did they transfer somewhere else in the Bureau, or what?"

She heard Sam release a slow sigh and thought for a moment he wasn't going to answer her.

"One of them did. He transferred to the Sacramento Bureau office. The other agent, Hank, was killed."

It was silent in the room for a time. Sarah glanced across the room at both Jess and Bill, who had quit what they were doing to listen to Sam's answer. Jess's mouth was almost open, as if in shock. Sarah wondered if they had ever heard Sam talk about his previous team. By the looks on Jess and Bill's faces, she had to guess the answer was no.

"What happened, Sam?" she asked, her voice almost a whisper.

She could see the muscles working in his jaw. There were several small scars on his forehead she had never noticed before because she had never been this close to him before. How many more scars did this wonderful man carry—particularly inside?

When he finally spoke, she could hear the pain in his voice. “It was two months after September 11th, 2001. Everyone was in high alert mode, and the stress was getting to all of us. We went into what we thought was a house full of illegal arms. Instead, it turned out to be a meth lab. Hank went in first, and the place blew up. We were all injured in some way, but Hank took the brunt of the explosion because he was the first one in. He died three days later. He had only been married for two months.”

Sarah gasped and placed her right hand lightly on his left shoulder and sighed in pain for this man who obviously had cared so much for his lost agent. She wished now she hadn’t asked him.

“I’m so sorry, Sam.”

He glanced up at her as if just remembering where he was, then went back to staring into space. “The one consolation I had was we had discussed his need for salvation, and I’d like to believe he made the decision to give his life to God before he died.” He shook his head. “I won’t know until I die if he made it or not, but I would like to think that what I told him made a difference.”

Sarah carefully studied the man sitting next to her. He continually surprised her, with his humor, his kindness, and his loyalty. She didn’t think she had ever met a man who had impressed her more, and she knew she was getting way too attached to him and the rest of the team.

In a few days, when Manaquez had been caught, the others would go back to their lives in Washington, D.C., and she would go back to Herbert, and whatever awaited her there, and she would never see them again. She cautioned herself to guard her heart. She couldn’t afford to get too attached to this man, but she was afraid it was too late.

She already had.

Sam looked across the room to where Sarah had joined Jess on the couch. He listened to their discussion centering on computers. He enjoyed being able to sit here and watch her—knowing that at least here, inside the house with him, she was safe.

He was afraid, and he wasn’t scared very often. Oh, there was the natural fear he felt when going into a dangerous situation, knowing he might be shot and killed. This was a different type of concern though, and he felt like it was totally out of his control. He was terrified he was falling in love with Sarah Masters. He wasn’t sure how or when it had happened, but it had. She had looked at him with those big green eyes, and his heart had melted. It had been so long since he had felt anything like this for a woman—and he was terrified.

Sam shook his head and tried to concentrate on the mystery novel he was reading. He couldn’t believe he had even told her about his marriage to Charlotte. That painful chapter of his life was never discussed with anyone, yet he had spilled it all to her. And how she had managed to pry the information about his first team out of him earlier, he would never know. He never talked about losing Hank. The whole episode had been one of the most painful in his life, and it had almost driven him to quit his job in the Bureau. Only a long talk with the Director at the time had kept him from giving up.

Just because he was a Christian didn't mean he was perfect, and he wanted her to understand that. He made mistakes like everyone else, some of them big. She needed to understand that even with all his flaws, God still loved him enough to send His Son to die on the cross for Sam Morgan's sins. And no matter what she had done or thought, God loved her enough to forgive her sins too.

He was also aware he was a man capable of hurting her emotionally as much as anyone else, even if it was the last thing he wanted to do. It sounded like Matt Calvin had crushed her heart, and Sam certainly didn't want to hurt her more than she already had been.

So he couldn't be totally honest with her and tell her his feelings where she was concerned. It would only cause pain for both of them. Once they knew what the outcome of this whole nightmare was going to be, once Manaquez was caught and behind bars, and she was safe again, then he could think about whether or not they had a chance for any type of relationship. Until then, it was best that he just keep his feelings to himself.

And in the meantime, he needed to keep praying for her—praying for her salvation and her safety.

Later that night Sarah lay in bed and listened to the noise of a country evening. With the windows open, she could hear the crickets and tree toads chirping and regular night sounds of the countryside. There were no traffic noises, no noisy neighbors. Just silence. She had thought where she lived at the edge of Herbert had been a quiet neighborhood. In comparison to this stillness, it had been extremely noisy. Not even a dog barked in the distance.

Sarah rolled over on her side and tried to get comfortable. She missed being able to sleep in her own bed, but that was only a small part of what she had lost. She missed her house and all her familiar things surrounding her. It was doubtful she would ever go back to look at her house. Part of her wanted to go back and make sure it was really gone, and another part of her wanted to remember it as it had been before the explosion.

She rolled over on her back. Tomorrow would be Friday. How many more days it would be until she could return to Herbert and some semblance of a normal life? Had it really only been three days since the beginning of this nightmare?

Tossing and turning for several more minutes, she finally gave up and turned on the light. She glanced over toward the other empty bed and was glad that at least tonight, she wasn't disturbing Jess, who she assumed was on guard duty. Sam had explained that the agents split the night duty into three, hour and a half shifts. That way, none of them went without a full night's sleep. Even though they said they were used to this kind of schedule, she thought they all looked tired.

Sarah sat up on the edge of the bed and reached over and picked up Sam's small black Bible. She had tried to think of everything else while she tossed and turned, but she knew what was really eating at her. The cover of the well-worn book felt soft in her hands as she held it. It was apparent Sam had spent many hours reading through it. Well, the answers she searched for had to be in here. She just had to keep looking.

Opening it, she flipped quickly through the thin pages, then back to the front. Just as Sam had told her, there was writing inside the front cover. Several chapters and verses were listed from the Book of Romans.

She thumbed through the book until she found the first verse referenced. Romans chapter 3, verse 23:

For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.

Well, that spelled it out pretty clear. Everybody sinned, including her. She turned some more pages and found the next verse shown: Romans, chapter 5, verses 8 and 9:

But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Much more than, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him.

The last verse listed on the front inside cover was Romans, chapter 6, verse 23:

For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

There was one more scripture listed. The first book of John, chapter 1, verses 8, and 9. This one took her a little longer to find because there was a chapter that was just John, but she finally found the one that was First John.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Obviously, she was going to die someday. Everyone died eventually. She just hoped she wasn't going to die anytime soon. But what was death and where would her 'soul' - that essence that was really her - go when she died?

Sarah closed the book, placed it on the bedside stand, and turned out the light. Before she lay back down, though, she thought more about what she had read. She didn't want to feel bitterness toward God anymore. Sam, Jessica, and Bill all had something she craved—a personal relationship with God and the knowledge that they were loved. What she would give to be able to feel that way too.

Since her parents' deaths, she hadn't really given God much thought. But it hadn't always been that way. Growing up, her parents had taken her to church every Sunday, and when she was little, she had spent her summers with her grandmother. Grandma had always sent her with the neighbor children to the church's vacation bible school program for at least one week out of the summer. It had been fun, and she had learned lots of Bible stories. But she had never considered that God might actually care about Sarah Masters as a person.

Until she met Sam.

So, did God really love her? Did it matter to Him that she'd lost all her friends and everything important to her? It had been hard enough to lose both her parents all those years ago, but to go through it all again - it was almost more than she could bear. Did He really care?

She felt the familiar ache build deep in her heart. Sarah knew terrible things happened to good people every day. As long as there was evil and sin in the world, that wasn't going to change anytime soon. But what could change—and what she needed to change—was her response to sin and evil, just like Bill had told her.

Sarah sighed and looked toward the Bible again. All her life, she had felt like she'd been waiting and looking...for something. She had thought it was a 'someone' she was waiting for – and maybe in a way, it had been. Perhaps she had been looking for God all this time.

Sarah knew she was at a crossroads in her life, and she was going to have to choose which path to take. She had been taught all these things as a child but had turned her back on God after her parents' deaths. It had been so long since she had felt anyone's love. Sarah had thought Matt Calvin had loved her, and that had all been a lie, so how could she be sure God loved her? Well, for one thing, the Bible told her that he loved her enough to send his son to die on the cross for her sins. That sure sounded like love to her.

Sarah stared back at the little book on the stand, and her heart softened. She dropped to her knees at the side of the bed and poured out her heart to her heavenly Father, along with her tears. What had ever made her think she didn't need Him in her life? That was like saying she didn't need to breathe.

God, I want to spend eternity with you. I know I'm a sinner. Everyone is; we can't help it. But I'm asking you to forgive me and let me become one of your children. I'm so sorry I turned away from You. I realize now that it was a mistake, and I've wasted so much time already.

She stopped whispering the words for a moment as her throat choked up. She needed God's love so much. How could she have thought she didn't?

God, it's been so long since I've had parents or family, or anyone who truly cared about me. Please love me and keep me safe in your arms. I could really use a Father right now. Would you be my Father?

Slowly a peace came to her, and she felt more than heard the words she had needed to hear her whole life.

"My child, I did not leave you alone then—and you're not alone now. I'm right here."

She curled up on the bed and felt a peacefulness she had never known softly sweep over her. Her last thought before she fell asleep was she now had a Father. And whatever happened to her in the future, she would never be alone again.

CHAPTER 11

Sam stretched his back and legs before he took off down the driveway for his routine morning run. It was only 6:00 a.m., but if he waited any later to run, it would be too hot. He started his run in a slow jog then sped up. While his feet hit the pavement in a comforting rhythm, he scanned the perimeter. He took the same route he had taken every morning since they'd arrived at the farm—down the drive, then a left turn down the road until he came to the wooded area with the gate. He hopped the gate, ran down the rutted, grass-grown lane and through the pasture back of the barn, then came back around to the front of the house. He wasn't sure how far it actually was, but he ran the route three times on most days. Today he thought he might try four times or even more. He needed the exercise, and the time away from the house would do him even more good than the run. Although with Sarah's delicious cooking, he definitely needed the exercise too!

During his run, he enjoyed the sounds of nature all around him. He had been born and raised on a small farm, and as a boy, he used to lie in bed early in the morning and try to distinguish the different bird's songs coming through the open bedroom window. He had gotten pretty good at it over the years, although there wasn't a lot of chance for him to exercise his knowledge of bird's songs where he lived in D.C. As he listened this morning, he could pick out the songs of cardinals, robins, and a goldfinch. A red-winged blackbird sat on the fence post ahead of him, more than likely chirping out a warning that Sam was headed his way.

Sometimes Sam missed the old family farm. After his dad's retirement from the small-town police department where he had worked as a cop for thirty years—and Sam's mom had died from a heart attack—his dad had sold the farm and moved out west to help his Uncle Fred, his dad's brother, on their small cattle ranch. Sam supposed one of these days he needed to go to the ranch for a visit. But every time he did, the two older men hounded him, telling him they needed him to join them in running the ranch. He loved them both dearly, but he didn't think he was ready to hang up his shield quite yet.

His thoughts turned once again to the young woman back at the house. Sometime soon, he knew he needed to deal with his feelings where she was concerned. She was becoming way too important to him. He tried to concentrate on his run again.

Sam, old man, you are so hooked on her, it's not even funny.

He had one job to do, and that was to keep Sarah Masters alive until Manaquez was caught and brought to justice. He had to keep reminding himself of that and guard his heart against becoming emotionally involved with his charge.

It was just that simple.

Sam slowed down in his run while he tried to sort out his thoughts. He had never before been attracted to a person under his protection. As much as he liked to think he exuded the tough-guy image, he was afraid he was really a softie at heart, and in this particular case, that was dangerous. Dangerous for him, and especially for Sarah. He couldn't let his feelings for her cloud his emotions

or dim his concentration. And it wasn't just because it was his job to guard her and keep her safe. Not anymore. About two days into the protection detail, it had become very personal for him. However, there was still a professional propriety that had to be kept up. She was his charge to protect, and he had to remember that and not let anything else interfere with his job.

Sam wasn't even sure when or how it had happened, and he still wasn't positive she felt the same way about him. He thought she did; sometimes, when she looked at him, he was sure she did reciprocate his feelings. Or did he want it so much he just imagined the sparks between them? Sam had always prided himself on being able to keep his job, and his emotions separate, but when he met Sarah Masters, all that changed. But now his old dreams of having a normal life with a wife, home, and family didn't sound so out of reach. Perhaps he could find love again, and maybe this time, because God was in control – perhaps this time, he could get it right.

Lord, I'm going to need Your help here. I'm in way over my head. All I know is, I need You to help me keep her safe. Because the one thing I am sure of, I couldn't stand it if anything happened to her.

Sam jogged around the corner of the house to arrive back at the front porch steps. He stopped and bent over from the waist, putting the heels of his hands on his knees while he caught his breath, then stood up and glanced at his watch. He had time for a quick shower and shave, and then it was time for another day to begin.

Sarah hummed a little tune while she prepared the morning's breakfast. She was especially looking forward to breakfast this morning because she had good news to share with the others.

She still couldn't believe she had finally done it. The evening before, she had become their sister in Christ – a Christian. Turning her life over to God had given her a peace she hadn't known existed.

All those years she had tried to believe she was a good person and that was enough; all that time she had felt like she was so alone after her parents' deaths; all that time she had blamed God for everything that happened in her life. She had wasted so many years when she could have had God in her heart and life.

Well, that was over. She would never be alone again. She knew becoming a Christian wasn't going to magically make all her problems disappear. After all, she was still being hunted by a madman, and her life was still in shambles, but she could handle it now. God was with her. Sarah couldn't help the smile that came to her face.

She was just dishing up a huge stack of buttermilk pancakes when she heard the three agents talking amongst themselves as they came into the kitchen. Sarah couldn't help but grin when she turned from the stove long enough to see all three of them raise their noses in the air as if sniffing out what was on the menu.

"Pancakes," she announced as she placed the platter on the table with a flourish. "Along with bacon, fresh fruit, and hot coffee – strong hot coffee, Sam. Just the way you like it."

She sent him a smile and caught the twinkle in his eyes, along with his devastating smile. Why did his approval mean so much to her? Deep in her heart, she was afraid she knew the answer. She was falling in love with the man, and there didn't seem to be anything she could do to stop.

They all took their seats at the round oak table, and Bill took his turn, blessing the food. Platters were passed, and coffee was poured. She waited until everyone had begun to dig into the food on their plates before she spoke.

"I have news for you all."

She smiled as three sets of eyes raised at the same time to look at her.

"I made a decision last night. God and I had a good long talk, and He is now my heavenly Father." She sighed, feeling again the weight of the world fall off her shoulders. "I can't tell you how much more at peace I feel - and how loved. Thank you all for helping me find my way back."

The others rose from their chairs to come and congratulate her. Jess gave her a huge hug and called her Sister Sarah. Bill shook her hand and then pulled her into his arms for a quick bear hug. Sam stood in front of her for a few minutes with a look she couldn't discern on his face before he finally reached out and softly touched her cheek with the back of his hand, a gentle look in his eyes.

"I'm so happy for you, Sarah." He finally said in a husky voice. She felt the loss of his touch when he dropped his hand.

She had half-expected a hug from him too but was almost relieved when he didn't. Sarah couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to be held in his arms and comforted. She smiled back at him, feeling very shy and awkward. Then she turned back to sit down in her seat, and the moment was gone.

"Well, let's eat, people. I made all this food, and I really don't want it to go to waste."

Later that morning, Sarah dumped the contents of her purse on her bed and picked up each item, one at a time. She gazed at the small pile of articles for a moment. Laying in front of her was all that remained of her life. She slowly went through each item, her wallet with her driver's license, a couple of credit cards, and a little money. Her keys, although she really had no use for them anymore as every key on her key chain was for something that no longer existed—the front door at Brown and Associates, her house and her car. There were a notepad and pen, some breath mints, a small package of tissues, and her cell phone.

Sarah flipped through the photos in her wallet until one caught her attention. It was a group shot, taken at the last Brown and Associates Christmas party. The event had been held at the local country club, and Adam Brown had talked the waitress into taking a photo of all of them. She touched each face tenderly with the tip of her index finger and said goodbye. That part of her life was over, but she was glad she had the opportunity to know them all as friends.

After placing the photo back in the wallet, Sarah picked up her cell phone and held it for a moment. Sam had told her to not use a computer to check any of her personal email accounts as their whereabouts could be traced that way. He had also warned her not to make any phone calls from her cell phone, and she hadn't, but she couldn't help wondering if she had any messages.

Surely it wouldn't hurt to check. She wasn't going to call anyone. Actually, there was no one she wanted to call. But it would be good to know if she had any text messages.

She held the phone in her hand for a few moments, then turned the phone on long enough to check and see if there were any messages. There weren't any which didn't surprise her. After all, the only ones who had her cell number were her friends and coworkers at the law practice and maybe their families. She quickly turned the cell phone back off and stuffed it and everything else back into her purse. Maybe someday she would need these things, but not now. Sarah dropped the purse back on the floor next to the bedside stand and left the room.

The only thing she knew for sure and was hanging onto with her whole soul was the knowledge that God had a plan for the rest of her life. She didn't have any idea what it was, but she was so happy God was in control.

Sarah watched Sam and Bill stroll across the yard while making their daily rounds of the property. There went two good looking men. Sam might be years older than the young former Marine, but he still had the broad shoulders and physical prowess of a much younger man. He was a very handsome man.

She shook her head in dismay. Being attracted to Sam Morgan was leaving her confused and scared. Not quite the level of fear she had of this madman who was trying to find her and kill her, but she was afraid nonetheless. Sarah was terrified of making another mistake in a relationship. She had thought Matt Calvin was 'the one,' and she had been badly mistaken and had been badly hurt by him. Also, she now knew he had been a man of no principles, and because of his mistakes, all her friends were dead.

So, how could she trust her heart to make the correct choice this time?

True, Sam wasn't Matt. It was apparent the two men were worlds apart. Sam Morgan was a man of dignity and honor. He had Christian principles that he not only believed in but lived every day. The past few days, he had treated her with nothing but respect, so why was she afraid of him? Well, that was the problem. Sarah knew she wasn't actually scared of *him*. She was frightened of her feelings for him. She was afraid her heart was going to shatter when this was all over, and he went one way, and she went another.

It was inevitable.

Even knowing all that, just thinking about Sam made her smile. She was smitten, that was for sure, and she'd like to think he was attracted to her too. When he looked at her, his soulful eyes sparkled with interest. Sarah had noticed, and she couldn't help but wonder if the others had seen it too. If they had, they were keeping it to themselves. Not even Jess had mentioned it to her.

Sam had never said anything to her directly, but his eyes expressed far more than he probably intended to show. The way he looked at her sometimes made her feel weak in the knees. She had never felt that way when Matt looked at her, and she wasn't sure what to think about it. She was only sure of one thing; having Jess and Bill around kept them honest, made them careful about expressing their feelings, and that was probably a good thing.

Sarah moved away from the window. She was just going to enjoy each day they were here together. What she was going through was a nightmare, but at least she had Sam Morgan at her side while she was experiencing it, and she was very thankful that he was the one God had chosen to be her protector.

That afternoon found Sarah on her knees, pulling weeds. The flower bed that ran along the front of the porch and around both sides of the house had been sorely neglected. The beds were full of the vibrant colors of blossoming yellow-gold coreopsis, variegated hosta plants, daylilies, hybrid lilies, Shasta daisies, and weeds—lots and lots of healthy weeds. And she was mainly on the lookout for that pesky plant, poison ivy since she was very allergic to it. It had been years since she had a run-in with it, and she was hoping she wouldn't find any of it lurking in the flower bed today.

It felt so good to finally be out of the house. She had tried for a couple of days to convince Sam she needed to get out and get some fresh air, and he had finally agreed. Of course, part of the agreement had been he would sit on the front porch in the swing, watching her every move. That was okay, though, as long as it got her out of the house. And it did make her feel safer to know he was just a few feet away—even if it did make her self-conscious of every move she made.

Sarah had been working on the flower bed for about half an hour. Her hands were dirty, she was sweaty, and her back was getting sore, and she loved every bit of it. She always enjoyed springtime and the chance to get out and work in her flower beds. Since her home was gone and she didn't know when or if she would ever get back to the point where she would have another house with a flower bed, she was going to enjoy this opportunity. Even though these flowers were in danger of being taken over by weeds, they were gorgeous. Perhaps when she was finished, she and Jess could pick some of them and arrange them in vases so they could enjoy them in the house.

She stood to get more leverage to pull out an incredibly stubborn section of quack grass when she saw a slithering object move through the weeds in front of her. Letting out a scream, she fell flat on her behind and quickly scooted backward, as far away from the flower bed as she could scoot.

Sam came bounding down the steps with his gun drawn to see what had happened. She looked up at his shocked face and laughed out loud.

"Sorry, Sam! I don't like snakes."

Sarah recognized the moment when Sam's brain finally registered what she was talking about. He started chuckling, holstered his gun, and reached out a hand to pull her to her feet. Then he was laughing so hard he had to lean over to rest his hands on his knees. It was a deep throaty laugh she had never heard from him—a laugh that was entirely without reservation, with nothing held back.

She laughed right along with him and grinned at this side of him she had never seen. It had been worth it - seeing that snake and having it scare the daylights out of her—just to hear him laugh like this. Sarah stood there and watched him adoringly while he caught his breath, wiped the moisture from his eyes, and stood upright. He flashed her one of his grins, his eyes still full of mirth.

“So, Miss Masters. I assume from this little exhibition that you don’t like snakes?”

She narrowed her eyes and cocked her head as she grinned up at him. “And you do, Agent Morgan?”

He firmly shook his head. “Absolutely not! As a matter of fact, when I get to heaven, one of the first questions I’m going to ask is why He had Noah take two of those lousy creatures on the ark with him!”

That sent Sarah and Sam both into another paroxysm of laughter. What shocked her even more was when Sam reached out and gathered her in his warm arms for a hug. She heard the remnants of his chuckle deep in his chest along with the beating of his heart, and for a moment, her own heart almost skipped a beat. It felt wonderful to be held in his arms, to smell his aftershave, and feel the texture of his shirt; she wanted to stay there forever. The moment didn’t last nearly long enough, though, as he pulled away and looked down at her upturned face. Then his lips came down to meet her in a kiss, and Sarah couldn’t help kissing him back, feeling it all the way to her toes. When she felt his lips leave hers, she opened her eyes and saw a look of dismay cross his face. He quickly let her go and backed up a step.

“I’m sorry, Sarah. That was a very unprofessional thing for me to do.”

She shook her head quickly. “It’s okay, Sam.” She tried to grin at him, although her heart broke a little bit at his rejection. “We both just got caught up in the moment.” Inside, though, her heart was crushed with the thought that he hadn’t really wanted to kiss her.

He took a deep breath as his eyes locked on hers. What she saw there almost took her breath away. Sam Morgan cared about her—much more than just as a part of his job. He cared about her as a woman. Sarah had known she was very attracted to him, but she hadn’t been sure until that moment that the feeling was reciprocated. Now that she knew, the knowledge almost made her dizzy, and her lips still felt the tingle of his kiss.

“Yeah. I guess we did,” she heard him mumble as he turned back toward the porch steps. “Guess we did.”

That night after supper, Sarah sat in the living room in a chair reading a book. Sam and Bill were across the room, engaged in a very competitive game of checkers, and Jess punched away at the keys of the laptop.

For a moment, Sarah could almost fool herself into believing this was a normal comfortable home on a Friday evening with a family just spending time together. But that wasn’t why they were all here together. These agents were not her family, not even her friends; they were her protectors.

They were the only thing that stood between her and the maniac out there somewhere that wanted her dead.

Sarah tried to not think about it too much, but she couldn't help it. When and if this nightmare ever ended, what was she going to do? She had a little money in her savings account, but not much. She didn't have a car or a job anymore, or any place to live. There were insurance policies on her personal property and her car, so she should be able to collect something from the insurance company. But would she have enough to start over again?

Hopefully, she could find another job. Everyone in Herbert would know what had happened to her, and maybe someone would be willing to help her out and give her a job. Then again, perhaps she didn't want to stay in her hometown at all. There were so many bad memories now associated with the place. But where would she go—and how was she going to pay for starting out somewhere else?

Sighing, she calmly reminded herself she wasn't alone anymore. God was in control of her life now. A portion of a verse she had just memorized from Psalm chapter 61, verse 4 came back to her:

I will trust in the cover of thy wings.

Thinking of God being able to hold her in His hand and covering her with His wings made her feel safe. A picture of the huge hawk Bill and she had seen circling high above the farm came to her mind. God was kind of like that. His wings were strong and would protect her from the enemy. He had promised. As long as she had God with her, she could handle anything that came her way, one day at a time.

CHAPTER 12

Sarah lay in bed the next morning and listened to the sound of the birds' songs coming through the open window. Not far from the house, she heard a mourning dove cooing out its mournful melody. She smiled. It was so different to awaken and know God was watching over her, and it gave her an indescribable peace. Maybe she didn't know what the future held, but for the first time in her life, she knew she was no longer alone. That knowledge alone gave her peace. And knowing that if she died today, she knew where she would be spending eternity, gave her the courage to face whatever was ahead.

She stretched her arms over her head and said a silent prayer of thanks before throwing her legs over the edge of the bed to begin another day.

Here we go, God. What do you have in store for me today?

After a quick breakfast, Sam and Jess headed out the door to go to town for supplies. Sarah had tried to convince Sam to let her go with them even though she knew the answer before she asked.

"You're staying here. There is no way I'm letting you out in public where the wrong person might see you."

Sarah nodded at the answer she was sure she would get from him, but nonetheless, she was disappointed. She was starting to get cabin fever being stuck inside all the time.

Before Jess and Sam left the house, Sarah noticed Sam pull Bill aside to speak to him, quietly enough she couldn't hear what was said.

"What was that all about?" Sarah asked Bill after the other two left.

Bill plopped down on the sofa and punched away at the keyboard of the laptop, glancing up briefly at her question.

"No big deal. He just said to keep an eye on you while they were gone."

Sarah frowned. That was nothing new. She couldn't go anywhere or do anything without one of them hovering. And Sam seemed more stressed today than usual. He had hardly said two words to any of them this morning. His gray eyes looked especially dark during breakfast when turned on her. She hoped she hadn't done something to upset him, but if she had, she sure couldn't figure out what it was.

"Sam looks more worried this morning than normal, Bill. What's going on?"

Bill shook his head. "Nothing I know of. Sometimes the boss just gets more intense about a case than others. Must be his radar is up."

Sarah chewed on a fingernail and sat down in a chair and tried to relax. She didn't know what radar Bill was talking about, but she just hoped Sam wasn't upset about kissing her the previous day;

she certainly wasn't upset by it. Just the remembrance of that kiss made her face grow warm and brought a smile to her face.

Then she frowned and tapped her fingernails on the wooden arm of the chair. It couldn't be the kiss. There was something more going on. It was like he was just waiting for something to happen. And because she could feel the tension radiating from him, she was worried.

She inhaled and pursed her lips to exhale and blow her bangs off her sticky forehead. Considering it was only the end of May, it was unseasonably hot and humid. She had really hoped the thunderstorm that had rolled through the area during the night would have cleaned the air and cooled it down a little. But the opposite seemed to have happened. If anything, it had made the air muggier.

While Bill typed on the laptop, Sarah sat and tried to read some verses from the Bible for a while. She glanced over at the small fan they had moving the hot air around the room. Too bad they didn't have an air conditioner. At least at home, she would have had her shady back deck to sit on and read. She frowned again. The house she used to call home was gone, and she had to stop thinking of it as her home. Home was gone.

Sarah finally put the Bible down on the nearby table. It was just too hot to concentrate. She wished she had the book she had been reading before she left home. It had been a book from the Herbert Community Library. She surmised she would be responsible for replacing it. At least it could be replaced. Her personal mementos and photos were all gone, and there was no way to replace those. And Sparky. She especially felt terrible about losing her loyal friend, Sparky. Sometimes it was difficult to remember everything was all gone. If it had been a normal fire, she might have been able to salvage a few of her belongings. But an explosion? She was pretty sure there was nothing left to salvage.

Restless, she finally got up from her chair and headed to the kitchen, where she poured a large glass of icy cold lemonade to drink, hoping that would cool her off. After drinking it, she poked her head into the living room. She was going to ask Bill if he wanted a glass of the refreshing liquid when she realized he was stretched out on the sofa with his eyes closed. She decided to leave him alone. With the high humidity and the heat, all of them had been struggling to get a good night's sleep, and she knew the previous night he had borne the brunt of the guard duty.

Poor guy.

She tiptoed back into the kitchen and spent a few moments wiping down the kitchen counters and putting what few dishes there were into the dishwasher. Sarah spent some time thinking about what to prepare for dinner that night. It was hot, so maybe a taco salad would hit the spot. She really would have liked to make rhubarb crisp for dessert, but it was going to have to wait until a cooler day because she sure didn't want to heat up the kitchen more by running the oven. It had been so exciting to find a planting of rhubarb this side of the barn. It would be an unexpected treat to create something baked with it, but it would have to wait for a cooler day.

Those tasks accomplished, she padded back into the living room and glanced out the window. Maybe it would be a little cooler on the porch. She glanced over at Bill's prone form, not wanting to wake him to go with her. After all, she was only going out on the porch.

Sarah quietly tiptoed out the front door and stood with her hands resting on the wooden porch rail. It felt like there might be a tiny breeze blowing, but she wasn't going to get the benefit of it on the porch with the house blocking most of it. She glanced back at the door and then decided she would go for a little walk—not far—only as far as the barn, which was only about a hundred and fifty feet from the house. Surely that wouldn't hurt anything, she reasoned. It was so hot in the house. She couldn't take it in there anymore. She hesitated only a second before she bounded down the steps, enjoying an unusual sense of freedom.

Sarah looked around her as she walked, pulling her ponytailed hair off her neck.

Oh, there was that little breeze she'd been looking for!

Sam and Jess were fifteen miles into the thirty mile trip into town when Sam's cell phone rang.

"Morgan here," he automatically answered.

"Agent Morgan, this is Sheriff Wilson of the Parkston County Police Department. You asked me to let you know if anything or anyone suspicious showed up in town."

Sam gripped the phone tightly as a feeling of dread swept over him.

"Sheriff, what's up?"

"We had a report of a vehicle stolen this morning from a liquor store parking lot—an old pickup truck, which isn't all that important. But what I thought you might find interesting; the witness who saw him take it says the man looked like a Mexican. He fits the description of the fellow you're looking for to a 'T.'"

Sam groaned. He'd felt out of sorts all morning. It was his "internal radar," as the other two agents on the team called it. He knew in his gut that something was happening; he just didn't know what, and it had been driving him crazy ever since he'd woke up.

Well, now, he knew. Manaquez was in the area.

"Thanks for the heads-up, Sheriff. I really appreciate it."

"You need any backup out there, Agent Morgan? We'd be glad to assist."

Sam answered quickly. He didn't want to get the local sheriff department involved in the case—not unless they were really needed. He had always felt that the fewer numbers of law enforcement involved in a case, the better. And he didn't want Manaquez to know they were aware he was here yet. A squad car or two showing up on their road might lead Manaquez right to them.

"No. I think we're fine right now, Sheriff. I'll let you know if the situation changes."

He quickly hung up the call and turned toward Jess, who was driving.

"Jess, make a U-turn up here and head back—and step on the gas!"

Sarah leaned her arms against the top fence rail and gazed out at the surrounding countryside. The land was so flat in this part of Ohio, you could see for miles. She supposed later in the fall when the corn and wheat were high and ready to harvest the view wouldn't be so great, but today

with the blue sky and sunshine, you could see everything. The land spread out in front of her in a patchwork of cultivated and planted fields. Neat rows of green sprouts of corn plantings could be seen poking their heads through the fertile ground. She inhaled the fresh air. It smelled so good to be outside for a while.

A goldfinch flew by, and she watched a nearby robin as it poked at the ground, searching for a worm. New leaves were coming out on the trees in full force now, offering at least a little shade in the gathering heat. If today was any sign of things to come, it was going to be a scorching summer.

Sarah turned her head and caught a whiff of sweetness. It looked like the fragrant aroma came from an old honeysuckle bush growing at the front corner of the barn, and it smelled delicious. She closed her eyes and lifted her face, allowing tranquility and peace to sweep over her.

Just what she had needed.

She looked back toward the house again, feeling a little guilty for leaving the house without Bill knowing about it. But when he woke up, all he had to do was look out the window, and he would be able to see her. They couldn't blame a person for wanting to get some fresh air, could they? She was so tired of being stuck in the house all the time, and it has been particularly miserable for her since she was used to being outside in the springtime, digging in her flower beds when the ground first warmed. Sarah took a great deal of pleasure in planting petunias, impatiences, and pansies in with the annual daisies, daylilies, and roses at her house. She wondered if any of the flowers had survived the heat of the fire. Maybe someday soon, she would be able to go back to Herbert and find out. If her landlord decided to rebuild the house, perhaps she'd be able to live there again.

Sarah lifted her head as she heard a sound. Was someone or something in the barn? She looked back toward the house, then once more toward the barn and heard the noise again. This time it sounded like it came from the backside of the barn. Glancing toward the house again and still not seeing any movement from Bill, she decided to check it out. More than likely, it was just an animal digging around, or maybe a raccoon trying to get into the barn. Sam had mentioned something the day before yesterday about seeing a raccoon. Perhaps she could scare it off before it got in the barn and did any damage. Sam had told her they could tear up a building and make a mess if they got inside.

Sarah slowly walked around toward the backside of the barn, pausing once again to listen for the sound. When she cleared the corner, though, her heart almost stopped.

"Buenas dias, Senorita Masters."

Her worst nightmare stood in front of her with a pistol pointed straight at her. He looked the same as he had five days earlier in the offices of Brown and Associates. This time, however, he was wearing a dark blue plaid short-sleeved shirt and scruffy looking blue jeans. And he was wearing an evil toothy smile on his face.

Manaquez.

He waved her forward with his left hand while he kept the gun trained on her with his right hand.

"Come closer, Senorita."

When she didn't move, he came toward her, grabbed her roughly by the arm, and pulled her away from the corner of the barn. Sarah attempted to get away from him, which only made him

grip her arm harder. When she struggled to get away from him, he squeezed and twisted her arm until she cried out in pain. Sarah's heart sank. Here back behind the barn, there would be no way Bill would be able to see her from the house and know she was in trouble.

Stupid, stupid, stupid!

She inwardly scolded herself. She never should have left the house. What in the world had made her think she would be okay if something were to happen? What made her believe she was safe wandering around? It had been so quiet here on the farm, she had been lulled into a sense of false security. She had been wrong. Very very wrong. And now she was going to pay for it.

"So, *Senorita* Masters. We finally meet again."

Her heart was racing, and she felt like she was going to pass out. Maybe that wouldn't be all bad – other than she didn't know what this evil man had planned for her.

"What do you want?" she finally managed to blurt out, glaring at him. She didn't want to show him how terrified she was of him. And she really didn't need to have him answer her question. She was pretty sure she knew what he wanted. He wanted her dead.

He smiled that toothy smile again that made her flesh crawl. "I'm here to finish the job. My boss, he don't like loose ends."

Sarah swallowed hard. Unfortunately, she knew what that meant. He was a cold-blooded killer and was still here for one reason only—to kill her.

"Get down on your knees."

"Wh...what?" She wasn't sure she had heard him correctly.

He pushed at her, and his voice was rough as he repeated it. "I said, get down on your knees!" he ordered.

She dropped to her knees in the dirt. There wasn't anything left for her to do but pray silently.

God, please help. I don't want to die yet. I just found You, and I'm not ready for my life to end yet. And what about Sam? I want to know Sam better too. I'm so sorry I left the house. I really messed up this time, Lord. Please help me get out of this!

The gun was pointed at her forehead as she looked up at the man. Sarah looked him in the face and saw the brief look of uncertainty cross his. It was only there for a split second before the look of evil returned, but it was there long enough for Sarah to see it. Something Sam had earlier in the week clicked in her head. Manaquez's specialty was killing people with homemade bombs, not having to face them while he killed them. Maybe he was a coward and was really afraid to shoot her. Maybe she could use his fear to her advantage and stall long enough so help could arrive—or God could pull off some kind of miracle—to save her. Either way, if she had to die, she wasn't going to make it easy for him. Her scrambled mind tried to figure out what to do next.

"You don't have to be a killer, you know," she said. "God will forgive you for murdering those other people if you ask Him. And you can change your life and become something good."

The brief look of uncertainty she had seen earlier left his eyes and was replaced with a cold, steely look of pure evil. At that point, she knew she was wasting her time. He had made a choice to travel down this road years ago and wasn't about to change directions now.

"Close your eyes, *Senorita*," he growled out at her.

"No!"

“I said,” he repeated slowly, “close your eyes!”

She glared up at him. There was no way she was going to make this easy for this monster. He had killed all her friends, and if he hadn’t messed up on the timing, he would have killed her in the explosion too. Then he had proceeded to blow up her house and kill her dog. He had single-handedly destroyed her life.

Sarah’s head spun while she tried to figure out what to do. Maybe if she could throw dirt in his eyes, she would have time to run away; or maybe she could knock him off his feet—other than he wasn’t near enough for her to reach his legs. But there had to be something she could do to stop him. She was determined she wasn’t going to go down without a fight. The quiet, meek, always-willing-to-let-everyone-have-their-way Sarah Masters was gone. If the last few days hadn’t taught her anything else, it had taught her that she was a person of importance—to God, if to no one else.

She forced her chin up and stared him in the eye. “I’m not afraid to die, you know,” she told him. “But I haven’t done anything to hurt you, so you have no reason to kill me. I know, though, if you do, I will just go to heaven to be with Jesus, so I’m not afraid of you or anything you can do to me. Not anymore.”

In that split second, she made a decision. If he wanted to kill her right here, right now, he was going to have to face her down when he pulled the trigger. She wasn’t going to do anything to help make it easier for him.

“But if you are going to kill me, you’re going to have to look me in the eyes to do it,” she yelled at him.

CHAPTER 13

Sam dialed Bill's cell phone number as soon as he got off the phone with the Sheriff. He was surprised when it rang a couple times before Bill finally answered it.

"Parker here."

Sam tried to keep the panic out of his voice as he responded. "Bill, I just got off the phone with the Sheriff. Manaquez has been sighted in Parkston. He took off with a guy's truck about an hour ago."

"You think he knows where we are?"

"I don't know, but don't let her out of your sight. Put in your earpiece and keep it in. We're going to do the same on this end so we can be in constant contact with each other. We're headed back to the farm—we're only about six minutes away."

"Got it."

Bill disconnected the call and rubbed his eyes, looking around him. He hadn't meant to doze off, but the heat made him just so darn sleepy, and he hadn't slept much the last two nights.

His eyes swept around the living room. So, where was she? He got up off the couch and did a quick search of the house. She wasn't inside, and a visual scan out the windows didn't find her in the yard either.

Great! Sam was going to kill him!

His adrenalin kicked into high gear as he readied to find Sarah. He holstered his gun from the table, put in his earpiece, and went out the back door, moving slowly, his eyes taking in his surroundings and searching for her.

Where was she?

Bill stood at the bottom of the back steps and thought about his options. He was going to have to fill Sam in on the fact that Sarah seemed to be missing, and he really wasn't looking forward to it, but he had no choice. Lying—even a small lie—was not acceptable in an FBI agent, and it was the quickest and surest way to lose your job. In an organization whose primary purpose was to expose deceit and lies, the truth was a precious commodity.

He hit the speed-dial on his phone.

"Uh, Boss, got a problem here."

"What's up?"

"Um, I musta dozed off a minute, and now I can't seem to find her."

"What?" His boss's voice roared on the other end.

Bill chewed on his lower lip. He hadn't seen Sam angry more than twice in all the time he had worked for him, but he was angry now, and it was his fault.

“Sam, I’m going to head out to the east wooded area and see what I can see from that vantage point. She must have taken a walk. I’ll probably run into her.”

“You’d better! Keep me posted.”

Bill went back through the kitchen door into the family room and grabbed a bag he had stashed at the end of the couch. He pulled out and deftly assembled a .338 Lapua Magnum sniper rifle—his ‘baby.’ He hoped he wouldn’t need it but would take it with him anyway, just in case.

He shouldered the rifle, went out the front door and bounded down the front steps, and ran up the driveway toward the road. His plan was to head to the gated lane and head into the property from that direction. If Manaquez were out there somewhere, that would be his best avenue onto the property without being noticed. Hopefully, he could catch him before that happened.

Bill ran steadily, praying all the way silently.

Lord, please keep Sarah safe. I really screwed up this time, Lord. Please don’t let anything happen to her because I failed to do my job. Just keep her safe.

He really hoped it didn’t come down to him having to kill someone, but he knew that if it came to saving Sarah’s life by taking another, he would have to do it. It was not only his job, but it was also his duty.

Keep my hands steady and my aim true, he chanted quietly. That had been his mantra for the years he was at war, and it still applied to his daily work. Truth be known, he was still at war—just a different war and on home soil this time.

First, though, he had to find Sarah. Hopefully, he would run into her out here on the road going for a leisurely stroll, and he could scold her for leaving the house on her own and then walk her back to the house and safety. *Hopefully*. But the sinking feeling in his gut told him that wasn’t going to be the case.

Sam pounded his fist on the dashboard and felt like jumping out of the truck and running if that would get them there any faster. Bill had a whole lot of explaining to do. Why he would let Sarah out of his sight was beyond comprehension. Perhaps Sam should have stressed more that they couldn’t let their guard down for even a minute, but his team members were professionals. They were supposed to know that without him reminding them all the time.

He glanced over at Jess, who was leaning forward toward the steering wheel, her hands clenching it tightly. Even though he knew by the speed they were going, she was pushing the old pickup for all it was worth, it was as if she were willing the vehicle to get there faster just by leaning forward. He knew the feeling.

Sam growled out his next words. “Bill doesn’t know where she is. He’s heading out now to scout around and look for her.”

Jess took her eyes off the road, briefly to look at him. “What?”

“Yeah. That’s what I said!”

Sam’s earpiece crackled as he heard Bill’s voice. “Sam, I’m at the east gate near the wooded area. The gate is open, and the chain’s been cut. I’m going to check it out.”

Sam felt his heart drop to his feet. *Lord, no!* They were too late. Manaquez was already on the property.

“We’ll be coming to the front driveway shortly, Bill. We’ll come in that way on foot. No sense stirring up dust and letting him know we’re coming.”

Sam instructed Jess to slow down the last quarter mile from the driveway and had her pull the truck over before they reached the drive. They quickly exited the vehicle and took off running up the long gravel driveway, their guns drawn and ready. Sam’s eyes scanned the perimeter in all directions but couldn’t see any movement.

Where was she?

All around them was silence. The breeze rustled through the leaves of the trees overhead, and a part of his subconscious heard the birds still chirping and singing their songs.

And Sarah was out there somewhere with a murderer.

He tried to steady his thoughts so he could think clearly. She had to be somewhere close by if Manaquez was still on the property—and Bill had the only other way off the property blocked; that is unless Manaquez had come in on foot. If he had, then they were in trouble. He could take her out through the woods, and they’d never be able to find them.

Or, Manaquez might have already killed her.

His heart plummeted at that thought, but he willed himself to stay positive. God was in control of the situation, he kept reminding himself. No matter what happened, God was in control.

When they reached the house, both he and Jess hugged the side of the building and took turns looking through windows. Sarah and Bill weren’t anywhere in the house, so that meant she was still out there somewhere, and Bill was still looking for her. When they neared the back corner of the house closest to the barn, Sam held up his hand, and they both stopped while he tried to steady his nerves and assess the situation. The only spot that wasn’t visible from where they stood was the backside of the barn and the wooded area. Bill was in the wooded area, so that left only the backside of the barn, and hopefully, Bill was where could see that area.

“Bill. Do you have a visual?” he whispered into the cordless mic strapped around his neck.

“Yeah, I do. They’re behind the barn. She’s on her knees, boss, and he’s got a gun to her head.”

Sam closed his eyes for a second and felt his stomach lurch. “Do you have a shot?”

“Negative. Not unless you want her hit too.”

“Keep your aim on him, Bill. The first chance for a clear shot, I want you to take it, do you hear me?”

“Got it.”

Sam gritted his teeth, said a silent prayer for help, and took off running across the back yard in the direction of the barn, knowing Jess was right behind him. They came to the rear corner of the barn and stopped, flattening their backs against the weathered wood of the old building. He took a deep breath and then carefully peeked around the corner. Pulling back quickly, he closed his eyes and sent up another silent prayer.

Things were about as bad as they could get.

Sam's mind struggled with the situation and tried to visualize what Bill saw through his gun scope. Sarah was on her knees in front of Manaquez, and he had a gun aimed straight at her. They didn't have time to wait for reinforcements. If they didn't do something to stop him now, Manaquez would kill her. There was only one course of action left for them to take.

He motioned with his left hand for Jess to follow him and gun drawn, he swung out from the corner of the barn. Before he could get off a shot, though, Manaquez saw them and pulled Sarah up from her knees in a chokehold around her neck, holding her in front of him as a shield.

Keeping his gun aimed directly at Manaquez, Sam hollered. "Drop your weapon, Manaquez! It's over."

He saw Sarah look across the open space at him, her eyes huge behind her glasses. But after a quick glance to see she was still relatively unhurt, Sam forced himself to concentrate on Manaquez. He sent another silent prayer to the heavens for help. Sam had been in situations like this countless times, but he knew this one was different, and he couldn't let his feelings for Sarah jeopardize his judgment. His own emotions had to stay out of his actions, and he needed to stay focused. This kind of stand-off had way too many possible ending scenarios.

And most of them were not good.

CHAPTER 14

Sarah could feel the cold steel of the gun barrel Manaquez held against her temple. She had been momentarily relieved when she realized Sam and Jess had arrived to save her. Then she had understood that their hands were tied because Manaquez held a gun to her head.

“Don’t come any closer, or I kill her!” she heard Manaquez holler at Sam and Jess. “Drop your guns, or I shoot her now!”

She heard the click of the hammer being drawn back and knew Manaquez had his finger on the trigger. Sarah was spending all her energy just struggling to breathe. Manaquez had his left arm across her in a chokehold, cutting off her air supply. He had pulled her back against him, and she was close enough to him, she could smell him; he smelled disgustingly of sweat, cigarette smoke and garlic—and evil. She closed her eyes and then opened them again to look at Sam. All the time, praying.

Lord, if it is Your will, please don’t let me die. I really don’t want to die yet, Lord. I feel like my life with You is just beginning.

Other than that first glance, Sam hadn’t looked at her, but now his eyes locked with hers as both he and Jess leaned over and carefully laid their guns slowly on the ground. Sam raised his hands as if in surrender.

What was he doing?

Was he just going to give up and let this maniac kill her? These Federal Agents were supposed to protect her. And now they were just going to lay down their guns and surrender without a fight?

Sarah closed her eyes against rising panic as a shudder went through her. No one else was to blame for this mess. She had been extremely stupid to leave the house without Bill. Obviously, she had underestimated the amount of danger she was in. So, why should anybody else die because of her stupidity? She would rather die right here and right now rather than have Sam or Jess hurt.

Please, God, don’t let anything happen to Sam or Jess. I couldn’t stand it if Sam got hurt because of my stupidity!

She tried to calm her racing heart and organize her scattered thoughts. Sam was still here. God was still in charge. Sam was still here, and God was still in charge.

“*You have to trust me,*” Sam had told her a few days ago at the police station. Back then she hadn’t known anything about the man but had decided to trust him. Now she knew exactly the kind of man Sam Morgan was. Sam knew what he was doing. He’d probably been in this situation hundreds of times. He would know what to do. She had to trust him.

And Bill, where was Bill? Her stomach knotted. Had Manaquez already killed him?

She tried to focus on what was going on in front of her as she heard Sam start speaking again.

“Okay, we’ve put down our guns, Manaquez. Now let her go.”

Sam looked directly at her, and his eyes locked on hers. His were dark slits, and even from a distance, she could read the concern in them.

“Sarah, please try to stay as still as possible. Don’t fight him, do you hear me? You have to trust me and just don’t make any sudden moves, okay?”

Sarah heard Manaquez’s evil laugh close to her ear and felt him run the end of the barrel of the gun slowly down her cheek as if it were a caress. She shivered even in the heat of the sun as she felt the cold steel against her face. If she lived, she would never forget the feeling of evil that exuded from him.

“That’s right, *chica*. Don’t you fight me, okay? Everything will be just *bueno* as long as you don’t fight me. You just be real nice to me, and I’ll be real nice back.” He laughed again in her ear, and she could feel his hot breath on her neck as he spoke to her in a low, menacing voice. She had to use every ounce of her control to not be sick.

Sarah kept her eyes locked on Sam as Manaquez pushed the end of the gun firmly against her forehead again and started dragging her backward with him. She remembered then seeing an old pickup truck parked behind the barn when she had first walked back here. The logical part of her brain that was still working assumed that was how he had arrived at the farm – and probably how he planned to leave.

With her.

Manaquez hollered at Sam again. “She is *my bonita, senor*—and she is going with me.” He laughed that laugh again that sent chills down Sarah’s back. “I think I will have a little fun with her before I kill her, though, you know?”

Sarah shuddered at the implications she heard in his voice. She wasn’t afraid to die, but he *would* have to kill her before she let him do anything else to her. She would fight him with every ounce of her being.

“She dies. You die, Manaquez. Just let her go and put down your gun. You know I can’t let you leave with her. It’s over Manaquez. You can’t get away.” Sam hollered.

“Oh, but you *are* going to let me leave with her, *senor*. Otherwise, I put a bullet in her head right here and now.”

Sarah felt his arm around her throat tighten as he turned her toward the side of the truck.

“Open it,” he ordered her, his voice hard. “Then get in and scoot across the seat. You are going to drive, *senorita*.”

Sarah quickly glanced back one more time toward Jess and Sam, who stood rooted to the same spot. Sam’s face was a mask, his eyes dark and his jaw set. She bit her lip to keep from sobbing and looked back at the truck door. It was time for her to be brave and do what she could to make sure nobody else got hurt.

And she wasn’t alone.

Out of nowhere, the words to the simple tune she’d learned as a child, “Jesus Loves Me,” came to her.

Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong. They are weak, but He is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so.

As the words of the song played out in her head, the knowledge that God was still with her swept over her along with the realization that no matter what happened to her, she would be okay. If Manaquez killed her, she would go to heaven to be with her eternal Father. If she were shot and

injured, God would still take care of her. Somehow she knew that whatever happened, God was in control of the situation. Even in the midst of all the chaos and evil around her, a peace she had never known before enveloped her. She was not alone, and she would never be alone again. Knowing that gave her peace about doing whatever Manaquez ordered her to do. She didn't want to leave with him, but if she didn't do what he said, he was going to kill her anyway. What choice did she have?

Unable to see the knob, Sarah slowly brought her right hand up and awkwardly felt for the doorknob. It was an older model pickup truck, and the handle was one of the old-fashioned types with a push button. All the time, her shaky hand felt the hot metal of the handle and struggled to open the door, her mind was spinning as she tried to figure out what she should do.

What if the truck wasn't an automatic? What would Manaquez do to her when he found out she couldn't drive a stick shift? Once she got in, did she have time to get to the other side of the truck and get the driver's side door open and escape? Or would he shoot her—or would he shoot Sam or Jess? She couldn't let him hurt either of them. Her mind was spinning as she continued to struggle with the latch on the door. She couldn't seem to get the stupid door open, and she felt Manaquez's impatience with her growing. Her time was running out.

"I said, open it!" he growled. Sarah felt the panic building in Manaquez's voice too. Not only was he getting impatient with her, but she could tell he realized he was running out of time before Sam made a move to take him down. Her mind tried to figure out what to do. No matter what she attempted, she couldn't seem to get the stupid truck door to unlatch. Her hand was sweaty and shaky, and with him choking off her air, she was feeling more lightheaded by the second.

"I can't," she squeaked. She was afraid she was going to pass out if she couldn't get a good breath soon. Manaquez was still choking off her air by the tight hold he had on her throat.

Then unbelievably, just when she thought she wasn't going to be able to last any longer without passing out, he loosened his hold on her neck a little and turned away from her to reach for the door himself. He had evidently had enough of waiting and was going to open the door without her help.

Somewhere behind her, Sarah heard Sam yell, "Now!" half a second before a gunshot rang out, then there was a second gunshot much closer to her. She heard the sound of shattering glass while she fell to the ground.

Sam saw her falling and quickly grabbed his gun from where it laid on the ground in front of him. He rushed over first to kick the weapon away from Manaquez's body and make sure he was dead. When his fingers on the man's neck didn't find a pulse, he tugged the dead man's body off Sarah. She lay in a heap on the ground underneath Manaquez's body. He couldn't see if she'd been shot or not, nor could he tell if the blood all over her was hers or Manaquez's. As he pulled the body off of her, his love for her rushed at him. He couldn't lose her, not now.

Please, God, let her be okay. I don't think I could take it if anything happened to her.

Many times over the years, he'd been willing to take a bullet for a witness under his protection, but it had always been an automatic reaction to the responsibility of the job. In this case, he would have gladly taken a bullet to keep Sarah safe, and it had nothing to do with the job.

"Sarah!"

He pulled her into his arms, close to his chest, holding her as tight as he could before pulling away briefly to check her for any injuries. She looked up at him with a dazed look in her eyes. Taking her face in his hands, he ran his fingers gently down her face and gazed into those beautiful green eyes that he had been afraid he would never see again. He shuddered when he thought about how close it had been, and without even thinking about it, he leaned down and brought his lips to hers in a quick kiss. Then he pulled away and looked at her face again, running his hands down her shoulders and arms, looking for any visible injuries.

"Sarah, are you hurt? Are you in pain anywhere?"

His voice sounded husky to his own ears, and he hoped the others didn't notice how close he was to tears. He certainly wasn't acting like a macho Federal agent now, but that didn't matter. The only thing that mattered to him right now was that she was okay.

She slowly shook her head, but by that time, he had spotted a cut in her upper left forehead that was bleeding at an alarming rate. He realized she must have been hit with a piece of the flying glass of the shattered truck window. Sam didn't know if Bill's shot had broken the window, or if Manaquez's gunshot had broken it. Fortunately, the single shot Manaquez had managed to get off had gone wild.

Sam pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and held it tightly against her head, pulling her hand up to hold it. He finally took a slow breath and tried to stop his racing heart. That had been far too close. He couldn't believe how close.

Thank you, God. Thank you for keeping her safe.

"Hold this, Sarah," he ordered her, his voice sounding gruff to his ears. "You have a cut on your forehead, and it's bleeding a lot. Just hold it there to stop the bleeding."

He pulled her into his arms again and kissed the top of her head. She felt so good in his arms, and he was so thankful she was okay. He knew his response didn't have anything to do with his job but was that of a man in love who had come far too close to losing the woman he adored. For a moment there, he had thought he was going to lose her, and the knowledge had almost been more than he could bear. When he thought about how the scenario *could* have ended, it was almost too much.

About that time, Bill came running up, out of breath, with his rifle slung over his shoulder.

"I got him?"

Sam glanced up at Bill from where he and Sarah sat on the ground, his arms still around her and nodded.

"Good shot."

He heard a whoosh of air escape Bill's lungs in relief. Sam knew Bill was kicking himself for letting Sarah out of his sight in the first place, and killing Manaquez had helped make up for it in his own mind. Sam saw Bill look closely at Sarah's face.

"Oh, man! Did I hit her too?"

Sam shook his head. "Some glass from the shattered truck window must have hit her. She's okay."

Sam noticed Jess also checking Manaquez's body to make sure he was really dead, and then she walked over to stand in front of him and Sarah. Sam helped Sarah stand up, but she was pretty unsteady on her feet, and Sam was glad to see Jess take hold of her arm to help her. He hated to let her out of his arms, but he knew they still had a lot of work to do.

Before he let her go, though, he turned to his female agent.

"Jess, take her into the barn and treat that cut on her forehead. I don't think she needs stitches, but check her out, okay? Then bag all the clothes she's wearing and get her cleaned up. I'll be in there in a few."

As Sarah stood there in front of him and Sam had a chance to see her better, he realized that as much blood as was on her clothes, most of it had to be Manaquez's. He knew Jess would bag the clothes to take back to HQ. They would now become a part of their case evidence. It was too bad, but if his memory was correct, Sarah was currently wearing the same clothes she had on the day they had taken her to the police station from her house, the only belongings she still had from her old life.

And it looked like she was going to lose those too.

As the two women walked away, Sam forced his eyes away from Sarah's retreating back and turned toward the body. He automatically pulled a pair of latex gloves out of his pocket and snapped them over his hands. Sarah was okay, and it was time to focus on the job. Bill was gloved and already kneeling over the body and checking the dead man's pockets. He pulled out a cell phone and tossed it to Sam, who quickly flipped it open and checked its history. There were a couple of recent text messages, all in Spanish, and he was thankful that the Bureau had made him learn the language years ago. The information he read from the texts wasn't good news, however.

He finished reading the messages, and then went back through the texts again to make sure he understood them completely. Sam closed the phone and handed it back to Bill.

"Bag it."

He wearily sighed and stood looking off into the distance for a moment. What he had just read was going to change everything.

Bill stood up and slowly came over to stand next to him, clearing his throat. "Sam, I'm sorry. I really screwed up this time. When I think of how close we came to losing her..."

Sam glanced over at his team member. Bill was one of the best young agents he had ever had the honor to work with. He was a caring, competent agent and one whale of a sharpshooter. He was young and still had a lot to learn, but Sam knew there wasn't anything he could say that would make more of an impression on Bill than what he would have to say to himself.

"Yeah, you did, Bill. But you took care of it. That's all that's important." He patted the younger man on the shoulder, hoping to reassure him that it had turned out okay.

Bill nodded his understanding. Sam knew Bill wouldn't quickly forget his lesson learned, but as far as Sam was concerned, it was over. He wasn't going to dwell on it. They had all made their share of mistakes. And because they were human, it was unavoidable. He had sure made his share over the years.

Right now, though, there were far more important things to worry about.

Sam clenched his jaw and swallowed hard at the news he had to share. He cleared his throat to try and get rid of the knot that seemed to have settled there in the last two minutes.

“Bill, Manaquez’s phone has texts on it from Mexico. I’m assuming they’re from his boss or his boss’ henchman. According to the texts, they knew Sarah Masters was still alive, and Manaquez had been ordered to take her out. He’d been told not to come home until it was a done deal.”

He sighed. “They’re not going to stop now until they know she’s dead, Bill.” He shook his head. “I just wish I knew how Manaquez was able to find her. Did someone leak something at the Bureau, or what?”

Bill looked up at him from where he was working on the body, emptying pockets, and bagging everything he found.

“So, what do we do now, Sam?”

Sam ran his hand across his face while a plan formulated in his head and then squatted back down next to Bill.

“This is what we’re going to do. You and Jess will fly back to D.C. with two body bags. There are some bags of feed in the barn. Rig something up using them for a second body. Jess has Sarah’s bloody clothes already bagged. I’ll contact our Medical Examiner and give him a heads-up about what you’re bringing back with you. I’ll drive her back to D.C. and headquarters in our vehicle.”

He sighed as he vocalized the only answer to the dilemma they now had. “From this moment forward, Sarah Marston is dead – she has to be; otherwise, they’re going to come looking for her until she is.”

Bill nodded his understanding. They’d been in this situation before. He knew the drill.

Sam stood up again. “I’ll fill the local Sheriff in on what happened and let him know when he can come out here and pick up the stolen truck. I don’t want him here until we’re gone, but I do want him to know our story so he can leak it to the news. Hopefully, it will get back to the cartel in Mexico and end this thing once and for all.”

Leaving Bill to finish processing the scene, Sam headed toward the barn to see how the ladies were doing. He was very concerned about Sarah and the dazed look she had on her face after the shooting. He hoped she wasn’t going into shock, but he wouldn’t be surprised if she did. She had been through more in the last few days than one person should ever have to experience.

And the worst part was, it wasn’t over yet.

CHAPTER 15

Sam found Sarah in the barn sitting on the back of their SUV with her feet hanging out the open door. It looked like Jess had just finished putting a bandage on the cut on Sarah's forehead when he joined them. All traces of the blood were gone, and she was dressed in clean blue jeans and a tan-colored tee shirt. Her face still looked pale to him, but the dazed look seemed to have left her eyes.

"How's she doing?"

Jess smiled at him. "Better than expected, Sam. I think she's fine. She did real good out there, don't you think?"

"Will you two quit talking about me like I'm not here?"

Sam felt the corners of his mouth curl up in a small smile as he caught Jess' wink. She did sound fine, and she sure wasn't the quiet, timid woman he had interviewed that first day. This sounded more like the woman he had come to know and love over the past few days.

Then he remembered what he had to tell her.

"Jess," he raised his chin in the direction of the open barn door. "Bill needs your help to finish processing the scene."

Jess nodded at him, cleaned up the remaining medical supplies, and headed out the door, leaving them alone.

Sam took the position Jess had just left, standing in front of Sarah. He was close enough that her knees brushed against the pant legs of his jeans. He really wanted to pull her back into his arms, but instead, he gently reached out and tipped her chin up with his hand to look at her bandaged forehead. Then he allowed his eyes to sweep slowly over her face. With her little glasses, she was as cute as ever. He took a deep breath and released it. They had come way too close to losing her, and he didn't ever want her to go through anything like that again. Regardless of his personal feelings for her, he was going to do his job. He was going to protect her—at all costs.

"We need to talk."

Before he could say more, she started babbling.

"Sam, I think it's my fault he found us. As a matter of fact, I'm sure of it. I never even thought about it at the time I did it, but that must be how he traced us."

"Sarah, what are you talking about?"

He put his hands on her shoulders to try and steady her as she turned her stricken face up to his. Sam felt her take a deep breath before she answered him.

"I turned on my cell phone yesterday morning—just for a minute while I checked to see if there were any messages on it. I thought it wouldn't hurt anything unless I actually tried to make a call. They must have traced it...Sam, I am so sorry!"

He gazed down at her. That explained a lot. He had wondered how Manaquez had managed to find them, and now he knew. At least it wasn't due to a leak in the Bureau, so that was a relief.

Sam waited a moment before he responded. There was no sense at this point in letting her know how bad it could have turned out. Besides, he was pretty sure she already knew.

“Sarah, that was a foolish thing to do. But thank God, it turned out okay.” He fought the temptation to gather her into his arms again. Instead, he reached up with his fingers and lightly touched her bandaged forehead. His heart was still in his throat at how close Manaquez had come to complete the job he had been hired to do.

Sam's heart hurt with the knowledge he had failed Sarah. He was supposed to keep her from getting hurt, and he had failed her miserably. It had almost cost her life.

“Sarah, I’m so sorry. He never should have been able to get that close to you.” He dropped his hand and sighed. “I don’t know what I would have done if anything had happened to you.” He felt his face grow warm as he realized he had just voiced his last thoughts aloud.

She must not have been as shocked as he was at his words because she just smiled at him before getting a more serious look on her face.

“It’s not your fault, Sam. I was stupid to leave the house by myself. I know that, so please don’t scold me.”

Then she grinned at him. It was going to be impossible to scold her when she looked at him like that.

“Bad guy dead. Right, Sam? All is right with the world again. I am so glad it’s over!”

He swallowed hard and clenched his jaw. Now came the time when he found out how much grit and gumption she really had.

“Not exactly.”

He watched the light slowly go out of her eyes. “What do you mean, ‘not exactly?’”

Sam hesitated, wishing he didn’t have to tell her the rest. But there wasn’t any choice in the matter. She had to know it all, and she had to be told what it meant for her—for her future.

“Manaquez’s cell phone shows he sent several texts to his boss over the last few days, telling him that you were still alive. He had orders to take care of you.” He paused a moment and let that sink in.

“Sarah, once they know Manaquez is dead, once they find out you’re still alive, they’ll just send someone else up here to finish the job.”

She gazed at him for a moment with a bereft look on her face before she dropped her head. The top of her head rested against his chest, and he heard the sorrow in her voice as she spoke.

“So, it’s not over,” she whispered. She sighed, and he felt the weight of it. “What do we do now, Sam?”

He gently took hold of her right hand. “You have to die, Sarah.”

He realized he could have worded it differently as her head came up sharply and he saw the fear sweep across her face.

Dear Lord, how could she even think that I’m capable of hurting her?

“What I mean is,” he added quickly. “Sarah Masters has to have also been killed in this shootout. If she’s dead, they will have no reason to continue to hunt her.” He saw the fear leave her face, and he could almost hear the wheels turning in her head. She finally understood him.

“How? There’s only one body.”

She was smart, he had to hand her that.

“We’ve got it covered. I’m going to have Jess and Bill stay here and get the bodies ready to transport to the Parkston local airport and fly them back to Headquarters. You and I are going to drive back to D.C. today. It will be a long drive, and you’re going to have to stay out of sight. I’ll take you to headquarters, and they’ll take care of you from there. They’ll help you start over with a new name and a new life.”

He saw her nod, although he wasn’t sure if she could really understand how much her life was about to change. Sarah Masters no longer existed. Not only did she no longer have a job, friends, or a home and belongings; now, she also didn’t have a name.

Sarah had been silent ever since they’d left the farm. She sat alone in the rear seat of the agents’ large SUV so she could get down if necessary to stay out of sight. Perhaps she hadn’t said much of anything, but she had been thinking—a lot.

Sam had been driving for about an hour, and from what he had told her, they still had a long drive ahead of them. Sitting in the back seat, she had a lot of time to think—too much time—and her mind was spinning.

Things had taken a turn she hadn’t envisioned, and now she wasn’t sure what to expect. She had thought that once Manaquez was eliminated or caught and put in jail for the rest of his life, that her life would no longer be threatened, and she would be able to go back home.

Obviously, she had thought wrong.

So now she had to wrap her mind around what was really going to happen. She could never go back to Herbert and her old life. She didn’t dare go back because she wasn’t going to be able to be Sarah Masters anymore. Instead, she was going to have to go somewhere else and start all over again with a new name. In a way, it was like being born again.

As she had told Sam earlier, “I’m alive. Even though a part of me is gone, I’m still alive. So I will be reborn as a new person with a new name. I’m ready.”

She couldn’t help but think about the parallel her new life would be to the Christian life. You left your old self behind when you became a new person in Christ and tried to live a better life because of it. She was going to have to do the same with her real life. How many people got the chance to start their lives over with a clean slate?

She leaned forward a little in the seat, taking care to keep her profile as low as possible as Sam had asked of her. Fortunately, they were traveling little-used roads, so there weren’t many people to notice her sitting in the back seat. But she would never assume safety again. She had done that once, and it had nearly cost her life. Now she wanted to be prepared for whatever the future held for her. She’d had a lot of time to think about what had happened the last five days, and she was convinced Sam hadn’t told her everything about Matt and his involvement with the Mexican cartel and Brown and Associates. At one time, she had thought he might be a little more forthcoming with information, but she guessed she was going to have come right out and ask him.

“Sam, why were you so sure the cartel was going to come after Adam Brown and the law practice? I’ve never understood how the FBI knew the threat against Adam was tied to what happened to Matt.”

She saw his head come up as he glanced at her in the rearview mirror then he turned his attention back to the open road.

“I was hoping I wouldn’t have to tell you, Sarah,” he finally said in a quiet voice. She heard his weary sigh. “It doesn’t really matter anymore, and I didn’t want to scare you at the time.”

“Tell me what, Sam?” Sarah knew she was pushing him, but she felt she had to know it all. She couldn’t explain why to him, but she just felt she had to know the truth—the whole truth. Maybe it would help her understand what had happened to her and why.

He finally nodded his assent. “A few weeks ago, Adam Brown received a written death threat along with a package. The contents of that package were what convinced us the threat was real.”

Sarah leaned up with her chin resting on the back of his seat. “What was in the package, Sam?” She saw the muscles working in his jaw. It must be bad because he really didn’t want to tell her. “A hand, Sarah. In the package was a severed hand.”

She gasped at the picture he painted with those words but then wrinkled her brow.

“I still don’t understand the connection.”

Sarah saw Sam take a deep breath. She wished she could see his face, but all she could see was the side of his face because he had to keep his eyes on the road.

“Like I told you before, Matt Calvin died in an automobile accident, but we were sure it wasn’t an accident. There was a reason for that. His right hand had been cut off. The DNA matched the hand Adam Brown received. It was Calvin’s hand.”

Sarah gasped again and sat back in the car seat as the shock of what he had told her swept over her.

“No wonder you were so sure. Why didn’t you tell me this before, Sam?”

Sam shook his head. “I didn’t want to scare you more than you already were. And I didn’t think it mattered at the time.”

Neither one said anything for a time as the countryside sped past the vehicle.

Sam had been smart not to tell her. She would have been terrified – more so than she already had been. And it hadn’t changed anything that had happened anyway. Matt made some terrible choices, which resulted in pain and death to a great many people she cared about. And personally, she was going to have to live with the consequences of those choices for the rest of her life. But at least she still had a life to live—even if it wasn’t her own life.

She could forgive Matt because he was going to pay for his mistakes with an eternity of separation from God. That was more punishment than the cartel or Sarah Masters, or the FBI could ever give him.

“Sam, what will happen to me once we get to Washington?”

She saw him glance up at her in the rear-view mirror again.

“Well, I can’t tell you exactly what will happen. I’ve never had any contact with anyone after they’ve been placed in the witness protection program. But what I can tell you is that the Bureau’s Witness Protection Program people are good at what they do. They will give you a new identity

with a new history—both professionally and personally. If you need the training to do a new job, they will provide that for you too.”

He paused, and they both watched as a small passenger car driven by an elderly woman passed them. Sarah sensed his relief once the vehicle has passed, and the quick sense of fear she felt vanished. Would she ever feel safe again?

Sam continued. “The people in the program will train you so you can start over in a new place in a new job. So many people in the program have trouble adjusting because of family and friends they’ve had to leave behind. As a part of the program, they are never supposed to contact anyone from their old life, and sometimes people struggle with that. In this case, it is fortunate for you that you have no family.” He hesitated a moment before he continued. “I know that sounds harsh, and that’s not the way I meant it. All I know is that they will see to it you are taken care of.”

Sarah thought for a moment about his statement regarding her having no family being an asset. Sam was right. It might have sounded harsh to someone else, but she had understood what he was trying to say. She didn’t have anyone she wanted to keep in contact with from her old life – unless you counted Sam Morgan. It was going to be very difficult, leaving him and never seeing him again. Knowing that left a huge hole in her heart, she didn’t think would ever heal. She would miss him so much.

She wondered as she had several times the last few days if her feelings were because Sam had become her protector—her guardian—her hero. She had heard about situations like that where the emotions involved were because the victim was thrown into a precarious position, and they developed an unrealistic attachment toward the person that offered them safety. She didn’t think that was the issue here, though. Her feelings were far too real. There was no doubt in her heart; she would never forget Sam Morgan.

CHAPTER 16

Sam looked in the rearview mirror at the headlights of several vehicles far behind them. They were only about half an hour from Washington, D.C. and the poured concrete structure on Pennsylvania Avenue known as the J. Edgar Hoover Building—FBI Headquarters

Almost there.

He should be feeling relief that he was close to being able to discharge his responsibility for her safety. He should be feeling ready to move on to the next case with the satisfaction that this job had been completed and had ended well. That was the way he had felt in the past when a mission was accomplished, but he wasn't feeling any of those things this time.

Sarah was lying down in the back seat, as she had most of the trip. From the silence the last three hours, he had to assume she had finally succumbed to her need for sleep. He could tell by the dark circles under her eyes that she was exhausted. It hadn't been an easy day for any of them.

They had left Jess and Bill at the farm to finish processing the scene. Sam had made the necessary arrangements for them to bring the body bags back via a small plane from the local airport. He had also contacted Sheriff Wilson and told him they'd had a shootout with a man who was assumed to be a member of a drug cartel—the same man who had stolen the truck from his townspeople. He informed him that in the shootout, not only was the perpetrator shot and killed, but also the victim, Sarah Masters. Sam had asked the Sheriff to release the information to the news media after they were gone from the farm. He was hoping that once word got back to the right people that Sarah was no longer a threat to the drug cartel, they would forget she had ever existed. That was the only way she would ever be safe, even with a new identity.

Because it had already gotten dark, he hadn't been able to see her face when the news report had aired on the radio earlier, just before they had crossed the Ohio border.

“Sheriff Wilson of the Parkston County Police Department has reported that earlier today, two were killed in a shoot-out with Federal authorities at an undisclosed location in Parkston County. Killed was a well-known member of a Mexican drug cartel, Paolu Manuel Manaquez, wanted for a recent bombing that killed nine employees of Brown and Associates in Herbert, Ohio. He was also wanted in connection with other criminal activities, including racketeering, drug trafficking, and money laundering.

Also killed in the shoot-out was Sarah Masters, a former employee of Brown and Associates, and the only witness to Manaquez's attack. Federal authorities are continuing their investigation, but for now, are considering this case closed.”

The Sheriff had done an excellent job handling the news media and had worded his release to the press almost word for word what Sam had told him on the phone. Hopefully, the news would quickly leak south of the border, and this nightmare would be over.

They had only made two quick stops in their eight-hour trip back to Washington, D.C. Sam had run into a fast food place and purchased a couple of burgers and a container of bottled water

for them to eat on the road. He had also stopped at a gas station once and filled up the SUV, while she had made a quick trip to use the restroom.

They hadn't talked much. Sam had so much he wanted to tell her, but he knew he didn't dare tell her all that was in his heart. It wouldn't be fair to her, and at this point, it wasn't going to serve any purpose. They didn't have a future together, and they both knew it.

Sam had hated telling her the truth about Matt Calvin's death and the death threat to Adam Brown. But he felt after all she had been through, he needed to be honest with her and tell it all.

Later he had tried to focus on telling her what would happen to her when they got to Washington. He had assured her over and over that the Bureau would take care of her in preparing her for a new life with a new name and a new history. They would help her get a fresh start, and she would be just fine. That was his prayer—but it didn't make it any easier for him to have to leave her and walk out of her life forever.

He had been involved with turning people over to the Bureau's witness protection program for years, but he'd never been this close to any of them before. Leaving her, and knowing he was never going to see her again, was going to be difficult—one of the toughest things he had ever done. In just a few short days, she had become very important to him, and in just a few minutes, he was going to turn her over to someone else to keep safe, and he would never see her again.

Once they reached FBI Headquarters, Sam keyed the unique number code into his cell phone and waited while the overhead door opened into the huge basement garage. He pulled the vehicle into an open parking spot and turned off the ignition, then turned around and looked at the sleeping form in the back seat. She looked so peaceful lying there he hated to wake her. But it was time to move on, for both of them.

Sam said a quick prayer for her future and her safety, then got out of the car and opened the backseat door, reaching out to gently touch her shoulder.

"Sarah, we're here. You need to wake up now."

Sleepy green eyes opened as she pulled up into a seated position, taking off her glasses long enough to rub her eyes. Then she slowly got out of the car. Sam couldn't help noticing the weariness in her eyes. Even though he knew she had slept some, she looked totally exhausted and as tired as he felt.

"Sorry. Guess I must have slept."

He smiled at her, feeling the love he had for her sweep over him again.

"That's okay. You needed it."

He turned as he heard footsteps coming from behind them. A red-haired female agent was walking in their direction, wearing dark slacks, a white blouse, and a dark blue jacket. Sam knew the back of the jacket had the words "FBI" emblazoned across it. It was official apparel for many of the agents.

"Agent Morgan? I'm Rebecca Thompson, with the Witness Protection Program."

Sam turned and shook the offered hand, then turned back to Sarah.

"Rebecca will take good care of you." He reached out and gently touched her cheek with the knuckles of his right hand.

"Will you be okay?"

Her chin came up, and a look of determination swept over her face. She nodded and looked at him with those big eyes behind her glasses. He wished he could hold her in his arms again and somehow make all this go away. It would have been great if this had never happened to her, but then if it hadn't occurred, he never would have met her. And he wouldn't give up the opportunity to have been able to know her for anything.

If only they had met under different circumstances, but at this point, he knew he was going to have to turn her future over to God. She would be in His hands, and Sam couldn't think of a better place for her to be.

He took her right hand in his. "I'll keep praying for you. You hang in there, okay? God has a plan for your life, I guarantee it."

Sarah looked up at the man who had been there for her day in and day out for the past five days. It was going to be so difficult to say goodbye to him—not just because he had saved her life, but because somewhere along the way, she had fallen in love with him. She was physically attracted to him, yes. But there was so much more between them than just that. She felt connected to his very soul. For years she had hoped to find the one man for her. Now she had found him and was going to have to walk away from any future they might have had together. It wasn't fair.

After he had asked if she'd be okay, she had squared her shoulders and readied herself to leave him.

It was time.

Before she chickened out though she moved forward and wrapped her arms around him in a hug and then turned her face up and gave him a light kiss on his lips. Wiping tears from her eyes, she backed away and looked up at him once more.

"Thank you, Sam. For everything. Don't forget me, okay?" Her voice cracked with emotion.

He grinned at her, and she was surprised that even though there was a smile on his face, she could see he was struggling to hold back his own tears.

"No chance of that," he said, his voice sounding husky.

He surprised her by reaching out for her hand one last time.

"Are you going to be okay?"

She lifted her chin and smiled at him, then nodded.

"Yes. I think I will, Sam. I'm not alone anymore, you know."

Then she felt Agent Thompson's firm hand on her elbow, steering her toward the waiting elevator. Sarah turned back just once to look over her shoulder and saw Sam still standing there, watching her as she walked away.

Sarah swallowed hard and tried to keep from crying. Fairy tales didn't end this way, but then her life had always been less than a fairy tale.

I wasn't supposed to fall in love with him, God. But now that I have, how can I walk away and just leave him? Help me, God. I feel like my heart is breaking.

Goodbye, Sam, her heart cried. Please don't forget me. I'll never forget you."

After leaving her at Headquarters, Sam headed home to his apartment.

Home.

In the past, it had always called out to him as a haven of at least some measure of peace and sanity in the crazy world in which he lived and worked.

Sam pulled his car into his parking spot in the apartment complex. He sat there for a few moments with his hands resting on the steering wheel before he finally got out of the car, then walked the short distance to the front door of his building, unlocked it, entered, and headed down the hall to his door, which he unlocked and swung open. He automatically leaned down to pick up the stack of mail from the floor that he knew would have arrived in his absence.

He unholstered his gun and walked through the living room to the den, where he pushed a series of buttons to unlock his gun safe and place his weapon in it. This was his usual nightly ritual, and he never even thought about the motions he was going through.

Until tonight.

For some reason, every move he'd made since leaving her at HQ was as if he was doing it for the first time.

Sam turned and went back into the living room, sat down in his big leather easy chair, and kicked off his shoes. He had tonight and tomorrow before having to head back to the office on Monday morning. Time to unwind from the job and get oriented again to being home.

Loneliness punched him in the gut.

He glanced around the living room of his apartment, taking in the comfortable leather sofa and chairs, mission style end tables, and solid wall bookcases filled with his favorite novels. Sam was a man who usually enjoyed his quiet solitude at home. After busy, often stressful, and danger-filled days on his job, his apartment was where he could reclaim his sanity. Here he could kick back, listen to his classical music and read his mystery novels, and forget. For a time, those things would take his mind off the things he saw and heard in his job that weren't so nice. Things that weren't very easy to forget and could easily keep you awake at night.

Closing his eyes, he leaned back in his chair, soaking up the silence and peace. He wasn't really looking forward to going back to the office Monday morning. His team still needed to complete the written paperwork on the Masters' case so the case file could be closed, but he sure wasn't looking forward to it. And then there was always the next mission. They never seemed to run out of bad guys to go after.

His eyes snapped open again. What was wrong with him, anyway?

Nothing had changed, yet tonight his apartment felt empty, just like his life—and he knew why. In just a few short days, he had become accustomed to being able to look across the room and see her. Just knowing she was there and was safe had been a comfort to him.

Over the years, he had always prided himself on his ability to never become personally involved in a case. Oh, they all touched his life in some way, but they'd never changed who he was or why he did the job. But this one had been different.

Sam allowed his mind to slowly replay the events of the last five days over and over in his mind, wondering what steps he could have taken so things would have turned out differently. He always had trouble releasing a case from his mind, especially one that didn't turn out the way it was supposed to. Even though he remembered all of them, this one would haunt him for different reasons.

He had never shared anything about his job with his ex-wife, Charlotte, but she had always complained to him that he obsessed about his career and the cases. Deep inside, he knew that obsession was what made him such a good agent. His mind wanted to understand why sometimes things worked, and sometimes they didn't. It was important to him to figure things out completely so that hopefully, in the future, he could keep bad things from happening again. Maybe he was a little obsessed, but that was what made him so good at his job.

Which was probably why he had never married again.

With that thought, Sam's mind immediately returned to Sarah. His heart ached for her and what she had been through, and she was going to have to make so many more changes. He just hoped she would be able to handle it. Not everyone who went into the witness relocation program could do it. Not everyone was strong enough to give up their old life completely.

Then something she had said on the ride back to D.C. came back to him.

"I'm still me inside, Sam, no matter what. My past is a defining part of who I am, and I can't just forget it, but that doesn't mean I can't learn to be a new person. Isn't that what we all do when we become Christians? Manaquez may have taken my old life away from me, but he didn't touch my new life with God, and he never could. I'm still God's child, and He will take care of me."

Sam closed his eyes again.

Please keep her safe, Lord. Help her adapt to her new life and let her be happy. Help her to have a good future. And I'm going to have to have some big-time help here myself if I'm going to be able to forget her, Lord. It's not going to be easy, so help me too, Lord.

He knew he'd never see her again. She was gone from his life, and he was going to have to let her go, but that didn't mean he was going to quit praying for her—and he was pretty sure he would never forget her.

CHAPTER 17

The following Monday morning, Sam exited the elevator on his office floor and greeted several co-workers as he walked down the brightly lit carpeted hallway. He felt energized and glad to be back in his routine. After his morning run and a hearty breakfast, he was wide awake and ready to go. The previous morning, he had attended church, then spent the afternoon relaxing at his apartment as he enjoyed a much earned day of rest.

Now it felt good to be back to work. He was still haunted by the previous mission but had decided to place the feelings and everything about it in a compartment deep in his heart. He couldn't afford to dwell on it if he was going to stay alive in this job. He had to move on. There was no other choice.

Sam tugged a little at the tie around his neck to loosen it a bit as he walked toward the squad room. He detested ties, and having to dress in a suit coat and tie was one reason he disliked having to spend time in the office, but it went with the territory.

The squad room was a large open room with several partitioned areas that housed his team and several other field teams. His team was located near the back of the room; three desks, computers, a television, and a few filing cabinets in their own small area with portable walls surrounding them. It was where Bill, Jess, and he worked on current cases, hashing out evidence until they caught the bad guys and brought them to justice.

It was what they did.

He walked directly to his desk, sat down, and opened the top right desk drawer. Taking his gun from its holster, he placed it in the drawer.

"Hey, Sam. Mornin'," Bill called from his desk. He and Jess, who Sam thought looked tired, walked over to stand in front of Sam's desk.

"How was the flight back?" Sam asked as he looked up at his team members.

Jess frowned and glanced over at Bill. "Some of us got to sleep. Some of us didn't."

Bill grinned. "I can sleep anywhere, anytime, sweetheart. Comes from being a former Marine. You learn to sleep when you get the chance." He wiped the smile off his face as Sam looked up at him. "Uh, bodies were delivered to the M.E., Sam. He buzzed me a little bit ago to say he's done with the autopsies. The reports are written up if you wanted to go down and see him. I know he's anxious to release the bodies."

Sam nodded. "Okay. I'll head down there now. Anything else I need to know about?" He stood to leave.

They both shook their heads, and he headed toward the elevator that would take him to the basement autopsy room. He wasn't a fan of Autopsy, but the Medical Examiner, Dr. Murray, a man in his mid-fifties, was a personal friend. He'd been the M.E. for years and was every bit a professional that took his job seriously. No evidence ever got past him and the Bureau's lab's

forensic scientists. Sam didn't even want to think about how the Bureau managed to solve crimes before forensics came into being.

"Good morning, Doc," he said as he entered through the sliding doors.

The tall, thin, gray-haired man dressed in green scrubs turned from where he was standing at his desk to greet him.

"Good morning yourself, Agent Morgan. You've kept me quite busy the last few hours, I must say."

Sam smiled a half-hearted smile at him. "Sorry. Call it job protection."

Dr. Murray smiled back. "Well, as we expected, my autopsy shows *Senor* Manaquez died of a .338 Lapua gunshot wound to the head. A long-distance shot, it seems."

Sam nodded in agreement. "Bill is one of the best snipers I've ever had the pleasure to work with."

"Yes. Well, no surprises there then. The bullet I extracted from him matches Bill's rifle. I've completed my report and notified the proper federal authorities. The body is to be shipped to the Mexican authorities tomorrow."

Sam nodded, glancing over at the other closed body bag lying on a nearby gurney. "And Ms. Masters?"

"I just finished writing up the report on her autopsy a few minutes ago. The 'remains' will be shipped back to her hometown to be buried next to her parents, as you requested. I've already made arrangements for a closed and locked casket to be shipped tomorrow to..." He glanced down at the chart in his hands. "...I believe the place is called Herbert. Is that correct?"

Sam nodded. "Thanks, Doc. Anything else I need to know about?"

The older man shook his head. "We verified that the bullet that was dug out of the cab of the pickup truck matched the one that Manaquez was carrying, so ballistics matches. And the record shows that was the bullet that took Ms. Master's life."

Sam nodded again, his mind drifting back to that sunny, sweltering day, and the gunshot that changed everything for him.

Sam felt the older man's eyes on him, probing for more answers than Sam was willing to give.

"You okay, Sam?"

He nodded. "Just thinking that one of these days I'm going to retire, Doc, and get away from all this. Maybe I'll go out to my dad's and uncle's cattle ranch in Montana. They've been bugging me for years to go join them in the family business. Never could see myself as a rancher, though." He grinned. "Just dreaming, I guess...."

Sam knew he wasn't old enough to actually retire from the Bureau as he wasn't anywhere near fifty-five years old. Neither did he have his twenty-five years in yet, but some days he really didn't care, and that might be a sign it was getting close to the time for him to move on. He knew that if he did arrive at a point where he lost his focus—his edge—he would need to leave the field, or someday he would be 'retired' by one of the bad guys.

Dr. Murray smiled back at him. "Ah, yes, retirement. I may try that one of these days too."

He reached out and shook the older man's hand before he turned to leave.

"Thanks, Doc."

Sam was in the elevator heading back up to the squad room when his cell phone chirped.

“Morgan here.”

It was Bill. “The big man wants to see you in his office when you’re done in Autopsy.”

“Got it. I’m headed back up right now.”

The ‘big man,’ as Bill had referred to him, was Director Mark Roberts, a veteran of the Army and a long time employee of the Bureau. Sam couldn’t help but wonder for what purposes he was being summoned to his office. He’d just arrived back in Washington. Was there something he’d missed in the Masters’ case, or was he being called in for something else? Even though he and Director Roberts were on friendly terms, he never thought it a good thing to be called to the Director’s office. Kind of reminded him of being called to the principal’s office when he was in grade school, and he hadn’t liked that either.

With that thought in his head, he had a grin on his face as the Director’s secretary waved him through. He lightly tapped on Mr. Roberts’ door before opening it when he heard “come in” from the other side.

“Sam,” the older man stood and greeted him with a firm handshake. “Glad to have you back. Heard your last experience ended well.”

Sam automatically nodded. As well as could be expected, he guessed. It could have ended a lot worse.

The Director pointed him toward a chair. “Have a seat for a moment, Sam. I just wanted to congratulate you on a job well done. Obviously, we wish we could have taken Manaquez alive, but even then, there was no guarantee we would have been able to get much information from him. As it is, the mission ended well, and we’re pleased.”

Sam took the offered seat, glanced around the paneled office decorated with photos of the Director and the President of the United States and the Secretary of Defense, and felt his suspicions growing. He was sure he hadn’t been called up here for a pat on the back. He hadn’t been in this office much in the past few months, but obviously, there was a reason he had been summoned here now.

“What’s up, sir?”

“Always to the point, aren’t you, Agent Morgan? Never one to mince words. I’ve always liked that about you.” The older man chuckled. “Well, as a matter of fact, I have another assignment for you, Sam. A money-laundering scheme that needs to be addressed.”

Sam sat straighter, getting interested. Another case was just what he needed to get his mind off a certain someone. And the best part was, it would get him out from behind his desk again.

“When do we get started?”

Director Roberts shook his head. “Not ‘we.’ Just you, this time. I’m sending you to Arizona to work with a task force already in place out there.” He sighed and tapped his pencil on the paperwork in front of him. “I need your other team members here to finalize the Masters’ case paperwork and finish up a couple of other outstanding cases. I’m sure you understand.”

Sam nodded. “Yes, sir.” He hated to leave his team behind, but then he wasn’t in charge. If the boss said he was going alone, that’s what he was doing.

“When do I leave?”

The older gentleman handed him a folder. “Your flight leaves at seven o’clock tonight. This will catch you up on what we’ve got so far, so when you get out there, you can hit the pavement running. They have a good team out there, Sam. I’m sure you’ll enjoy working with them.”

Sam stood up and readied to leave.

“Oh, one other thing, Sam.”

Sam turned back from the door, his hand still resting on the handle.

“I had the pleasure of meeting a certain young woman this morning. She had nothing but good things to say about you and your team, and I have to say, I was quite impressed with her as well. She is a sharp one, and I think she’ll do well in the Program.”

Sam smiled as he realized who the Director was talking about. He couldn’t help feeling a little pride in his words. The Director had no idea how impressive she really was.

“Yes, sir. That she is.”

“She specifically wanted to tell me how impressed she was with you.” Sam didn’t miss the glint in his friend’s eyes as the Director paused as if for effect. “As an agent, of course.” He smiled and surprised Sam even more by giving him a quick wink.

“When I asked her how she thought she was going to handle the changes in her life, she quoted some scripture to me from The Bible; something about becoming “a new creature, old things passing away,” and then something else like “Behold, I will do a new thing.” Not really sure what all she was talking about, but she seems to have embraced the idea of starting over.”

Sam felt his face grinning. He could see her in his mind’s eye, talking to the Director in this very office. And he knew the verses she had quoted by heart.

Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

And: Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it?

“Second Corinthians 5, verse 17, and Isaiah 43, verse 19. Great references for starting a new life, sir; both of them.”

“Yes, well, I thought you’d appreciate hearing that about her. I think by the sounds of things, she’ll do just fine.” He stood and saw Sam to the door where they shook hands again.

As Sam headed back downstairs and went to work finishing his report on the Masters’ case, he couldn’t help thinking about what the Director had said about her. Sam was so happy to hear she was accepting the changes her new life was going to bring about. Knowing she would be safe made all the sacrifices worth it.

Waiting for the elevator to reach his floor, his thoughts also turned to his own future plans. In the past, he’d never even considered leaving the Bureau— at least not since he lost his agent, Hank. Ever since then, he had dedicated himself to doing the best job he could to protect his fellow Americans and had never even been tempted to leave the job.

But now, the job didn't seem to have the same appeal for him anymore. Maybe it really was time for him to hang up his shield and do something else. He wasn't getting any younger, and helping his dad and uncle on that ranch in Montana was looking better every day.

CHAPTER 18

SIX WEEKS LATER

Sam went through the open elevator doors, down the familiar carpeted hallway, and headed through the bustling squad room toward his team area. The place was busy this morning with ringing phones and people talking. They never seemed to run out of cases. They never seemed to run out of bad guys out there, creating more work for them. And something told him, they never would.

He was surprised to discover he was actually glad to be back in Washington. It had taken way too long to clean up the mess in Arizona. True, the Bureau had a good bunch of agents out there. That wasn't the problem. But what he thought was going to be only a two to three-week assignment had taken a month and a half to complete. He didn't mind working with the Arizona task force, but he didn't care for the Arizona heat—especially in the summer.

Although he supposed it had its good side too. Because it had been a hectic six weeks, he hadn't had time to think a lot about Sarah. Other than the evenings. Without anything else to keep his mind occupied, evenings often found his thoughts turning to her. He couldn't help but wonder where she was and if she ever thought about him. No matter how much he tried not to, he thought about her—way too much. He had really hoped that after all this time, his memories and thoughts of her would have lessened. So far, they hadn't. It looked like he would be haunted by his love for her for the rest of his life.

As he neared his team's area, both Jess and Bill called to him from their desks.

"Sam, you're finally back!"

Jess came hurrying over and gave him a hug, and Bill pumped his hand up and down in a firm shake.

"So glad to have you back, boss! Believe it or not, we've actually missed you!"

Sam chuckled. That admission wasn't something he was used to hearing from his team. Oh, he knew they respected him and cared about him, but he also expected a great deal from them and worked them hard.

"What. You didn't like working for the big guy?"

Jess groaned. "I have never done so much paperwork in my life. I'd much rather be working out in the field."

Sam chuckled at her remark. He could so relate.

"So, how did everything else go while I was gone—other than the paperwork?"

He watched Bill stroll back to his desk. "Well, let's see. We finished closing the Masters' case, and then cleaned up two other cases for the Director – a missing person case and a cybercrime case.

Like Jess said, lots and lots of paperwork! I thought the Bureau was going to try and use less paper, but it sure doesn't seem that way most days."

Before Sam could sit down at his desk, Jess spoke up. "Oh, don't sit down, Sam. I almost forgot to tell you. The boss called down a little bit ago saying he wanted to see you upstairs as soon as you got in."

Sam straightened back up from his almost seated position, rolled his eyes a little, and stifled a groan. He had just arrived back in the office after being gone for six weeks, and he was already being summoned upstairs. He was getting too old for this and hated playing politics, and the Director knew that. Sam just wanted to do the job and be left alone.

But he kept those thoughts inside as he reluctantly headed up the elevator where the secretary once again waved him through. Director Roberts met him at the door, hand already outstretched for a shake.

"Great job of tying up the loose ends in Arizona, Sam. I really appreciate you going out there on such short notice to help them out. I know it took a great deal longer than we planned on, and I'm glad you were willing to hang in there until the job was done."

"Thanks, sir. Yes, it would have been nice if we could have figured out that the attorney feeding us all the bad information was really the person behind the whole operation. Even with one of our operatives in the organization working undercover, it took us a while to figure it out. But we finally got him, along with the rest of the crew."

Sam sat down in the offered chair while the older man took a seat behind the desk.

"So, what's happening here, Director? Any problems I should know about?"

Director Roberts smiled and leaned back in his chair, lightly tapping the desktop with the pencil in his hand. "Not really. Your team closed two cases we've had open for a while. It was good to get those out of the way. I've worked them pretty hard. They're probably glad to have you back. I'm sure they're weary of being hounded by me.

Sam chuckled. "That's okay, Director. You're just doing your job."

The other man chuckled along with him, then nodded. "By the way, Sam, I'm sure you're already aware of this, but you've got a couple of great people working under you. Either one of them could be team leaders in their own right."

Sam nodded. "Trust me, sir. I know." He paused for a moment, hoping the Director wasn't hinting he was going to take either of them away from him. "I just hope I'm not going to be losing them anytime soon," he hinted.

The older man shook his head. "No. They still have much to learn, and I can't think of a better man for them to learn it from than you. Someday they'll be ready, but not yet."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate your confidence in our work."

"Well then, you ready to get back on the job here?"

The corner of Sam's mouth twitched. "Ready as I'll ever be."

"Good. Glad to have you back. I just wanted you to know I really appreciated you dropping everything and going out to Arizona for us." He paused before continuing. "I felt it might be good for you to get out of D.C. for a while. Did it help?"

Sam raised his eyebrows a little at the older man's question. Could the Director know how much he had struggled with the Master's case?

"Yes, sir, I think it did."

Sam stood, ready to get out of the man's office and away from his probing eyes. He reached out to shake the other man's hand again. It seemed like the Director held on to his hand a little longer than usual, and Sam would have sworn there was an uncharacteristic twinkle in the other man's eye. What was Roberts up to this time?

As Sam left the office and headed back downstairs to his desk, his mind replayed the conversation he and the director had just had. He wasn't sure what that had all been about or why he had been summoned but quickly pushed the conversation into the back of his mind. It was time to get back to work.

One thing the Director had said still troubled him, though. He had caught the Director's mention that both Jess and Bill were capable of leading their own teams. He hoped he wasn't going to lose them. The three of them were a good team that worked well together. And he sure didn't want to have to go through the experience of training rookies again right now.

He had no more than sat back down at his desk and was trying to concentrate on the paperwork covering it when he heard Bill clear his throat.

"Uh, Sam?"

Sam glanced up in the direction of Bill's desk and was entirely thrown off balance by the most beautiful pair of blue eyes he'd ever seen. They were looking out of the face of the young woman standing in front of him. It felt like his heart stopped for a second, then he blinked twice and slowly stood up.

She stuck her right hand out toward him.

"Hi. I'm Julie Henderson. I've only been working here for about a week, so I thought I would stop by and introduce myself." She smiled a familiar smile that lit up her whole face, and Sam was sure his heart must have skipped a beat.

"I'm trying to meet everyone, although, by the size of this place, it will take me a while." She chuckled, and Sam felt his face relax into a smile.

He took a few seconds to study her carefully. She was quite a bit thinner, and the wire-rimmed glasses were gone, and he had to assume she was wearing contacts that changed the color of her eyes to their current blue. Her hair was cut in some short, sassy looking, layered style, and was dyed a sandy light brown. Wearing a black skirt, dressy white blouse, and snappy black heels, she was striking.

He automatically reached out and took the offered hand and shook it, feeling the electricity go up his arm the instant their hands touched.

Wow.

Sam tried to steady his beating heart as he looked closely at her face. Gone was the impression of a little girl unable to take care of herself. She appeared to be very confident and was not at all what he had expected.

She was gorgeous.

He nervously cleared his throat.

“Um, I’m Special Agent Sam Morgan, and it’s a pleasure to meet you,” he finally managed to mumble. He turned toward Jess and Bill while attempting to pull himself together. They had both been watching the interchange between the two of them, and he couldn’t help but notice the smiles on their faces. “And these are the other members of my team,” he said as he waved his hand in their direction. “Bill Parker and Jessica Thorne.”

Julie turned to each of them and smiled. “And I’m very pleased to meet both of you also.”

Jess spoke up. “So, where are you working, Julie?”

“In Central Files—the archives.” She laughed. “The job title is “digital archiver.” But what it comes down to is that I’m a paper pusher. We’re in the process of digitizing all the old case files. It’s going to take some time, but the hope is to eventually have everything where you can quickly pull it up from your computer—no matter how old the case file is. Hopefully, that will make what you guys do easier, especially when you have to refer to an old record. Someday there will be no need to go digging in the boxes in the dingy basement for the old case files.”

Julie smiled as she turned to look back at Sam, and his pulse kicked up a notch as their eyes locked. “In addition to introducing myself, though, what I really wanted to do was come up here and thank you all. I’ve seen some of the case files you agents have taken on in the past, and the words “thank you” just don’t seem enough.” She paused for a moment, and her voice was quiet when she continued. “But thank you.”

She reached out to shake Sam’s hand again and smiled at them each individually one more time.

“Well, I guess I’d better get back to work now. It was great to meet you all.”

Sam stood perfectly still and watched her walk away, his mind in turmoil. There was a definite bounce in her step, and her laughter had expressed pure joy. She was...happy. He had been so worried about her and her future, and now...here she was. A surge of happiness swept over him—something he hadn’t felt in a long time. But now...here was Julie Henderson, a confident, strikingly lovely young woman he was very interested in getting to know better. After the Masters case, he had felt God was telling him to forget the idea of having a woman in his life. And instead, He had sent Julie Henderson. Sam was really hoping he would run into her again, and very soon.

Sam came to, not sure how long he had been standing and staring off into space. Both Jess and Bill still stood behind their desks, watching him with those silly grins on their faces. He steeled his face to quit smiling and sat back down at his desk. He was letting his mind wander way ahead. Julie Henderson had just started working here, and he was aware she was quite a bit younger than he was. And he knew she knew what he did for a living. Oh, who was he kidding? When it came right down to it, she probably wasn’t the least bit interested in dating someone like him. He had a dangerous job. Not all women could handle that.

He turned his attention to the files on his desk.

“Back to work, people,” he growled.”

TWO DAYS LATER

Sam headed toward the elevator, feeling like it had been an incredibly long day—but it was finally Friday and the weekend stretched before him. He didn't have any exciting plans, but there was always laundry to do and books to read. And it would be great just to be home for a weekend of relaxation.

The elevator dinged as the doors slid open and he raised his head and looked into the face of one Julie Henderson. He felt his lips turn upward in a silly grin as he entered the elevator.

"Long day, huh?" she asked.

He chuckled. "Aren't they all?" He nervously glanced over at her. After all those days of talking with her so easily, why did he find it so difficult now to find the words to even start a conversation? What in the world was the matter with him?

"So, how are you settling into the Bureau and your new job?"

"Oh, I really like it," she surprised him by looking right at him with those beautiful eyes, and it was almost his undoing. His heart did a little flip, and he needed to wipe his hands down the side of his trousers to get rid of the extra moisture on them. He wasn't afraid of dealing with well-known felons, but this little gal looked at him, and he was terrified.

Get a grip, Morgan!

"I enjoy the work I'm doing, and I feel that in the long run, it will be beneficial to the Bureau. If I could just find an apartment, life would be good. I'm really tired of living in someplace temporary."

Sam thought for a moment. Was this God leading him, or his own wishes pushing him to action? He couldn't be sure, but the opportunity was too great to ignore. He finally decided to take the plunge.

"Well, it so happens that I know of an apartment available not far from here, Julie. It's actually in the same complex where I live if you're interested."

Julie smiled up at him, that gloriously beautiful smile that lit up her whole face and left him breathless - that smile he had thought he would never see again.

Thank you, God.

"I would be very interested in seeing it if it's not too much trouble. I'm weary of living out of a motel."

He knew he was grinning again and felt like he was a teenager. Would she think him too presumptuous if he asked her out on a date?

"How about I buy you dinner, and then we can go check with the landlord and see if it's still available."

She shyly smiled at him. "Well, if you're sure it wouldn't be too much trouble. That sounds great."

Sam chuckled and felt the heat rising under his shirt collar. He just hoped he wasn't making a fool out of himself, but he honestly couldn't help it where she was concerned. The idea of spending even part of an evening with her was exhilarating.

Too much trouble? You have to be kidding!

"By the way, Agent Morgan. You wouldn't happen to know of a church in the area you can recommend, would you?"

The elevator door reached the ground floor, and the door opened. The outside entryway doors and the parking lot lay ahead of them. Now that he had found her, Sam didn't want to let her get away.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I do. The church I attend is wonderful; the people are like family, and the pastor is a real Bible preaching and teaching preacher. Maybe you would like to go with me this coming Sunday and try it out?"

Sam waited expectantly for her answer while he held the building's doors open for her to go out first.

Julie glanced back over her shoulder at him, a definite sparkle in her eyes and a teasing grin on her face.

"I think I'd like that, Agent Morgan."

Sam smiled back as he hurried to catch back up with her, his heart overflowing with joy.

"How about you call me, Sam?"

He sighed in contentment. It looked like early retirement, and the ranch in Montana was just going to have to wait a few more years. He was sure once his dad and uncle met her, they would more than understand why he wasn't ready to retire yet.

Yup, he was definitely going to stick around here just a little bit longer.

THE END

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