

## Chapter One

She hated waiting.

Like, really hated it.

US Marshal Jenna Sheridan tapped her boot on the tarmac. She resisted the urge to check her watch. Again.

“Why is it so cold?” Deputy Marshal Owen Briggs clunked down the steps from the private jet and joined her at the bottom.

“It’s Alaska,” she replied.

“But it’s spring. Summer will be here soon. It shouldn’t be this cold.”

He stopped beside her, pulling on a navy-blue windbreaker like hers. It had *US Marshal* emblazoned on the back.

Owen had been her partner for the last eight months. He was fit and trim, with dark skin, a handsome face, and short, black hair. She’d been training him, and he had a hell of a lot of potential. He was smart, which balanced out his habit of being a little over-eager.

They were here to collect a dangerous fugitive who’d come to Alaska to hide, but had been apprehended.

Two other marshals and the Alaska State Troopers were transporting him to the jet.

She looked at her watch. They were late.

Jenna wanted Kyle Olson secured and in the air.

Her cellphone rang, and when she saw the name on the screen, she rolled her eyes. She pressed the phone to her ear. “Sheridan.”

“You airborne yet?” Senior Deputy Marshal Vic McDermott’s voice rang with impatience.

“No,” she told her ex.

She hadn’t listened to her friends, or her own intuition, and had dated a colleague. Vic had worn her down with his pursuit. She’d actually admired his tenaciousness.

She’d thought it meant he really felt something for her.

Thank God she’d never slept with him. Clearly something in her hindbrain had known something was off.

They’d dated for just over a month. Sure, Vic was arrogant, confident, and opinionated, but he was a damn good marshal. She’d thought their bond over work would make them a good team. Her work was the most important thing in her life.

But their relationship had imploded quickly. It really sucked to come home from a tough work trip transporting dangerous criminals to surprise the guy you liked...and find him in bed with his neighbors’ twenty-year-old daughter.

Jenna had walked out the door and never looked back. Unfortunately, she still had to work with him.

“Get a move on, Sheridan,” Vic said.

“I know how to do my job, McDermott. They haven’t arrived at the plane yet.”

“They’re late.”

*Thank you, Captain Obvious.* “I’ll keep you posted.” She ended the call.

“Must be hard working with your ex.”

She shot Owen a sharp look. “He’s barely an ex. It was just a couple of dinners.”

The younger man held up his hands. “Sorry.”

She huffed out a breath. “Learn from my mistake, Owen. It can be hard work, especially when he’s an asshole.”

Owen coughed, and she was pretty sure he’d mumbled something about McDermott being a major asshole.

Her lips twitched, but she refocused her gaze on the road leading into Fairbanks Airport.

No convoy in sight.

She didn’t have time for Vic. He was just another reminder that men lied, and a handsome face could hide a lot of darkness.

There was no way in hell she was thinking of her father right now.

She tapped her boot again. Then she pulled her phone out and called Deputy Marshal William Lopez who was in charge of the transport. It rang and rang with no answer.

She felt a cold shiver down her spine. She was well aware that Kyle Olson was exceptionally dangerous. And well-trained.

She tried to call Lopez again. Nothing. Next, she tried the deputy marshal who was with him. No answer.

“Fuck.”

“Problem?” Owen asked, face serious.

“Neither of the marshals are answering and they’re late.”

Owen shrugged. “There’s spotty cellphone coverage out here.”

“My gut says we have a problem. Olson is dangerous.”

Owen made a scoffing sound. “Maybe, but he can’t take out two marshals and the two state

troopers escorting them.”

Owen was wrong. Olsen could easily do that.

Her phone rang. “Sheridan.”

“Senior Deputy Marshal Sheridan, this is Lieutenant Dunford from Fairbanks. We have a problem.”

*Double fuck.* Just from the serious tone of the man in charge of the local state troopers, she knew this was bad.

“We lost contact with the convoy ten minutes ago,” Dunford said. “One of my troopers just managed to call. The prisoner has escaped. He crashed the vehicle he was in, and injured my men. He’s escaped on foot.”

Jenna closed her eyes, then opened them. “Where? We’ll meet you there.” She clicked her fingers at Owen. “SUV. Now.”

The young marshal jogged off.

“Sheridan, I knew this fugitive was dangerous, but not this dangerous.” Dunford sounded pissed. “Senior Deputy Marshal McDermott assured us this would be a simple transport.”

*Well done, Vic.* “Lieutenant, this fugitive is as dangerous as they get. Are your troopers okay? Where are my marshals now?” Lopez would be spitting mad. He had a fiery temper. Her mind was already focusing on where Olson would go. She started planning the search in her head.

“One of my men was injured in the crash, and the other has a bullet wound. Just a graze, thankfully.” The lieutenant paused. “Sheridan, your marshals are dead.”

She froze. “What?”

“I’m sorry. My man said Olson shot them both, execution style.”

Static filled her ears. *Dammit, no.* Grief hit her hard. Lopez had a big family, with kids and

grandkids. Deputy Marshal Calt was young. His kids were toddlers. She looked down at her boots and wrestled her emotions down. She couldn't think of them right now. "I'm on my way. Lieutenant, we need to find Olson. Fast."

"I will find him," Lieutenant Dunford said darkly. "He hurt my men, killed yours. And this is *my* state." He gave her the location.

"We're on our way." She slid the phone away just as Owen pulled up in a silver Chevy Tahoe. She climbed in.

"How bad?" Owen asked.

Jenna fought not to grind her teeth together. Leaning over, she tapped the address into the navigation system. "Lopez and Calt are dead. The troopers are both injured. Olson is in the wind."

Owen cursed. "They're dead?" His hands clenched on the wheel.

"The only way we can help them now is to find Olson."

Her partner nodded. The tires squealed as he pulled out.

Jenna sent Vic a text message. He called instantly, but she ignored him. This was partly his fault. He hadn't assigned enough resources, and he'd downplayed the risk to the troopers.

She'd warned Vic repeatedly that Olson was dangerous, and he hadn't believed her.

Kyle Olson had a special skill set. He'd just proven that.

It would take someone with the same skill set to track him down.

"We'll run this fucker down." Owen's hands flexed on the wheel. His voice was filled with the overconfidence of someone who didn't fully comprehend the situation.

"We won't. Olson's too good. He can survive in the worst terrain, and he's trained to kill."

Owen's brow creased. "You make him sound like the boogeyman."

“I’d prefer the boogeyman.” She sucked in a breath. “But we *are* going to find him. We just need some help.”

As they headed out of Fairbanks, Jenna scrolled through the contacts list and touched a name. The call rang, then connected.

“Norcross,” a deep voice said.

“Vander, it’s US Marshal Jenna Sheridan.”

“Jenna, always a pleasure. What can I do for you?”

Ahead, she spotted the ruined cars in the distance. There were several Alaska State Trooper vehicles parked nearby, lights flashing. There was an ambulance, as well. The black SUV the marshals had been driving was on its roof. It looked like it had rolled several times.

*Dammit.*

“We apprehended Kyle Olson in Alaska,” she said.

There was silence. “Good,” Vander replied. “He’s dangerous.”

“Vander, he escaped during transport to the Fairbanks airport.” The anger was building inside her, scorching hot. “He killed two of my marshals.”

A curse cut across the line. “I’m sorry, Jenna.”

“I need help.”

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He stepped out of the back door of his cabin and breathed in the fresh air. Standing there for a moment, he took in the view. His cabin sat at one end of a small lake. Mountains rose up in the distance, and spring had turned everything a lush green.

Best of all, there wasn’t a single person or another cabin in sight.

Parker Conroy took another step, and almost rolled an ankle on part of a pinecone.

“*Dammit.*” He picked it up. “Red, I told you to quit it.”

Since he’d moved in a couple of months ago, a red squirrel had started hanging around. Red liked to leave Park gifts of a dubious nature. Last week, it had been a ratty Barbie doll head. Park had no idea where the animal had found that.

He tossed the pinecone off the deck and heard rustling in the trees.

“I hear you. No food for you today.”

Park headed to the pile of wood that he’d been chopping. It was springtime, but the nights could still get cold.

He set one log on another, then lifted the axe. He pulled in another deep breath. *Whack.*

This was a far cry from his job as a special-forces operative in Ghost Ops. After a stint in Delta Force, it had been an honor to be selected for the Ghost Ops program. The teams were made up of the best and toughest of the special forces.

He’d been sent on the most challenging and dangerous missions that existed. He’d been good at it. Thrived on it.

Until...he hadn’t.

Until he’d woken up in a hospital bed, full of bullet holes and covered in burns and cuts.

The black memories crowded in, filling his head with a rush of nasty whispers. He gritted his teeth and through sheer force of will, he blocked them.

He swung the axe again. That was the past. He’d bought this old cabin in Alaska to be alone. Where it was quiet. He looked around.

Okay, sometimes a little too quiet.

But he didn’t want people around, poking and talking and... No, he just wanted to be left alone.

He got busy chopping wood, and soon pulled his T-shirt off and tucked it into the back of his jeans. It wasn't long before he had a huge stack of wood. Gathering up an armload, he carried some toward the cabin. He glanced out at the lake. He might try some fishing tomorrow.

There was plenty of daylight late into the night this time of year. Even though it felt like the afternoon, it was time to make some dinner. He had a steak marinating in the fridge.

Once he'd stacked the wood, he fired up his little grill, and threw the steak on it. Back inside, he pulled out some carrots, green beans, and broccoli. He'd recently stocked up and still had fresh vegetables. Once those ran out, he'd switch to frozen and canned for a while. He chopped them up, hesitated, then sighed. He put half of the vegetables in a pot and the other half on a small plate. He carried the plate out and set it on the back steps.

As he flipped the steak, he heard a skittering sound, and a tiny, red squirrel appeared.

"Asshole," Park muttered. "I could have broken my ankle."

Red chittered at him, completely unrepentant. He snatched up a carrot, then darted across the deck.

Park served up his steak. Back in the compact kitchen with its aging cabinets and appliances, he added the vegetables. Then, he grabbed himself a bottle of beer and sat at the small, wooden table. The cabin was basic. The previous owner had left some hand-hewn furniture behind, and that was all he needed. There was a decent brown-leather sofa in the tiny living area, and a king-size bed in the only bedroom. The bathroom needed overhauling, though. It had godawful green tiles, but a nice, wooden vanity. He'd been watching some videos online about tiling and planned to do the reno himself.

He cut some steak and ate it. This sure beat endless MREs. He hoped never to have to eat his meal out of a ration pack ever again.



As he chewed, the scars on his neck tugged. He rubbed the scar that ran along his jaw and down the side of his neck. Burn and knife scars covered parts of his right side. A souvenir from his torturers.

His gut cramped. Actually, there were a lot of things he didn't miss about the military.

He sipped his beer, then grabbed his remote and turned on the TV.

"Breaking news." An earnest young male presenter stared into the camera. "A dangerous fugitive has escaped US Marshals and Alaska State Troopers south of Fairbanks."

Park stilled. That was his neck of the woods.

"Be alert for a strange man on foot. Two marshals were killed during the escape, and troopers injured. They're currently recovering in the hospital. The fugitive is considered armed and dangerous."

The story changed, and Park cut into his steak. They hadn't shared the fugitive's name. Weird.

He flicked through channels and found a movie. It was an action flick, and as soon as he saw the way the hero held his weapon, Park rolled his eyes. He changed the channel again, and found a science fiction movie.

He took another sip of beer. This would do.

He was watching a lot more TV than he had previously. Part of it was the dead silence here in Alaska. He'd wanted solitude, and he'd gotten it, but he hadn't realized just how silent it would be. He simply wasn't used to it yet, but he'd get there.

*This is what you wanted, Conroy.*

As he ate, his thoughts turned to his former Ghost Ops buddy, Sawyer Lane. He wondered how Sawyer was doing. Parker had recently gone to Hawaii, where Sawyer was a deputy sheriff.

He'd helped Sawyer keep his girlfriend, Hollis, safe after some asshole had put a contract out on her life.

There were some pitfalls when you fell for an A-list Hollywood actress. Still, Sawyer was smitten, and Park was happy for them.

He rubbed his scar again. He had no interest in a woman. Since his torture, he couldn't stand being touched. He tolerated handshakes and hugs with his friends, but that was about it.

The thought of anyone touching him made his muscles tense up.

Yeah, he'd recovered from his injuries, but his torture had left him fucked up in other ways. He'd spent twenty-two days in hell. Locked in a cage with the lights on, multiple men beating the shit out of him.

Now, he just wanted to be alone.

Lucky for him, there wasn't anyone around here, and definitely no women.

He sipped his beer and focused on watching the humans trying to fight off killer aliens.

Nope, there was just him, his solitude, and an annoying squirrel to keep him company. Just what he wanted.