

# Jennifer Haynie

## Prologue

*July 2008*

**I**t was a beautiful night for a sailing trip. And a beautiful night to die. The thought twisted Emily Barstow's lips.

The small sailboat slewed to the left and the right in heavy swells remaining from an earlier storm. The sea was still choppy, making piloting it a difficult task even for seasoned sailors. Hank and Vicky? They barely had it under control.

All the better for what she needed to do.

A gust hit the sails, and the boat shuddered.

"Hey, Em!" Vicky Meadows called. "Get that line there. Hold it tight since Hank's going to shift the spinnaker."

"Aye, aye!" Emily called back.

Mark, her date for the evening, crawled forward on all fours—because of the drinks he'd had or the fact he'd never been on a boat, she didn't know—to help Hank.

Emily tied her line onto a cleat. Then she ducked as the vessel wheeled around so they rode with the wind. The boom snapped hard overhead and once more strained against the gale. She sought out the lighthouse. It winked at her as if taunting her for thinking she was where she needed to be. It was only a matter of time.

She swallowed hard.

Now, the sailboat gently rose and fell as it skimmed along the top of the water. She lifted her chin, and the wind pulled through the wisps of dark auburn hair that had fallen from her ponytail.

Emily leaned against the railing and peered down at the water. It was murky. Roiling. She shuddered before raising her gaze to the night sky. The sliver of moon only offered a weak glow. The stars twinkled with cold light, and she shivered in the chilly wind.

"You scared, babe?"

Emily jumped and whipped around. "Uh, no. Not at all."

"You know how to swim, right?" His voice had the singsong of someone who wasn't completely sober.

She almost laughed. "I spent my teenage years on the coast."

They yawed back toward port. Emily tensed, just waiting for what she'd always called the tipping point where the wind would shift, causing the boom to snap around with amazing force. But they weren't where she needed to be yet.

They shifted back starboard.

"Hey, Emily, want to take the wheel for a while?" Vicky called.

Emily pasted on her warmest smile. "I'm fine here. Mark, go ahead."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Okey doke." Mark stumbled toward the cockpit.

Emily glanced at them as Vicky laughed and pointed toward the wheel. She demonstrated how to turn it, but she lost her balance and would have fallen had Mark not grabbed her. Mark took over, and Vicky lifted a bottle of beer to her lips.

Great.

Maybe no one but her would go into the drink. She searched for the beacon of the lighthouse again. There. Almost straight off the starboard side.

Her stomach clinched.

It was time.

Now, Mark seemed a wee bit sober as he held the boat on a steady course. Giggling reached her ears, and since the boom was on the port side straining against the wind, she noticed how Hank and Vicky had stretched out together on a blanket near the bow.

Nausea tinged her stomach, and she put her hand to her mouth as she thought about Eric and what they could have had together. Then she steeled herself. She couldn't think like that, not now at least. Suddenly, she noticed how Mark had begun drifting starboard a bit.

*Keep your focus. If not, that boom's going to come around, hit you, and kill you. Be ready.*

She blinked and steadied herself.

Toward the bow, Vicky kissed Hank.

It happened.

Out of the corner of her eye, Emily saw the boom snapping around. It came at her fast, so fast she barely had a chance to get her hand up and tip over the railing. The boom clipped her on the temple. A bolt of pain shot through her head.

Emily plunged into the chilly water.

*Now!*

She forced herself to let enough air out of her lungs to sink. She waited as long as she could, then pushed a few seconds longer as her instincts fought her mind for more air. She kicked her legs and fled to the surface.

Emily sucked in a gasping breath.

The boat had sailed ahead. It faltered before commencing a tight turn to the left.

A flashlight's beam cut across the black water.

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Emily tugged the hood of her navy blue sweatshirt over her hair and part of her face. She darted back under and began swimming toward the lighthouse, only coming up for air when she had to.

Emily paused and treaded water as she turned to see where her friends were. They were close. Too close. Their frantic voices rose each second and reached her above the noise of the waves. Beams of light from their flashlights skittered across the surface. They would take the hit for her actions, but it was the only way. She swallowed hard.

Emily turned and began a strong, steady crawl stroke back toward shore, which looked a mile away, further than she'd remembered. Her swim through the choppy seas drained her strength.

Her muscles burned. Her side cramped. Tears seeped from her eyes, and she wondered if all of this would be worth it.

Finally, after several minutes of pushing her body to its limits, Emily felt herself in the gentle tug of the breakers. The lighthouse was to her right. Before her, the beach stretched wide and long. Too far to the left, and she'd miss the park where she'd left her vehicle. Too far to the right, and she'd be noticed by anyone still at the lighthouse.

Like a kid, she stretched and rode the waves closer to shore. But the one she'd picked to deliver her onto the sand rose up higher than she'd expected. It sent her tumbling head over heels in a frothy mess. She grunted as her elbow scraped sand.

Suddenly, she was free—for the moment.

She scrambled further out of the surf and collapsed onto all fours at first, then fell into the sand, her limbs folded beneath her. Her chest heaved, and her fingers clinched the soft sand. She raised her head and gazed around her.

Seeing no one, Emily scrambled to her feet and dashed toward the walkway through the dunes. She fell to her knees and pawed at the sand until she pulled out the dry bag stuffed with a clean outfit. She exchanged the heavy, wet clothes pulling at her body for a soft T-shirt and jeans.

The sound of a boat engine distracted her.

Emily ducked into the shadows of the walkway. Running lights crossed from right to left, obviously a Coast Guard boat going out to search for her. Tears filled her eyes, and she bit her lip.

*This is wrong. I can't do this! But I need to do this.*

It had taken three years of planning. Three years of scrimping and doing her best to prepare and somewhere along the way making compromises she had never dreamed of making, like setting her friends up to take the fall for her actions.

Grasping the warm boards of the walkway above, Emily pulled herself first to her knees and then to her feet.

She snatched up her bag and dashed across the walkway and to the parking lot where she'd stashed the car earlier that day before hiking the five miles back to where they were staying. The car she'd chosen for her new life wasn't the faithful one from her past. Instead, she'd driven an old Corolla, perfectly good for going from Point A to B. Emily knew she'd better leave soon be-

fore more searchers arrived. She needed to be long gone before the search expanded to include volunteers scouring nearby beaches.

Emily pulled her wet hair back into a loose ponytail. Then she climbed behind the wheel and cranked the engine. As she began her journey, the road widened, first to a two-lane road and then to four lanes before turning into US 50 and I-95. She turned south.

*Just to Richmond tonight. Then I'll rest.*

Hot tears burned her eyes as she thought about what she'd done. Emily pretended they were from the salt water. She reached for the radio and blasted away her concerns with some techno music.

Two hours later, she pulled into the parking lot at the cheap motel where she had stayed the year before when planning this venture. It wasn't much. Wasn't expected to be much. But hopefully, it was so nondescript she wouldn't stand out in her new black jeans and sweatshirt. She pulled to a stop at the end unit of the one-story structure.

Emily hesitated, and her hand shot up to grasp the locket around her neck. She bit down on her lip and closed her eyes. From somewhere in the back of her mind, "Jesus Loves Me" echoed.

"Time to go."

Those words fortified her, and she tucked her hair underneath the back of her new hat before heading inside.

"I, um, wanted to see if you had a room," she mumbled, averting her eyes. She kept her gaze on the counter and threaded her keys through her fingers.

"How many nights?" the clerk asked. She yawned, her eyes fixated on *The Tonight Show* blaring from the television. The studio audience clapped.

"One."

With a huffy sigh, the clerk flipped through the huge book on the desk.

Emily already knew, judging by the amount of cars in the lot, that they were wide open. "Room Twelve is open." The woman scrawled something on the page. "You want it?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Okay. Your name?"

Emily's lips twitched into a faint smile. "Jenna. Jenna Knight. K-n-i-g-h-t."

## I. Meet Jenna Knight

*Late April, 2015*

“What are you doing here?”  
“Hey, babe.”

“Eric.”

“I came to see you.”

“And I’m supposed to believe that?” Jenna Knight’s voice shook just as much as her gun.

“It’s the only story I’ve got.”

“I still don’t believe you.” Jenna stood her ground, her back to the door of her hotel room, her wet umbrella dangling from her wrist and dripping onto the tile at her feet.

“How about put that thing away before you accidentally shoot me?” The shadowy form remained slouched in the chair by the window.

Jenna set the Beretta on the sideboard of the suite’s sitting room and glared at him. “I could’ve killed you.”

He shifted. “Oh, I know.” He leaned over and turned on the lamp next to the chair. The smile on his face only infuriated her. “I knew you wouldn’t. Not ’til you got a visual.”

Jenna scowled. “Why are you here?”

“I came to see you. Sugar sent me.”

She froze. “Sugar?”

“As in our employer.” Before she could react, Eric Smith rose and pulled her into a hug and a long, slow kiss. “I’ve missed you.”

Jenna noticed the way his slate gray eyes almost glowed in the dim light, just like the year before when she’d surprised him for a night at his bar in St. John.

She couldn’t cave.

She wouldn’t.

Not then when so much was at stake.

“If you’ve come to make a social call, you’re wasting your time.” She flipped a switch on the wall, flooding the sitting room with more light from the chandelier overhead as she marched into the bedroom. After tossing her purse onto the bed, she kicked off her heels.

“Promise I’m here on business.” Eric’s voice reached her as she took a seat at the dressing table near the bathroom door.

“Business?” Jenna cocked an eyebrow at his reflection in the mirror as she removed the wig of long blond hair and set it on its form. A wry smile tipped the corners of her mouth. “That’s some way to start a business meeting.”

She removed the latex cap holding her hair. Once she pulled it from its tight ponytail, it fell to mid-back. Jenna ran her brush through it as she worked out the kinks. “What kind of business?”

“The kind where I pass on a bit of intel that just might save your skin tomorrow.”

Her brush froze in midair. “What are you saying?”

“You know your boy Jacques? Your getaway driver?”

“Of course. Sugar was the one who connected us.”

“Word on the street says he’s now in the pocket of the police.”

“What?” Jenna spun around on the stool to face him.

Eric lounged on the foot of the king-sized bed and leaned back on his hands. “One of Sugar’s researchers discovered it. How, I’m not sure.”

Jenna swiveled back around and stared at her reflection in the mirror. Hazel eyes gazed back at her. She fingered her long hair, its dark auburn long since dyed a deep, rich brown. Almost seven years of waiting, of killing for Sugar fifteen times, and now, a snitch jeopardized her present mission and maybe her future.

“This isn’t good.” She picked up her hairbrush and tried not to notice how her hands shook.

“It’s okay. We’ll get through this.”

“How? I’ve stalked Igor Markov ever since he arrived at the conference. If he leaves and goes back to Russia, the risks skyrocket to the point— Wait. You said ‘we.’”

Eric had come to stand behind her. He began rubbing her shoulders. “That’s right. We. You and me together. Sugar told me to come and be your driver.”

Jenna blinked. “I’m not sure I follow.”

“He called me up. Told me about Jacques. Then he asked me to offer an assist.”

“Which you had no trouble accepting.” Jenna rose and paced back into the sitting room. She stopped at the window and lifted the curtain. Across the way, attendees of the international arms conference had begun arriving for supper at the conference center. She noted how several limousines disgorged their elegantly attired passengers into rings of bodyguards and Parisian gendarmes. She swallowed hard. “Okay. What are your thoughts?”

“I take care of Jacques tonight.”

Jenna opened her mouth to object.

“He’s a snitch, not collateral, so he has to go. Then you tell me where to be, when I need to be there, and where you need to go. I’ll recon it tonight with you.”

“I can’t do that.” Jenna headed into the kitchenette and poured herself a glass of Evian water. “I’m stalking Igor one last time later on.”

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Eric leaned his hip against the bar, effectively trapping her against the sink. “Okay, then. I can do it on my own. Then we do the job tomorrow. Easy as that.”

“Is it?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“What do you want?”

“I’d like you to consider moving back to St. John.”

She brushed by him and returned to the bedroom. “I told you that’s a closed issue.”

He followed. “Not in my mind.”

“And why not? I left there five years ago.”

He grasped her arm before she could escape to the bathroom. “And then you’ve shown up once a year since then like some long lost puppy looking for love.” He hesitated and shook his head. “Please, hear me out.”

Jenna swallowed hard at his soft words.

“Can you do that?”

She nodded.

Eric led her into the sitting room, and she curled up on one end of the couch after making sure she had plenty of room between her and him. Eric slouched and stretched one arm along the back. The other toyed with his cellphone. “I care about you.”

“I know, but this is important—”

“Just... hear me out. Listen to me.”

Jenna bit her lip.

“I can take care of Raul Avila for you. I know who the guy is, and I know what he did to you.”

“You don’t know how I suffered.” Her gaze hardened. “He stole everything I had. Everything. I didn’t fake my own death, didn’t dress in sleazy clothes and put myself into the service of an assassin pimp just because I felt like it. I did it because he has to die for what he did. I’m the one who wants to take that shot. Not you. Me.”

“But it’s gotten you so focused. What about us?”

She fell silent.

“What about us, Jenna? Admit it. You loved me years before when you were Emily and on the biathlon team with me. You loved me when I was training you on St. John.”

“I have to do this.” Her voice was low, hard. She stared at where her hands twisted on her lap.

Her fingers curled into fists.

“Even if it costs us?”

She didn’t dare reply.

“Jenna.” Eric’s hand on her cheek made her finally meet his gaze.

His gray eyes and lock of hair falling across his forehead made her want to forget everything and do as he said. She couldn’t. Not until Avila was cold in the ground. She jumped to her feet and almost threw her water glass onto the bar. “It’s getting late. I’m tired and really need to grab

a nap and some room service before I head to the hotel where Igor's staying. Can we talk about this later?"

A small sigh escaped him. He leaned over and picked up his leather jacket. "Okay. Have it your way. We'll talk some more after you're done."

She could only nod.

He lifted her chin and pecked her on the lips. "Call me when Jacques calls you, and I'll take care of him. Have a good evening."

The door slammed, leaving Jenna staring at blank wood as her frustration added to the ball of nerves in her stomach. Then she shook her head. She couldn't let Eric Smith distract her from her goal.

Not then.

Not ever.



## II. Paris in the Spring

Paris in the spring. The place for romantics. The trees bloomed blossoms of pink and white. Birds twittered in the deepening twilight washed clean by the most recent rain shower. Fragrances of roses, tulips, and other flowers swirled on the fresh evening breeze as thick as the air around a perfume counter in a department store.

Just like the arms dealers and their requisite bodyguards. Jake Witherspoon sensed the testosterone floating around like too much cologne.

His lips twisted in a half-smile, half-grimace as he stood beside the double-door entrance to the elegant ballroom. His current client was giving an after-dinner speech about the need for more sophisticated weaponry in the evolving militaries of the world. Jake cast a glance at Nigel Armstrong and rolled his eyes.

Nigel smirked. "So how much longer?"

Jake glanced at his watch. "Not too long."

As if to agree, he heard his boss, Danny May, murmur into the receiver in his ear, "Speech is starting to wrap up. You two go and get the car."

Jake knew Danny and Regis stood inside the ballroom near the dais and watched as their client finished his speech.

"Roger that." Jake nodded toward Nigel. "Time to rock and roll." They strode through the wide hall, dotted here and there with chandeliers and furniture groupings where businessmen could scheme. They stopped at the elevators leading down to the underground parking garage.

A gendarme stood in front of the doors and asked for their credentials. Jake smiled and held up both the conference's badge and his Xenith security creds. Nigel did the same, and within seconds, they were on their way to retrieve their client's Suburban.

"Who's going to draw bomb duty this time?" Nigel asked. "Shall we do Rock, Paper, Scissors?"

"That works." Jake chuckled. Three times, he pounded his fist into his hand. On the third hit, he made a scissors motion with his fingers while Nigel kept his in a fist. Jake groaned. "I guess it's my turn."

"I'll wait over here. You know." Nigel grinned. "Just in case you go kaboom."

Jake swallowed hard as his humor vanished. He'd managed to evade checking for car bombs for a while. At first, it had been because he'd supervised more junior employees, but since his comrade of a year and a half was an Australian SAS veteran, he had no way to delegate. Especially after losing a fair game of Rock, Paper, Scissors.

He pulled a telescoping pole and a mirror from an interior pocket of his tuxedo jacket, then got down on his knees and began a detailed scan of the underside of the SUV. His goal was to find any wire or other item that seemed out of place. And if a wire or item existed? They'd have to get their client out in a completely different way.

He moved the mirror over the gas tank, then the transmission, and finally, the motor. Nothing. Just the way he liked it.

"Boring is good," he always joked with Nigel.

Nigel often laughed. "Sure. But boring is no fun."

Jake shivered as he checked around the locks and hood latch and the interior for any other signs of a bomb. When looking for bombs, boring was always good. He undid the hood latch and examined the engine compartment. The motion of his work made an image flash across his mind.

Completing a bomb check of one of the cars entering the hotel parking garage for the luncheon. Watching as the ambassador finished his speech. Escorting his fiancée to her car amidst a flush of pride. Shutting her door and turning just in time to see a man jump from a van. Taking off—

"Hey, you okay, mate?" Nigel's voice caught him up short.

Jake blinked. He'd been staring at the SUV's battery.

Nigel cleared his throat. "Compartment's clean. So's the boot. I think we're in business."

"Yeah. We, uh, are."

*Way to go, Witherspoon. Freezing on the job. And in front of Nigel.*

His friend didn't know what had happened to him. Very few people did. Only his family and Danny had any idea.

And Abigail.

He winced.

*Focus, Jake. Focus. Get Professor Remington back to the hotel. Then you can brood all you want.*

"Since I risked life and limb, do I get to drive?"

"You're the man." Nigel tossed him the keys, and Jake climbed into the driver seat.

"Speech is ending," Danny reported. "Take the good professor back to the hotel. Annette is waiting."

"Ten-four." Jake put the SUV into gear, pulled out of the parking place, and cruised up the ramp and onto streets damp from an earlier rain shower. They pulled to a stop under a red and black canopy. Elegant script proclaimed the conference center's name overhead.

"On the move," Danny softly stated.

Jake checked around them. The gendarmes had formed a protective ring around the red carpet leading to the hotel's double doors. He kept the SUV running as Nigel hopped out and

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opened the back door. Within seconds, Professor Remington climbed inside. Nigel resumed his position, and they pulled away from the curb.

Jake checked the rearview mirror. No one seemed to be following them. Just to be sure, he began a series of turns while both men checked for anyone mimicking their moves or turning out or in on a regular basis.

“Good speech tonight?” Jake asked, glancing at the professor in the rearview mirror.

“The usual crowd.” The gray-haired gentleman rested his hands on the silver head of his cane, which was shaped in the grip of a pistol. “The usual suspects, if you would. All wanting to know where the next step of war will be.” He shook his head. “Must you be so careful taking me back to my room?”

“Just want to get you there in one piece, sir,” Nigel replied, ever the show of politeness.

Finally satisfied, Jake began winding his way to the hotel where the professor was staying. They pulled to a stop.

“Sir, stay here for one moment, please.” Jake climbed from the Suburban.

His eyes roved over the people on the street in front of the old hotel of brick and stone. He checked each person’s face, looking for signs of ill will. His gaze drifted to the flats across the street.

The building was four stories high and had the same vintage look of the hotel. Not too high but high enough to provide a good field of fire from the roof or one of the upper-floor flats. Lights were on in all of the apartments, signaling the tenants were all present and accounted for.

Good. Lights always revealed shadows sitting in windows ready to take a shot. He’d feel even better when the good professor was safely in his suite for the night.

“Clear?” Nigel asked from his side.

“Clear.”

Nigel opened the door, and they wasted no time hustling the professor inside and to an elevator. “Annette, we’re here.”

“Danny’s not a minute behind you,” she replied. “Suite is ready.”

“Roger.” Without breaking his surveillance, Jake pressed the up button for the elevator. The bell dinged, and a moment later, the doors slid open. “Professor, if you would.” Jake gestured toward the car.

Once all were inside, he pressed the button for ten and swiped his access card through the reader.

The doors swished open a moment later to reveal a trim brunette. The former Secret Service agent greeted them, professional all the way from the creases of her black business suit and up-swept hair to the way she came to attention and smiled at the professor as they stepped off the elevator.

“All is secure,” she said. “Welcome, Professor.” She offered a smile and opened the door to the suite for him.

“What’s the plan for tomorrow?” Jake asked as the doors to the elevator on the far right swished open to reveal Danny.

“I, for one, gentlemen—and lady,” the professor added as he nodded toward Annette. “I am planning on sleeping in. I don’t have to leave until ten, so I will make the best of it.” He bowed slightly. “Good night, all. And thank you again for your services.”

“Wow, we get thanked,” Jake murmured after the door to the bedroom shut.

Danny smiled. “Nigel, Jake, you’re off the hook for tonight until the good professor leaves. Annette, Regis, you’ve got night duty. You can sleep on the plane to the States.” He nodded. “Until tomorrow, gentlemen.”

“At the bar in ten?” Nigel asked as they stepped onto the elevator.

“How ’bout twenty? I feel the need to clean up a bit.” Jake wanted to have a beer and stare at the television as he tried to purge thoughts of his former fiancée from his mind.

“Twenty it is. Later, mate.” The doors opened on the floor below, and they headed to their individual rooms.

Jake didn’t waste any time exchanging his tux for a comfortable pair of jeans and a sailcloth shirt to ward off the nighttime chill. He added his cowboy boots and belt with the big metal W buckle before heading to the lobby.

He had to admit he liked the old hotel. It had charm, that was for sure. Charm and intimacy. And it was a nightmare in terms of safety.

Though the professor had insisted that extra security at the hotel wasn’t necessary, they’d prevailed and secured the place. Other conferees had the same idea because Jake had noticed several men with alert gazes and pistol grips peeking from underneath jackets.

The ground floor was dark, hardwood floors, and rich Oriental rugs. Light glowing warmly from library lamps and table lamps with black shades made him want to pick up a classic novel, settle into a chair, and read. Jake could have sworn he smelled tobacco smoke from somewhere. The ground floor was also very small, containing only a reception area to the left and a bar to the right. In the evenings, the bar became something like a watering hole for those attending the convention and their bodyguards, like an African waterhole complete with a few beautiful gazelles.

Jake took in the scenery with one swift glance. Five women inhabited the bar. Four seemed to be with either boyfriends or husbands. Only one sat alone, luscious hair the color of gold coins cascading over one shoulder. A glass of chardonnay sat in front of her. His eyes automatically drifted down and caught sight of one leg, left bare by the short skirt she wore, crossed delicately over the other. A high heel dangled from the toes of her right foot. Her gaze flickered between the people coming in and out through the lobby doors and the television above the cash register. She smiled and said something to the bartender.

*Today is my lucky day.*

Jake noticed how the seat to her left was empty. He wasted no time in making sure it wasn’t.

“Howdy.” He grinned at the bartender, who automatically wrinkled his nose.

“*Monsieur*, what can I pour for you?” the bartender asked. His eyes narrowed.

“A Budweiser?” Where had that come from? “Just kidding,” he hastily added. “I’ll have what she’s having.”

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“Chateau Blanc Chardonnay,” the bartender murmured as if he couldn’t believe that someone as gauche as Jake had ordered something so sophisticated.

“It looks good, and hey, I like wine.”

“Oh.” The bartender shook his head. “Your wine, *Monsieur*.” He shoved a glass to him and moved to the other end.

The blonde shook her head. “You’re a real piece of work, you know?” Her accent was distinctly American and specifically southern.

“I try.” Jake chuckled and sipped his wine. It was good. Not too sweet with the faintest trace of something he couldn’t place.

“Let me guess. From the South, right?” the woman asked.

“Yep. North Carolina. You?”

“The same.”

Jake glanced around and noticed how a couple of big guys with crew cuts and blunt features stepping off the elevator. Russians. The hairs on the back of his neck rose.

“What’s with all of the weightlifter types?” Her hazel eyes looked at him, then back to the men.

“Oh, a convention’s in town this week.”

“Convention?”

Jake shrugged, not willing to talk about his employment situation. “Yeah. Convention.”

“What kind? Cooking?” She grinned, obviously teasing.

“You’d think that judging by the size of some of these guys.”

She laughed. It was a clear, bell-like sound. “I’d say gourmet cooking.” Her laughter simmered down to a giggle as she set her glass on the black marble bar flecked in gold. An emerald and sapphire bracelet glimmered on her wrist “How come you’re a string bean compared to them?”

“Thanks.” Jake shifted so he faced her and leaned his elbow on the bar. “I don’t eat a lot, and I run like I’ve got a pack of rabid dogs chasing me. Force of habit, I guess.”

“Habit from what?” The woman tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, revealing an earring that matched the bracelet.

Jake took a sip and set his glass on the bar. “Sports. I was a three-sport athlete in high school and did cross country in college.”

“So old habits die hard.”

“I guess they do. What about you? You’re pretty trim yourself.”

“Thank you for not saying healthy.” Another grin crossed the woman’s face.

“Why?”

“I know what you mean when you say it, but for too many women, healthy implies fat. Why, I don’t know.”

“So what’s your secret?”

“Oh?” The woman raised perfectly coifed, darkish eyebrows. “Same here. I like to work out. Keeps me trim, just as you say.”

“What brings you here?”

“To this bar or to Paris?”

Jake shrugged. “Both, if you so desire.”

“Paris? Well, I have business in France. This bar? One of my high school flames, a former French exchange student, works in Paris. He promised to meet me.”

“I take it he’s a no-show.”

“So far.” The woman sighed and sipped her wine again. She opened her mouth and looked like she was going to say more when a stir at the elevators made them both glance in that direction.

Jake felt an actual growl start in his throat as he recognized the man stepping into the lobby. Igor Markov was one of the most hated and feared arms merchants at the conference. When he moved through crowds it was like a bowling ball cutting through pins.

If the width of his girth meant anything, he probably shopped the big and tall stores thanks to the food he enjoyed from the spoils of his work. How many people had died from the guns he sold? And his buyers were all sorts of lowlifes. Jake had even protected some of them in the past but only because Xenith had been hired to do so.

He glanced at the woman. Her eyes narrowed, and her mouth pressed into a thin line as her fingers tightened around the stem of her glass. The look vanished so quickly that he wondered if he’d imagined it.

“Who’s that?” Awe colored her voice.

*Don’t you know?* he wanted to ask. “His name’s Igor Markov. A real winner if you’re the type who likes arms dealers who sell to all of the lowlifes in this world. I guess he’s here to shop or something.”

One bodyguard opened the front door, and Igor stepped into the chilly night air, either headed on an evening walk or to supper.

Jake returned his attention to the woman. “How long are you here for?”

“Here at the bar or here in Paris?”

“You do have a sense of humor.” He rested his chin on his hand and smiled at her. “Well, both.”

“In Paris? A couple of more days. Here?” She glanced at her watch. “Jacques has ten more minutes to show himself. Then, unfortunately, I need to leave since I have an early morning meeting. What about you?”

“Headed out in the morning, I’m afraid. It’s been a long week or so.”

“So what do you do, exactly?”

“I’m—”

The woman’s phone chimed in her purse. “Oh, I’m sorry.” She checked the number. “I’ve got to take this. So sorry.” She answered in French.

Jake thought he heard the word Jacques.

The conversation lasted a couple of minutes. Then she hung up with a sigh. “That was Jacques. Again, so sorry.”

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“Not a problem. Interruptions are a part of my life.”

“Mine too.” The woman finished her wine. “I hate to say it, but it seems as if my guy ditched me. It was nice to talk with you. Good to hear a familiar accent in a strange place for once.”

“It was a pleasure to meet you.”

“You too.” The woman slid off her chair and disappeared through the doors Igor had used moments before.

Jake shook his head. He’d been so enthralled he’d completely forgotten to get her name.

*Way to go, Witherspoon.*

He’d forgotten to ask where she was from too. Had she meant North Carolina or the South? He shrugged.

“Who was that gorgeous creature?” Nigel asked from near his elbow.

“Who?” Jake blinked, drawn back to the reality of the bar.

“That woman? She’s a looker.”

“You know, I have no idea. I didn’t get her name.”

“Poor guy.” Nigel chuckled and ordered a Heineken. They began rehashing the day, and once Danny joined them, Jake realized one thing. He’d completely forgotten to spend his time alone brooding.

### III. Jenna the Assassin

In the apartment she'd used for most of her stay to avoid leading the authorities to her hotel room, Jenna set up the crossbow on its bipod at the kitchen table in the breakfast nook and through her scope ensured she had a clear view of where her target would be. After a week of stalking Igor Markov, his habits had become almost natural to her.

She pulled on the thin leather gloves she liked to wear while on a job and began wiping down the apartment to clear it of any remaining fingerprints. Then she set to work on the crossbow. Once more, her mind wandered back to her conversation with Sugar when she'd received the details about the job.

"He wants the guy killed with a crossbow? Is he insane?" she had asked while they shared a glass of his finest chardonnay at La Femme Nue, his jazz club in New Orleans.

Sugar laughed that deep, rich laugh that reminded her of a burbling brook. "Spice Girl, you should know better than to question the client."

"It just seems... ludicrous."

"Ludicrous it may be, but them's the orders, so the orders we follow. Sugar always makes sure the goods are delivered."

"Okay." Jenna sat back and sipped her glass as she gazed at him. "I'll take your word for it. It's just going to make getting out a little tighter."

"You can handle it 'cause you're the best. Just don't tell Eric I said that." Sugar grinned and winked.

Now, Jenna settled the crossbow on the table and parted the curtains just enough for a good view with the scope.

*Sugar thinks I'm the best. I still think this is crazy,* she thought.

Her phone chimed, signaling she had a text. She glanced at it. *Ready and in position.* Eric waited for her five blocks away in a stolen car with stolen plates. Perfect. Jenna pulled out a chair and knelt on one knee as she snugged the scope to her eye. She noted the double doors of the hotel and the café next to it. The doors opened, and a woman came outside and settled at one of the tables near the café. She placed a book on the top.

Jenna was about to pull back from one last check when a motion caught her eye. A man strolled from the café.



## Jennifer Haynie

A man she knew.

Bar Boy, the boyishly handsome guy who had sat beside her at the bar the night before.

She gasped.



Jake smothered his yawn as he pushed through the doors of the café. Last night had turned out to be a later one than anticipated. In order to be coherent when he, Nigel, Annette met for an early morning Bible study, he'd needed to grab the biggest caffeinated beverage the café had to offer. The coffee now warmed the palm of his hand through the cup.

He stopped, sniffed the air, and smiled. Cool mornings reminded him of good times at home when he would step onto the screened-in porch and greet the sun.

It had rained the night before, and the air had a polished smell to it. Earthy. Like when he'd been a kid in southeastern North Carolina and had gone out early on the family farm to feed the animals—minus the animal smell, of course. The stones of the sidewalk glistened in the weak morning light. A light breeze rustled the new leaves on the surrounding trees.

“Hey, handsome. You going to stand there soaking in the morning, or are you going to join me?”

He grinned when he saw Annette sitting at the table. “Hey. Sorry 'bout that. Just savoring the fresh air.”

“Yeah? Well, I'd like to savor this Bible study so I can then go and savor a nice, long nap before we head out.”

“Hard night?”

Annette shook her head. “Boring is more like it. No one's interested in the good professor.”

“Agreed on that.” Jake pulled out a chair, turned it backwards, and straddled it. “Oh, Nigel's on his way down. He said something like his alarm didn't go off the way it should have.”

“We've got a few minutes, I guess. Six forty-five is what he said, right?”

“Yep.” Jake snuggled down in his jacket as he observed the people who began drifting out into the dawn on their way to work.

Across the street, the bank of apartments seemed dark, except for one or two rooms. Several windows were cracked open, the residents most likely enjoying the refreshing breeze as they slept. One tenant on the top floor must have really been enjoying the air because the window was wide open.

Jake thought he saw a curtain twitch. A frown crossed his face. Was that a—

“Hey, mate.” Nigel clapped him on the shoulder and settled beside him. “Sorry about that. Dumb cellphone alarm didn't work again.”

“Go to Wal-Mart when we get to my place and get a travel alarm.”

Nigel wrinkled his nose. “Wal-Mart? You know I don't like Wal-Mart.”

Jake shrugged and grinned. “You need to give it a chance.”

“Just like I need to give poison ivy a chance.”

Everyone laughed at that, and Annette opened her Bible. “Okay, you two. Enough joshing. Let’s get this underway so I can crawl back under my duvet for a bit. Romans chapter 28, verses 28 through 39. Nigel, care to read?”

“With pleasure.” Nigel began reading the passage.

Jake followed the words on the page. As he listened to his friend’s accented voice, his brain got stuck on the very first verse he read.

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Did he honestly believe that? After what had happened six years ago?

*Seven years ago, yeah, sure, I did. But after what happened to Ari? And the way Abigail left me as a result? It’s so senseless. Everything that happened was so senseless.*

*I know You’re there, God, but I’m struggling with the working for the good of those who love You part. Abigail loves You. I love You. And why am I still thinking about our breakup six years after the fact?*

“Hey, earth to Jake.” Annette’s teasing voice pulled him out of his prayer.

“What? Oh, sorry,” he mumbled. “Just thinking.”

“Really hard from the looks of it.” Nigel grinned. “She was asking why you think Paul was writing those verses.”

“Oh.” He chalked up his inattentiveness to being tired.

He glanced at the apartment where the window was wide open. For sure, he saw a silhouette there. Male or female, he couldn’t tell. He shrugged.

*I’m off duty, not on. Maybe someone’s just enjoying the cool morning air.*

“He was writing to the Roman Christians.”

“Right.” Annette nodded. “What else?”

*Igor Markov is what else.* Jake noticed the arms dealer come out the front doors of the hotel. With his two bodyguards before and after him, it was clear he was going for his morning walk. The hulking man ignored the trio at the table and strode by them.

“Jake.” Now Annette’s voice held a hint of exasperation.

“What? Oh, sorry. Um...” Jake fell silent. Then he tried a weak grin. “Nigel?”



Jenna’s heart pounded.

She secured a bolt in the string and cocked it back.

She pressed her eye against the scope and panned the area one last time.

Bar Boy remained seated with his two coworkers.

*Okay. Note them so there’s no collateral damage. And Igor’s bodyguards too.*

Just one person would die today.

Igor.

She focused on the front doors.

## Jennifer Haynie

They opened, and out strolled one of the beefy bodyguards, followed by Igor's fat form, then the other bodyguard.

Jenna focused on Igor, following him with the scope. She settled the crosshairs on his neck, the only part of his body she'd deemed feasible for such a weapon.

She took a deep breath, held it, and released it.

Jenna squeezed the trigger.

She hesitated just long enough to see her target go down. She pulled back, the curtains shifting slightly in the morning breeze that puffed through the window. She laid the crossbow on the table. It had no prints on it. No serial numbers either, so leaving it behind enabled her to make a quick escape.

Jenna slipped out the apartment, and the door clicked shut behind her. Her footfalls echoed down the fire stairs as she made her escape. She briefly stopped and surveyed the area. Screams reached her.

She took a deep breath of cool air, released it, and squared her shoulders.

With a quick smile to release the tension, Jenna headed to the crime scene to view her kill.



Jake found himself having a difficult time concentrating on the study thanks to his exhaustion—and his eyes darting to the window upstairs. His gaze shifted to Igor, who now headed away from them about twenty-five yards down the street. At the café table, the three of them remained stuck on the first verse. When they got together, it always happened.

“It took me years to really learn the true meaning of that verse, especially after everything that happened to me.” Nigel pointed to his Bible.

That got Jake's attention. “What exactly—”

A thud like bag of books hitting the ground made Jake jump.

Igor lay motionless on the ground.

Jake leapt to his feet.

A pool of scarlet blood began spreading beneath Igor's neck. Something protruded from it.

Jake raced toward the Russian. He skidded to a stop when he recognized the object.

It was an arrow.

His gaze swung to the apartment where he'd noticed the window wide open.

The curtains shifted in the breeze.

The shot had to have come from there.

Jake bolted toward the building.

“Jake!” Annette screamed.

He ignored her and ran to the street-side entrance. Locked. He darted around the building, searching for another way inside.

A door caught his eye, and he flung it open. His steps thundered upward as he took the stairs two at a time toward the top floor. His momentum carried him through the top floor's fire door, and he stumbled as he tried to catch his balance.

Jake scrambled down the hall.

When he reached the end unit, he raised his foot and sent it into the apartment's door.

The doorframe shattered as it flew open. The knob embedded itself into the plaster wall.

He scanned the room.

A combination living room, breakfast nook, and kitchen with a couch, coffee table, and side chair in the living room was to his right. The kitchen table was pulled up to the window, and on it rested what appeared to be a crossbow.

*What on . . .*

The thought died from his mind. Suddenly, he realized where he stood was a crime scene, and if he went any further inside, he might contaminate it at best or, at worst, falsely implicate himself.

Jake backed away. He returned downstairs.

By the time he reached the street side of the apartment complex, a crowd had gathered. Some sobbed. Some stared. All murmured in shocked tones.

In the distance, he heard the two-toned wail of police sirens. He pushed through the crowd.

Annette and Nigel now knelt beside a completely still Igor. Annette reached up and closed the man's eyes.

"Too late?" he asked even though the question seemed foolish.

"It must have hit the carotid artery." Annette rose. "Whoever shot him was really, really good."

"I'll say. They got away without a trace." He briefly recounted his foray into the apartment.

He glanced up and surveyed the crowd. Each person gathered around seemed to be in various states of distress from weeping to gawking.

His eyes met a familiar hazel gaze, and his breath caught in his throat. The blonde from the night before stared at them from behind a couple of people in the crowd. She wore a skirt and deep maroon sweater as well as heeled boots. Her golden hair, clipped at the nape of her neck, curled over her shoulder, and her lips pressed together as she watched his group.

Their gazes met.

Her face remained expressionless, her look calm. Something twitched at the corner of her mouth. The beginnings of a smile?

He couldn't tell.

The woman turned, pushed through the gathering crowd, and disappeared.

"Wait here."

"Jake..." Nigel's voice faded as several policemen jogged up and slowed near them.

"*Monsieur*, if you will, step back," one of them advised.

The gendarme stared at Jake as if daring him to protest.

He meant business.

Jake sighed. He was stuck. And the woman was gone.

## Jennifer Haynie

Jake ran his hands through his hair, watching the officers as they cordoned the scene with tape and approached the body. Questions swirled through his mind like bats swarming in the sunset.

Was she involved? If so, how?