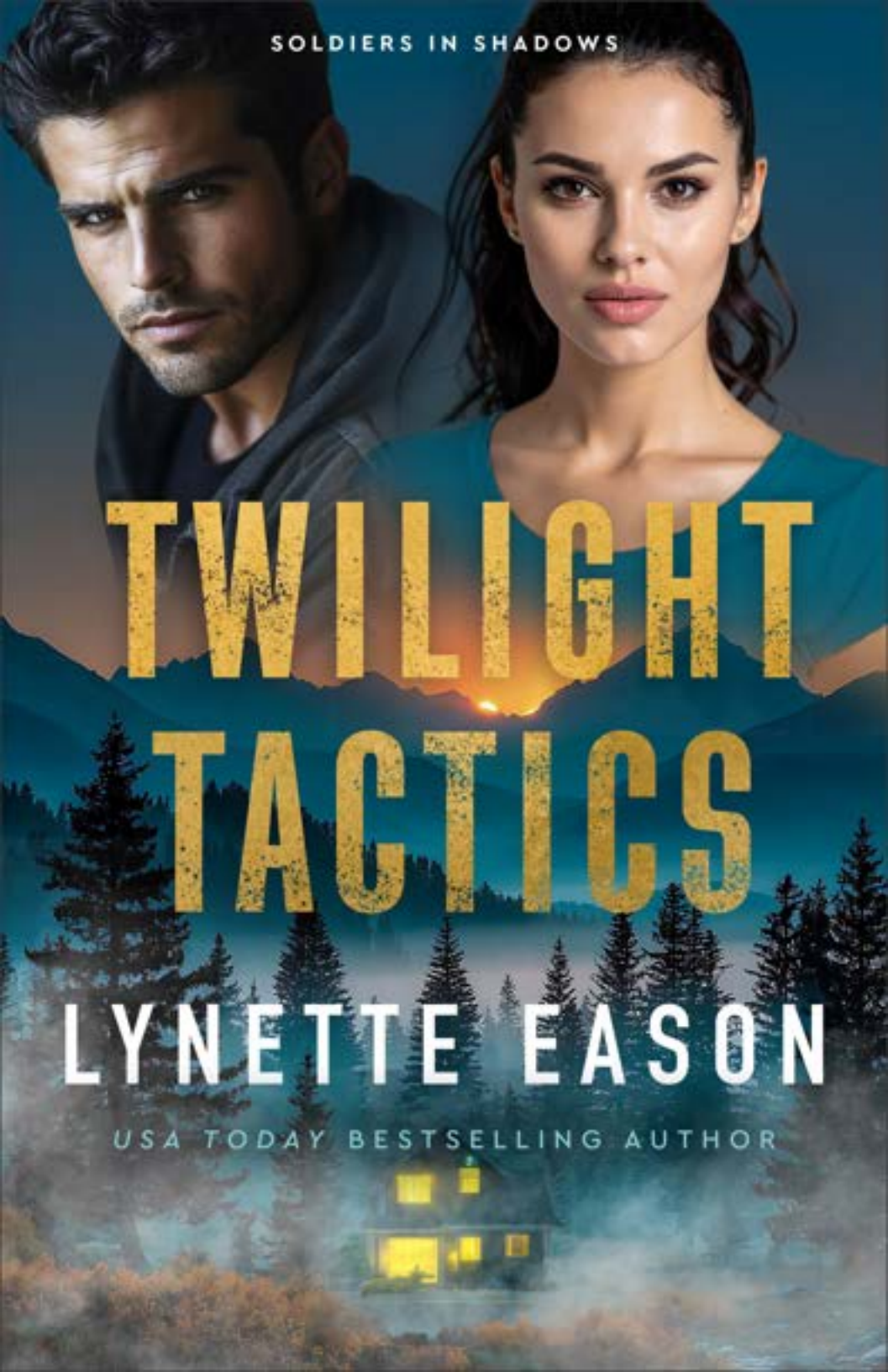


SOLDIERS IN SHADOWS



# TWILIGHT TACTICS

LYNETTE EASON

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SOLDIERS IN SHADOWS #1

# TWILIGHT TACTICS

LYNETTE EASON



*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2026 by Lynette Eason

Published by Revell  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
Grand Rapids, Michigan  
RevellBooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Eason, Lynette, author.

Title: Twilight tactics / Lynette Eason.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2026] | Series: Soldiers in shadows ; 1

Identifiers: LCCN 2025041518 | ISBN 9780800744939 (paperback) | ISBN 9781493453900 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Fiction | Thrillers (Fiction) | Novels

Classification: LCC PS3605.A79 T95 2026

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2025041518>

Scripture used in this book, whether quoted or paraphrased by the characters, is taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and postconsumer waste whenever possible.

26 27 28 29 30 31 32      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Dedicated to Jesus—  
the one who has a purpose  
for every word in this story.

# 1

## NOVEMBER SUNDAY AFTERNOON

FBI Special Agent Collin Sullivan—aka Sully—gripped the SUV’s wheel and glanced in the rearview mirror once more. The silver sedan was still there, following at a discreet distance, but it was enough to set his teeth on edge.

His partner Piper Whitaker sat in the passenger seat, her jaw tight, brow furrowed. She shot him a quick glance. “You see it too?”

“Yeah.”

“See what?” Ollie Callahan, their fourteen-year-old murder witness, had hearing like a bat. Sully thought she was asleep. “The car behind us?”

No sense in lying. “Yes. You recognize it?”

“I can’t really see it very well. It’s too far back.” She gazed out the rear window.

“Turn around,” Sully said. “Don’t let him know you’ve seen him.”

“Oh. Sorry.” She faced front again and lowered her gaze

to her hands, but not before he caught the sheen of tears in her eyes.

Remorse kicked him. "It's okay. I should have prefaced my question with 'Don't turn around.'" The teen was a good kid as far as he could tell. She'd just been in the wrong place at the wrong time and had witnessed an organized crime hit. As a result, Luca Bellini had sent his goons after her. And it was his and Piper's responsibility to make sure nothing happened to her.

Like death.

A bullet pinged off the back bumper. Ollie screamed and flattened herself against the seat, her seat belt still around her. Piper pulled her weapon and rolled her window down while Sully pressed the gas, the speedometer inching up past sixty, then seventy. Tennessee's bitter wind whooshed through the window. The poor heater had been fighting a losing battle almost since he'd cranked the vehicle at six o'clock this morning.

"There are two of them now," Piper said. "Black SUV coming up on my side. Silver sedan hanging back on the left. Passenger of the SUV is the one who shot."

"Hold on."

Sully pressed the accelerator, and the engine roared as they wound through the rolling farmland dotted with patches of dense woods. The Smoky Mountains loomed in the distance. He glanced back at Ollie. She lay still on the seat, quiet as a statue.

The road narrowed. Weathered fence posts whipped past. Fields of dried cornstalks offered no cover or escape. His hands tightened on the wheel while his brain searched for options.

Broken Chains Ranch was less than ten miles ahead, but they'd never make it before their pursuers caught them. And besides, he didn't want to take the bad guys right to his cousin's doorstep.

Another shot took out the passenger side mirror.

Ollie screamed.

Piper climbed into the back seat, lowered the window. "I got this," she said to Sully. "Let them pull up a little."

Sully did as instructed and used the rearview mirror to keep track of the SUV and the sedan.

"Use the curve, Sully."

"Got it." It was a good plan. He turned into the curve and the sedan fell back, but the SUV gained. Piper fired.

Shattered a side window. They never slowed down.

"Ugh," she said. "Let's try that again."

Sully winced. She was a good shot, but trying to hit a target in this situation was difficult if not downright impossible.

Ollie whimpered, and his heart clenched for the child. No kid should witness what she had unintentionally found herself in the middle of. "Ollie, hang in there, hon."

"I'm hanging, Sully." Her voice shook. She was terrified, of course, but she was also one of the bravest people he'd ever met. He needed to tell her that as soon as they got out of this mess.

The black SUV surged forward, right on their tail, then pulled up beside them. Piper gasped. "Is he positioning for a PIT maneuver?"

Sure looked like it to him.

With impact imminent, Sully accelerated and steered slightly toward the shoulder of the road.

When the hit on their rear quarter panel came, his SUV spun, but because of his countermeasures, he was able to gain control after a 360 that left him slightly dizzy. Somehow, he was still on the road and heading in the direction of the ranch with the black SUV falling behind them.

"Ollie, you okay?" Piper asked.

"Still in one piece." Her small but sure voice came from the back seat.

The wind from the open window whipped around them, and Sully mentally flipped through plans. They couldn't outrun them much longer. Whoever *they* were, they had fast cars. And knew how to execute PIT maneuvers.

That worried him. He glanced in the rearview mirror once more. "We passed an old barn a while back. With an overgrown access road."

"Yeah," Piper said, "I saw it."

"I'm going to go for that. I have an idea."

"What?"

"Hang on." He slowed and made a quick U-turn. The sedan shot past with a squeal of brakes. Sully glanced in the rearview mirror to see the car barely avoid the SUV doing its own U-turn.

"I don't know about this, Sully," Piper said. "They could split up and cut us off."

"Maybe. Or they'll just follow us."

"What are you thinking?"

"Flash-bangs are in the back, right?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then I've got a plan."

"All right then. Let me know my part when it's time."

Ollie sat up and her slender fingers pressed into his shoulder. "Sully—"

"Not now, kiddo. Get back down and stay there, okay?"

She did as he said. "I'm scared."

"I am too, but we're going to fight our way out of this and be just fine. Got it?"

"Sure." Her dubious tone conveyed what she really thought.

But she didn't know everything that was going through Sully's head right now, and that was the mantra that he could not fail. *Would* not fail.

Not this time.

*Please, God, let this work.*

“Sully’s really good at this,” Piper said. “He won’t let anything happen to us. My daughter, Hannah, thinks he’s a superhero in disguise.”

“How old is Hannah again?” Ollie asked.

“Sixteen.”

The teen huffed a short laugh. “A little old for that kind of belief, isn’t she?”

Piper’s chuckle was forced, but she’d managed to distract Ollie, and that was what mattered.

The black SUV edged closer once more, but Sully was ready. He had one chance to get this right. Movement caught his attention—the silver sedan was dropping back.

He glanced at Piper. “As soon as I stop, I’ll pop the back. You grab the bag and hightail it back.”

“Got it.” She rolled the window up.

Sully sucked in a breath, said a quick prayer, and cranked the wheel hard left.

Gravel sprayed as he whipped the SUV onto the overgrown access road. Tree branches slapped against the hood, leaves and twigs snapped and sprayed across the windshield.

Nothing like leaving a trail a blind man could follow.

The abandoned barn loomed ahead, the weathered boards having seen better days. But it would do for what he needed.

Piper looked back. “Splitting up like I thought they would.”

“It’s okay.” He pressed the accelerator and aimed for the barn’s gaping doors. He slammed on the brakes and spun the wheel hard once more. The SUV slid sideways into the barn in a shower of dirt and rotted wood.

Piper was already out of the vehicle, and he popped the hatch.

Less than five seconds later, she was back in her seat. She shoved the go bag on the floor and snagged a flash-bang. “Ready.”

“Here he comes,” Sully said.

“And the sedan?”

“Don’t know.” He frowned. “Hands over your ears and close your eyes, Ollie. Got it?”

“Yes!”

He nodded to Piper, who waited. Seconds ticked past, and the black SUV roared into sight. It slammed to a stop, and Piper tossed the weapon under the vehicle. She yanked her door shut, ducked her head, and clamped her arms over her ears.

Sully did the same.

The bang and flash came, expected but jarring all the same.

He threw the vehicle into reverse, spinning the wheel again, and shot through the back wall of the barn.

“The sedan!”

Piper’s cry alerted him to the vehicle he was almost on top of. The driver overcorrected, seeking to avoid hitting Sully, and slammed into an old, rusted tractor.

“Go!” Piper’s urgency fueled his own, and he accelerated toward the road, taking the path he’d created on his mad dash to the barn.

“Ollie! Still okay?”

“I’m okay,” she said, sounding breathless.

Sully allowed a moment of relief to sweep over him. And gratitude. They were safe. For now.

He swept his gaze between the mirrors looking for movement, any sign that their pursuers were still on their tail somewhere. Piper turned to keep an eye on their rear. She was a good partner, and he was glad she had his back. “We bought some time,” he said, “but they’re not done. They’ll regroup, replan, and come back.”

Piper shot him a strained smile. “Let’s hope Maya’s security is as good as she says it is.”

“It is. David and I helped her come up with it.” David Broussard, Maya’s head of security at the ranch, was also one of

Sully's former colleagues. The man had been looking for something different and approached Sully about any job recommendations. He'd sent the guy to Maya, and she'd hired him a few months ago. "David and Maya discussed us using the ranch as a safe house," he said. "And they agreed Ollie would be safe there. She's got top-notch tech."

"Well then, that makes me feel so much better. Security by David and Sully. What could go wrong?"

A soft chuckle came from the back seat, and he found a smile curving his own lips. He enjoyed sparring with Piper, and apparently Ollie liked it too. She sat up and met his gaze in the rearview mirror. "Will they find us at the ranch?"

"I can't promise they won't, but I *can* promise that the ranch is a special place with special people and you'll be as safe as possible there."

She nodded, and he glanced toward heaven. *Please, God, let us be safe there.*

**THE ROAR OF THE ENGINE** coming up the dirt driveway caught Elena Thompson's attention. She was outside the barn with four of the ranch's occupants, teaching them how to make a solar water distiller. A simple enough process with only a few materials needed, but it was something none of them had ever seen before, so she had a captive audience.

The SUV sped along, dust flying behind it.

Maya Sullivan Price, the owner of the Broken Chains Ranch and good friend to Elena, joined her in watching the approach. "Who's that?" Elena asked.

"My cousin."

"Oh yes. We've met. Mr. FBI Special Agent Collin Sullivan."

"Sully to most. Pain in the neck to others," Maya murmured.

Elena laughed. "I've always found him pleasant enough." More than. But she kept that to herself. "Who's with him?"

Maya pulled Elena to the side, out of hearing range of the others. "I'm just letting you in on this because I have permission. He has his new partner, Piper Whitaker, and a young girl who witnessed a murder with him. Her name is Olivia Callahan."

Elena's laughter faded. "Oh, how terrible."

"Yeah. Sully and David used to work together in some capacity at the Bureau. David and I talked about it and agreed to let them hide out here until the trial." She waved her phone. "Sully called and said they were attacked on the way but managed to escape."

"Attacked! By who?"

"The people who want his protectee dead, I would assume."

"Poor girl."

"They were working a case, and the murder she witnessed was in conjunction with that. It's turned into a RICO investigation starting before the murder that Ollie witnessed. There were two or three before that. Anyway, it's a big trial, in every sense." The stakes were higher now that the case fell under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations statute. "She's a foster kid. Been in and out of the system almost as long as she's been alive."

The words kicked Elena in the gut. "Life can be so unfair." She knew that better than most. Maya's dark eyes glistened, reflecting the same compassion swirling in her own heart.

"But," Elena said, "if she's coming here, we'll take care of her."

"We?"

"Yep." She gave a decisive nod. "We."

Maya hugged her and looked back at the others. "I don't want them to know or worry about this. I hesitated to say yes when Sully asked if he could bring her here. But David and

Sully felt like this was the best place for her.” She shrugged. “I’m still not sure, to be honest. The ranch is supposed to be a place of calm and healing, not a hideout for people on the run. But the girl . . .” She chewed her bottom lip. “I had a hard time saying no to this one.”

“Understandable. I mean, how do you say no to that?” Elena said. She glanced at one of the vets fiddling with the distiller. “You should let Aiden in on it. He was special ops and is completely trustworthy—in spite of his scruffy appearance.” His black beard curved around his chin and his bushy brows could use a good trim, but he had the kindest heart of anyone Elena had ever met. Thankfully, the program had worked for him, and he’d be leaving in a couple of days.

“Maybe. Right now, all anyone knows is that my cousin, his ‘sister’”—she signed air quotes—“also my ‘cousin,’ and her ‘daughter’ are coming to visit.”

“Right.”

Maya bit her lip. “I pray I’m making the right decision,” she said, her voice soft.

“You’ve said over and over that you want this ranch to be a refuge. A place of restoration. Well, there you go. If that girl has seen a murder, she’s going to need us to be that place.”

Maya’s worry faded from her features. “I knew you’d say that. With your therapy and counseling experience, it may be you who’ll be able to help Ollie the most.” A former military nurse, Elena was also certified in wilderness therapy and trauma counseling.

“I’m happy to help her any way I can, you know that, but Rachel’s probably the better option for any therapy.” Rachel Evans, their art therapist, was a former military chaplain. She had her own counseling practice and split her time between her office in Whitestone and the ranch.

“We’ll just see what she needs, then make the judgment as to who can help her the most.”

“That works.” Elena nodded to Adam, another vet at the ranch working through wounds left by war. “He was in the foster system a few years, and from what little he’s shared, I can tell you, for some kids it’s not a fun place to be. In some ways I think his wounds from that are worse than the ones he got in combat.” She shot a pointed look at his titanium leg attached to what remained of his thigh.

“Yeah,” Maya whispered. And then there was no more time to chat. The SUV pulled to a stop in front of the house about fifty yards away from the barn. “All right,” Maya said. “I’m going to get everyone settled.”

“I’m right behind you,” Elena said.

“Thanks. They need to meet everyone as soon as possible so they can be familiar with who belongs here.”

And so they could also know if someone *didn’t* belong.

Elena dismissed her class with promises to finish the project in their next session, then followed Maya to the main house. She let her gaze scan the area behind it in the direction of the mountains that hid . . . a lot.

“You okay?” Maya asked.

“Yes, why?”

“You’ve seemed a bit preoccupied lately. Distracted.”

Ouch. She’d been that transparent? “I ventured into town for the first time since coming here instead of using a delivery service, and I saw someone who reminded me of my childhood.” She’d finally convinced herself she’d be okay. That even if someone from the prepper community recognized her, there wasn’t anything they could do to her. Not anymore. Getting to that moment, to that ability to go into town alone, had been a huge stepping-stone to putting the past behind her. The fear. And then she’d seen—

“Your childhood? With the cult?”

A snort slipped out. “Preppers.” Elena said the word with a mild tone and small smile. The argument was a familiar one.

“Cult.”

She wasn't convinced they were an actual cult, but she wasn't convinced they weren't either. They hadn't started out that way in Virginia, but when they'd left the group there to join the one here in Tennessee . . . yeah, it was very different, so maybe “cult” was the right label. It hurt to think that. She still cared about people up on that mountain in the distance. But every time she thought about going up there, her mother's voice stopped her. *“They're dangerous. Stay away. Hide. Don't let them catch you.”* And so, she stayed put. Close enough to be at the compound in an hour or so on horseback, but every time she thought she was ready to try, guilt swarmed her. Like she was betraying her mother's wishes. Going into town had been hard enough. “Okay, whatever. But yeah.”

“Who?”

She sighed. “It doesn't matter. It was just a glimpse. I'm probably seeing things.” But she didn't think so. “Let's focus on your company.”

“Fine, but you're spilling the tea later.”

Elena should have known better than to try to hide anything from the person who knew her best.

The main house was set on a ranch that spanned about five hundred square acres. Elena lived in the lower-level apartment of the main house with an entrance around the back, affording her lots of privacy, while Maya and her husband, Gideon, had the top space. Elena's small living area, complete with two bedrooms, a den, and a tiny kitchen, was all she needed—and more. She was the only worker who lived in the big home, and she paid a modicum of rent because she didn't feel right mooching off her friend.

Although to hear Maya tell it, Elena was the one doing the favor.

The tall man who'd just exited the vehicle was Collin Sullivan. Sully. Elena had talked to him a few times over the

past six months she'd been here. And Maya had told her all about the cousin she adored, so she felt like she knew him. Maybe. He favored Maya in looks. Dark hair, dark eyes, deeply tanned skin even in November. Five o'clock shadow. A couple of inches over six feet.

He caught her staring and held her gaze, a hint of amusement coloring his eyes. "Hi."

Busted. "Hi. Good to see you again." Thankfully, her voice was steady, no hint of her weirdly rapid pulse. And with her turtleneck and hoodie on, there was no way for him to see the heat climbing into her neck. Hopefully, it would stop before it could reach her cheeks.

"You too," he said.

The back door opened, and he turned his attention to the teenager climbing out.

The witness. Poor girl.

The front passenger door opened, and a woman with blond hair pulled back into a tight ponytail and a hard expression emerged. Her green eyes scanned the area, then swept back to the house.

Maya went to Sully and hugged her cousin. "Welcome. We'll get you all set up. I've got a four-bedroom cabin available that's not too far from the house, but secluded so you can easily see if anyone approaches. It's set pretty close to the lake and has an updated security system. It's called Serenity."

Sully nodded. "That sounds perfect."

Maya smiled. "Let's hope it can live up to its name."

"Definitely." He frowned. "Where's David?"

"In town checking on a client." While David was in charge of security for the ranch, he and his team also had private clients who hired him on a regular basis. "He should be back sometime tomorrow, I believe."

"I can't thank you enough for being willing to take us in at the last minute like this. Our last three places were com-

promised, and we've been running out of options. I talked to Claire." Claire Ogden, their SSA, Supervisory Special Agent. "She said ASAC Winters recommended I find a place and keep it secret between the three of us. And you, of course. This place came to mind, and here we are."

Elena raised a brow. "Sounds like you're trusting someone you shouldn't."

His gaze collided with hers, and it was like a physical impact smack in her gut. She swallowed. Weird.

"I don't want to think it," he said, "but can't say it hasn't crossed my mind." He gestured to the tall woman still standing by the car. "This is Piper Whitaker, my partner, aka my sister and cousin to Maya." Piper was only about three inches shorter than Sully. The woman nodded and offered a small smile. "And this brave young lady," Sully continued, "is Olivia—better known as Ollie—Callahan, my 'niece.'"

Once the introductions were made, Maya held out a key ring to Elena. "Do you mind showing them the cabin and giving them the code to the alarm system as well as the door code? I don't think they'll have any trouble, but here's a backup key in case. I have a phone call I need to make."

Elena took the ring and curled her fingers around the key, letting the jagged edge dig into her skin and keep her grounded. Now wasn't the time to be mooning about Collin Sullivan—Sully. Not that there was ever a good time for that.

*Focus.*

"Of course," she said, forcing a smile. What she needed to do was figure out what this weird attraction arcing between her and Sully was, but that would have to wait. She climbed into the SUV and, a short trek later, pulled up next to the biggest cabin on the property. Most would call it a house, but all the structures around the lake and up the hill into the woods were known as cabins.

She unlocked the door with the code and waited for them

to grab their things. Ollie, who still hadn't said a word, slung a backpack over her shoulder and pulled her rolling carry-on inside. Elena met her gaze and offered her a reassuring smile. The girl's lips never twitched.

Elena drew in a breath and motioned to the area in front of her. "The kitchen, dining area, then the great room are one big open area, which you can see from here. A den off to the side. To the right are two bedrooms. On the basement level there are two more bedrooms. You access the stairs through the great room. I think Ollie should have the bedroom on this level next to the stairs. It's safest and there's no door leading out to the porch."

"Perfect." Sully nodded to Piper. "Why don't you get Ollie settled. I'll be fine with whatever—even the couch at night so we can all be on the same floor. In the meantime, I'm going to check over the security system."

Piper nodded and led Ollie through the kitchen and dining area, then made a right and disappeared into the hallway. The agent had placed herself between the far windows and Ollie. Smart. But something about the agent's movements seemed off. Stiff, like she was . . . mad? Worried? "She doesn't agree that this is the best place for Ollie?" she asked Sully.

He quirked a small smile. "I'm impressed. And annoyed. How'd you guess?"

Elena shrugged. "Body language. Some people are easier to read than others. Why would you be annoyed?"

"Because you read her that easily."

"Oh." She smiled and nodded to the wall in the kitchen. "The security panel's over here." He followed her toward it. "You'll find it in good shape." She tilted her head at him. "Or did you do this one too?"

"No, I didn't."

"Oh, well, Maya must have taken direction from what you

did with her home, because this one has the motion sensors, infrared cameras, and more.”

“Good to know.”

She stilled. He was right behind her. Close enough to breathe in his musky scent.

“You know a lot about the security setup,” he said, taking a step back and giving her some breathing room.

She cleared her throat. “All of the staff do, but Maya and David know I have relevant experience, so they’re smart enough to put that to good use and let me give the introductory tours.”

She reached for the panel, but Sully’s hand shot out, catching her forearm. Her pulse flared and she tensed. “What are you doing?”

“You have blood—there.”

“What?” She looked down. Then opened her hand. Thanks to the key she still gripped, a small trail of blood had traveled from her palm to her wrist. She’d squeezed the little piece of metal too hard. “Oh, for crying—it’s nothing.” She pulled away, uncomfortable with his powers of observation—and how much she liked the feel of his hand on her arm. She cleared her throat. “This is the panel. Obviously. I should probably . . . um . . . go do . . . something. Like clean up.”

Wow. Awkward much? Heat climbed into her neck for the second time that day.

She turned to leave and stopped when she spotted Ollie in the doorway, eyes now on Elena’s wrist. Something flickered in her expression. Recognition? Understanding?

“You’ve hurt yourself,” Ollie said.

“It’s nothing. Just squeezed the key too tight.”

“It’s your way to stay focused, not let yourself think about other things, isn’t it?”

Elena’s breath caught and Sully went still. “Um—I didn’t

mean to. It was an accident.” But she *did* have her coping mechanisms. Not that she needed to air that dirty laundry.

“Sometimes,” Ollie said, “I add numbers up in my head. Hard numbers. It helps clear my mind of everything else and makes stuff fade into the background.”

Elena walked to the teen who’d seen too much. Who’d learned too young how to cope with those things. “I could teach you other ways,” she said. “Maybe not better, but possibly. If you wanted. I mean if it’s okay with Sully and Piper . . . er . . . Agent Whitaker.”

Ollie’s eyes widened, and Piper, who’d stepped up behind the girl, made a sound that might have been a protest, then said, “*Piper’s fine.*”

Sully’s quiet “thank you” made Elena realize she might have crossed a line she wasn’t aware was there. Well, if so, whatever. She straightened, nodded to the others, and headed out the door. She was halfway back to the barn, desperately trying to keep past memories, feelings, and fears at bay, when she heard footsteps behind her.

“Elena, wait.”

She looked back to see Sully gaining on her. She tried to push the memories of her family’s compound from her head. Along with everything she’d been programmed to believe—and later had to unlearn. She took a steadying breath. “Yes?” Thank goodness the word came out low and calm.

He stopped next to her, eyes kind. Concerned. Compassionate. “You mentioned some ways to help Ollie. Did someone teach them to you?”

She huffed. “That’s what you want to know?”

He shrugged. “Yes.”

“Then no. No one taught me. I had to figure a lot of things out alone.” She met his gaze. “But that’s why I’m here now. So others don’t have to do the same.”

“I see.”

“Do you?” He probably did and that made her want to squirm. “I’ve got stuff to take care of,” she said. “A class to finish tomorrow, so I need to make sure I’m prepared.” She was, but it never hurt to double-check. “Talk to you later.”

She hurried into the barn where her students had put all the pieces of the still. Just being in the barn and planning what she was going to do tomorrow grounded her. She had a solar still to finish building so she could demonstrate it. Simple. Practical. And one more tool in her belt of those kinds of survival skills.

The other kind—the ones Ollie needed—would come later. For now, she just had to ignore the way Mr. Big Shot FBI Special Agent Collin Sullivan seemed to see right through her carefully constructed walls.

And pray she hadn’t made a huge mistake by giving him even a glimpse of what lay behind them.

# 2

Ollie sat on the strange bed of yet another strange bedroom and stared at the strange wall opposite her. She was so tired of strange and different. However, the terror that stayed with her constantly had eased a fraction despite the attack they'd just escaped.

She'd lived in fight-or-flight mode for so long that she should be used to it by now.

But she wasn't.

Was it wrong that she just wanted to feel safe? To belong somewhere and have someone love her? And not because that someone was getting a paycheck for letting her live with them? To come home to a bedroom that didn't feel like she should sign the visitors' log?

She knew there were good foster homes. Some even amazing. She'd heard the stories from other foster kids she'd gone to school with. She'd just never been one who got to experience that.

She pulled her legs up, wrapped her arms around her shins, and rested her head on her knees. *Why do you hate*

*me, God?* And why was she talking to someone she wasn't sure was even real?

Ollie rose and grabbed a packet of meds from the side pocket of her backpack, glanced at her watch, then swallowed a pill dry. She pondered the dresser against the opposite wall and sighed before tucking her bag of belongings next to the bed. There'd be no unpacking—not if she wanted to keep her stuff when they had to leave in a hurry.

And they'd have to leave, so she'd just keep to herself and hope it took more than twenty-four hours for the bad guys to find them.

Because she had no doubt they *would* find them.

**SULLY STOOD AT THE WINDOW** and looked out over the property. He'd grown up coming here and had come back as often as possible. He had thirty-three years' worth of memories and loved the land, but most especially the peace and quiet that came with it.

And the people, of course.

He and Maya shared a connection to the land that ran as deep as the bond formed through their mutual love for their amazing grandparents. It was ironic that their fathers—twin brothers—wanted nothing to do with the place Maya now called home. A smile tugged at his lips as he thought about their grandfather's wisdom in willing the ranch to her. Definitely the right move. Their grandmother had chosen to vacate the home and move into the independent living center just fifteen minutes away, and no amount of begging her to stay had swayed her decision. Maya had filled him in on the conversation shortly after she'd taken possession of the ranch.

"Your grandfather left this to you," their grandmother had told her. "He and I talked about it for years and we both agreed

on this. I'm too social to want to live out here any longer without Paul. So, you just keep me a guest room made up, and I'll come spend the night occasionally."

Maya had finally agreed, and truly, their grandmother did seem like she loved living in town. They all missed Paul Sullivan, of course. He'd been a great man. A godly man. And taken much too soon by a heart aneurysm.

Gramps had been gone just under a year, and his passing left a void in Sully's heart that didn't seem like it would ever heal up. He sighed and walked into the kitchen to open the refrigerator, surprised to see it stocked full.

Maya had been busy. He grabbed a bottle of water and listened for any movement from the bedrooms.

All was quiet.

And he was hungry. They'd grabbed something at a drive-through on the way, before the cat-and-mouse game, but all the adrenaline had burned some calories.

He grabbed some cheese, an apple, a banana, and some crackers and figured that would hold him until morning. He turned to see Ollie in the doorway and his heart jumped, then settled. Good grief, she was like a ninja. "You hungry?"

"Yes."

He put the food on the table and grabbed a few more pieces of fruit. Another trip to the refrigerator netted him a purple sports drink that he set in front of her. "Adrenaline rushes can do that to you."

"I know." She sat in the chair facing the door and snagged a banana.

"You feeling okay?"

"For now."

"Will you tell me or Piper if you're not?"

"Of course."

He grunted. She was talkative tonight. "You want to watch television?"

“No.” She glanced up through her thick lashes. “Thanks.”

He narrowed his gaze at her while she ate the banana and set the peel aside to grab an apple.

“Wanna talk?” he asked.

She hesitated, then opened the drink and took a swig. His Spidey senses tingled, so he waited and sliced the block of cheese.

“Can you call that woman? Elena? Ask her to come back over? I want to talk to her.”

Oh. Elena. He nodded and tapped a message to the woman who’d captured his attention from the first time he’d met her.

---

Ollie wants to talk to you. Are you up? You mind coming back over?

He set his phone aside. “If she doesn’t answer in a few minutes, I’ll call her. In the meantime, you have time to eat before she gets here.”

“Thanks.” She ate the apple, then started in on the crackers and cheese.

“There’s chips in the pantry if you want some,” he said. “Want me to make you a grilled cheese?” Shouldn’t he offer her something a little more filling and nutritious?

She stood. “I don’t want the sandwich, but I won’t say no to the chips. I’ll get them.”

When she returned to the table, she had the bag of kettle chips already open.

“I’m sorry, Ollie. I really am.” Sully sighed and rubbed his temples.

“It’s not your fault.”

“Isn’t it? I’m asking you to trust me to keep you safe, and someone keeps showing up to kill you. I wouldn’t trust me at this point.”

She laughed. More of a snort and a choke, but her eyes

held a shimmer of mirth. “That’s the first real funny thing I’ve heard you say since you got stuck with me.”

“Aw, Ollie, I didn’t get stuck with you. Sure, you’re my assignment, but the truth is, you’ve grown on me. I like you. I care about what happens to you.”

She narrowed her eyes and looked away. “Whatever.”

They fell silent. Her walls were still so high and thick he wasn’t sure he’d ever manage to reach her. Then again, maybe he shouldn’t try. Shouldn’t let himself care too much.

“Why now?” she asked.

He blinked. “What?”

“You’ve been protecting me for a little over three months now. The boredom was real, but at least no one found us. So what changed?”

He frowned. “I don’t know. I’ll confess I’ve wondered the same thing.” He shouldn’t be surprised she’d thought of it too.

She crunched a chip. “And?”

He sighed. “We’ve had our analysts check the computer you were using. There was no breach. No one found you that way. All the agents who were watching out for you came back clean.”

“Y’all checked that?”

“Of course. And yet one day, hit men show up to the safe house and we barely escaped because one of them tripped the alarm system.” He shook his head. “I keep going back to ‘what changed?’”

She frowned at him. “But that’s just it. Nothing did.”

“I know it looks like that on the surface, but *something* did. I just can’t figure out what.”

“I don’t know either. I just know that the trial is next week and they’re closing in.”

That was the first time she’d expressed her fear like that. He had to admit he felt the same. “Yeah.”

A knock on the door brought Sully to his feet, hand on his weapon.

Ollie raised a brow at him. “You really think the bad guys are going to knock?”

He relaxed a fraction. “Probably not.” But he’d still be careful. He walked to the door and saw Piper in the hallway, hand on her weapon.

“Hey, it’s me, Elena,” a voice called. “You texted?”

Piper slipped back into her bedroom, leaving him with the one woman who made his heart squirm and his emotions roller coaster.

Great.

He opened the door.

**ELENA IGNORED THE SUDDEN SURGE** in her pulse when Sully opened the door and smiled. “Ollie wanted to talk to me?”

He stepped back and let her in, his eyes sweeping the area out of what she figured was pure habit. “That’s what she said.”

“Sounds good to me then.” She stepped inside and spied Ollie at the table, chin resting on one hand.

“I’ll just leave you guys to it.”

He disappeared downstairs and Elena took a seat across from the teen. The girl was pretty in an understated way, with thick blond hair, gray eyes, and clear skin that looked like it would tan easily in the summer. Right now, she looked pale, timid, and bone-deep weary.

Then Ollie’s eyes met hers, and Elena could see the strength beneath it all. “Hey.”

“Hi.” Ollie dropped her gaze to her hands and sucked in a slow breath. “Thanks for coming.”

“Of course. What can I help you with?”

“You said you could teach me ways to cope. To deal with . . . stuff. Did you mean it?”

Elena reached across and covered Ollie’s hands with her own. “I meant it.”

“Okay.” Ollie drew back and crossed her arms, and Elena filed that away. No touching. “What exactly does it entail?” Ollie asked.

*What exactly does it entail?* Elena cleared her throat. The question was legit, she was just surprised at the phrasing. What fourteen-year-old talked like that?

“When you get a chance, you come to my place and I’ll show you something.”

“What?”

“Just something that helps me when I’m feeling lost or alone, scared or sad.”

Ollie studied her for a moment, then nodded. “I’d like that.”

“Great.”

“I want to learn other things too, though,” the teen said, her voice low. “Then I can protect myself and never be afraid again.”

And just like that Elena lost her heart to this girl and vowed to do whatever it took to help her feel confident and secure in her world. “Well, I can help you there too. I grew up in a prepper family. I’m assuming you know what preppers are.”

She shrugged. “I call them human squirrels who hoard supplies like winter is always just around the corner, convinced that their six-month stash of beans, bullets, and toilet paper will be their salvation when the aliens, robots, or mutant hyenas finally take over.”

Elena blinked. Then laughed. A genuine belly laugh that rolled from her and felt so good she didn’t want it to stop. This girl was very smart.

Ollie looked surprised, then her features relaxed into a small smile. “I’m glad I’m amusing.”

“I have a feeling you are way more than that, my friend. That’s a perfect definition, though. Perfect.”

“Now you come up with one.”

Elena sobered. “What?”

“What’s your definition?”

“Oh. Um . . . okay.” She thought, then grinned. “Preppers . . . um . . . preppers are people who look at a Costco’s largest pallet of canned goods and think, ‘Amateurs.’”

Ollie grinned. “I think mine’s better, but that’s not bad.”

“I’m glad you approve, thank you. Now, as I was saying, I grew up in a family of preppers. I learned all kinds of things survivalists would need to know to live.”

“Like what?”

“Oh wow.” Where to start? “From building a shelter with natural insulation and weatherproofing, to collecting, purifying, and storing water. And of course, gardening and foraging for food. I had to know what kinds of berries and mushrooms I could eat and which ones would make me sick. I can hunt and trap, but I’ll be honest—killing game isn’t my favorite thing to do. I’d rather be a vegetarian.”

Ollie smiled. “Me too.”

“But I can do it if I have to. And you have to know how to take care of yourself in an emergency. Before I went to nursing school, I already knew a bunch. Had been stitching up my family’s wounds and setting broken bones since I was a kid.”

“No way!”

“Yep.”

“That’s really cool.” Ollie frowned. “In a weird kind of way. What else?”

“Um . . . well, I had to learn how to defend myself, of course. Dad was trained as a black belt in various forms of martial arts, and he taught me and my sister.”

Ollie’s eyes widened. “So you’re a black belt?”

“I am.”

Piper came into the great room area. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to interrupt. I just came to scrounge for some food and something to drink."

Ollie motioned to the leftovers in front of her. "Help yourself."

"Or there's some chicken salad," Elena said, "cooked burger patties, and a rotisserie chicken in there if you need something with more sustenance."

"A chicken salad sandwich sounds lovely, thanks."

Ollie snorted. "Sully didn't tell me about that stuff."

Piper rolled her eyes. "Men. He probably didn't notice."

The woman busied herself making the sandwich, and Elena stood. "We'll start tomorrow if you like," she said to Ollie.

"I like."

"Start what?" Piper asked, turning from the refrigerator to look at them.

"I want to learn to defend myself," Ollie said. "Elena's a black belt and is going to teach me."

"Oh. How nice." She hesitated and frowned at Ollie. "You think that's a good idea, what with—"

"It's a good idea," Ollie said with a thread of steel in her tone.

Elena caught the undercurrent of words left unsaid but had no idea what it was about.

Piper nodded and looked at Elena. "You're very kind."

Elena gave a small shrug. "It's what I do here with some of the vets. You wouldn't think guys who've fought in wars would need help building confidence, but they do."

"I can see that. Let me know if I can help. I'm not a black belt, but I am trained in self-defense."

"I'll do that."

"Great. I'm going to eat and then do a little perimeter patrol."

"Felicity Bowman has a kennel here where she trains dogs."

Some are being trained for intruder protection, so that could be an option.”

“That would help, but the dogs can’t be everywhere.”

“True enough. Then have at it.”

Piper gave a small smile, grabbed her plate of food, and walked into the great room.

Ollie snapped her head toward Elena. “Wait a minute. Dogs?”

“Felicity was in the military and used to train dogs for things like sniffing out bombs, search and rescue, patrol, and so on. Now she does the same thing here and gives a portion of the sales of the dogs to the ranch.”

“That’s incredibly cool.”

“I think so too.”

“Could I see the kennels sometime?”

“Absolutely. She’d probably even put you to work if you want.”

The girl’s eyes went wide. “Learning to train dogs? I’m definitely in for that.”

“Probably cleaning kennels too.”

Ollie didn’t even blink. “Just tell me when.”

The more Elena talked to the teen, the more she liked her. And was reminded of herself in some ways. “I’ll let Felicity know. In the meantime, I’m going to let you get some sleep. I need some too.”

“Thanks, Elena.”

She waved goodbye to Ollie and Piper and walked back to her home. Once inside, she stepped over to the bookcase on the wall next to her television. A whole display of bird carvings greeted her. This was what she wanted to show Ollie.

A memory slipped in. She’d been thirteen years old. They’d been at this new compound in Tennessee for only about a month and already she hated it. She’d been down by the river taking a break from cutting firewood, her feet in the

cold shallow water. Sweat dripped from her temples, and she thought about dunking her whole body. But then it might look like she was goofing off and Papa LaRoche wouldn't like that. He'd make her dad punish her. She swiped a tear and swallowed hard. Her father had changed in the last two weeks and not for the better.

"Eleanor?"

She jumped out of the water and slipped her feet back into her shoes. She grabbed the axe and another piece of wood and set it on the chopping stump.

Her father stepped into view, walking down the path, hands in his pockets. She held the axe at her side and scrubbed a rivulet of sweat from her chin. "What is it, Dad?"

"Can we talk?"

She tightened her grip around the handle, then dropped the axe to the ground. "All right."

He motioned to the rock she'd just scrambled from. She walked over to it and took a seat. He did the same next to her. "You're not happy here," he said.

Be honest? Or lie? She sighed. "No. Mom isn't either."

"I know." He patted her hand. "I think it's just because you need to get used to it. Iris has adjusted well."

"She's Iris. She likes this kind of life."

"You don't."

"I hate it." She almost flinched when the words left her lips. She'd already learned not to express her real feelings to anyone. Not here. "I miss my friends." She missed her life. She looked up at him. "Why did we come here?"

"Because we were invited. It's a good opportunity for me. For our family's future."

"You never really explained why we were moving. Can you tell me more details? Like what kind of future? What kind of opportunity?"

He raked a hand over his head and looked out across the

river. Toward the town she'd give anything to escape to. "It's hard to explain. In Virginia, I was passed over for a promotion in the group. Kimbell played favorites. And I wasn't on his list of favorites." Kimbell, one of the leaders of that sect. "I . . . It made me furious. I felt betrayed. I reached out to LaRoche, and he urged me to come here, said he had a high-ranking position I'd be perfect for."

"I see."

He nodded. "Now I have a position here that I like. I'm in charge of making sure we have what we need to survive when the government finally has full control of everything. Our money, our land, our medical care, even our thoughts at some point if they have their way."

"And you want to stay here." It wasn't a question.

"For now."

"And you agree with the way LaRoche runs this place?"

He sighed. "Not everything. No. But it takes a strong leader to make sure an entire group of people are cared for. So, for now, I'm willing to overlook some of his . . . idiosyncrasies."

She nodded, her heart pounding with dismay, fear . . . anger. "Okay."

He dug into his pocket, pulled out one of his carvings, and handed it to her. "I made this for you last night." The little wooden bird sat weightless in her palm.

She traced the fragile beak with the tip of her dirty finger. "It's beautiful, Dad, thank you."

"It's an indigo bunting. If you haven't seen them around here, you've heard them singing. The males are all blue and the females are brown."

"Why are the females always the ugly color?"

He smiled. "Not ugly, they just have a different kind of beauty. And that beauty serves a different purpose. They're actually perfectly designed. God gave them softer colors so

they'd blend into the trees and stay safe with their eggs and then their young."

"Oh." She studied the bird again. "I think this one is a female." She glanced at him from the corner of her eye. "I'm going to need her babies to go with her."

He laughed and hugged her. "Noted. Now, finish chopping your wood." He glanced at his watch. "I've got a meeting in a few minutes."

She nodded. "Thanks, Dad."

"See you at dinner."

Elena sucked in a ragged breath and blinked her den back into view. Not all her memories were bad. She set the bird back on the shelf. When she packed her backpack the night she fled the compound, she'd taken six of the carvings with her. Her favorites. Was he still making them? If he was, did he think of her as he worked? Tears threatened and she forced them back.

She didn't know why she was so melancholy tonight. Maybe Ollie reminded her of herself just a little too much. She walked outside and stood on her porch, taking in the darkness. She'd always thought it peaceful. Her very own weighted blanket that wrapped her in a cocoon of velvety black. But tonight, for whatever reason, the familiar hush unsettled her. It was too still. Too quiet.

Threatening.

As if danger was already stalking them, just waiting to pounce.