

DEFENDERS OF JUSTICE | 03

BLIND BETRAYAL

**NANCY
MEHL**



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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

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To my mother and father,
Barbara and Jack Harper,
for introducing me to God
and encouraging my love of books.

CHAPTER ONE

As Martin Avery waited to be murdered, he was surprised to find that, more than anything else, he felt offended. He wanted to explain to his killer that he was a good son. That he'd been a loving brother to his special-needs sister. He'd always tried to be a decent man. He cared about people and had dedicated his life to protecting the environment. Somehow he felt it should matter that on Christmas he worked at the downtown shelter and served dinner to the poor and homeless. Then there was the time he stopped to help a woman who'd run her car off the road and into a tree. Martin had smelled gas and pulled her out before the car caught fire. Shouldn't that mean something now?

He scooted a little closer to the dumpster. He retained a small spark of hope that the man who wanted him dead wouldn't see him hiding beneath all this trash. He was struck by the absurdity of his situation. There were plastic bottles,

aluminum cans, and newspapers strewn all around him. Normally he'd be angry at a business that clearly wasn't recycling. In fact, he would probably stop by and speak to the owner, reading him the riot act about how he was damaging the environment for upcoming generations. But now, the very items he'd spent the last few years fighting against could actually end up saving his life. Of course, his chances weren't great. How many times had Martin yelled at the TV when a character running from someone who wanted to kill him headed into an alley with no exit? Yet he'd just done the same thing. Problem was, he didn't know much about the streets of Pennsylvania. The man who'd chased him from the warehouse had to know he was here. It would likely just be a matter of time.

He could hear footsteps getting closer. Then he remembered his phone. All his texts to Valerie. He had to protect her. He slowly pulled the phone out of his pocket, trying not to shake the newspapers that covered him. Martin quickly slid it under the dumpster. Hopefully his killer wouldn't take the time to look there after Martin was dead.

At that moment, the sadness finally came. Martin didn't want to die. There was so much he wanted to do. How could this be happening? He was an environmentalist, not a criminal. Not a law enforcement officer. How could protecting the earth cost him his life? It was ridiculous.

Something his mother once told him whispered in his mind. When he was twenty, he'd told her he didn't believe in God anymore. He could still see the pain in her eyes. But instead of chastising him, she'd said, "*You may not believe in Him, Marty, but He believes in you. Just remember that*

He's always close. All you need to do is call on Him. He'll answer."

Martin closed his eyes and silently called on God. He was still praying when someone grabbed the newspapers and pulled them away.

"We need to get her ready to move."

Doug nodded. "I'll call the office. You tell her."

"Sure." Casey Sloane knocked on the door to the adjoining room while Doug took out his phone. She and Doug Howard, both Deputy U.S. Marshals from St. Louis, had been assigned to transport a witness to Washington, D.C. Valerie Bennett, a local newspaper reporter, had been called to testify before a grand jury. According to the chief, Valerie had been interviewing a well-known environmentalist when she'd supposedly stumbled across the possibility that a sitting U.S. senator dedicated to environmental issues might have ties to terrorism. Casey wasn't sure how the jump was made from tree hugger to ISIS, but somehow things had taken a really perilous turn and there was real concern that Valerie Bennett's life was now at risk. Casey had no idea if those fears were valid. It was the Marshals' job to deliver their witness safely to D.C. Period. Once their assignment was done, it was up to the Feds to figure out what was true and what wasn't.

Not getting a response, Casey rapped a little louder. "Ms. Bennett, it's Casey Sloane. We'll be leaving in about fifteen minutes. Any problem with that?"

The door swung open to reveal Valerie Bennett, dressed

and seemingly ready to leave for their meeting at the U.S. Marshals Office.

“I’m all packed. Ready whenever you are.”

“Good. Why don’t you give me your suitcases? We’ll put them in the car for you.”

“Sounds good. Come on in.” Valerie retrieved her two suitcases and had started to hand them to Casey when she paused. “Wait a minute. I don’t think I checked the bathroom. Sorry to make you wait.”

“Not a problem. We still have a little time. Our office is just down the street.”

“I’ll be right back.” Valerie put the bags down, turned, and went into the bathroom.

As she waited, Casey’s gaze swung slowly around. The rooms here were nice. Dark wood furniture, colorful bedspreads, and the obligatory pictures that were screwed into the walls just in case you wanted to take them home. Casey found those concerns a little strange since she’d never seen a painting in any hotel she’d actually want in her house. There was also a desk in each room, which was handy. Of course, the most important amenity to Casey was the coffeemaker, something she looked for first whenever she was assigned to stay with a witness.

The general public didn’t know that most safe houses used by the Marshals were actually located in hotels. That was fine with Casey. The last thing she wanted was to get stuck someplace where she couldn’t get her daily caffeine fix. She could easily down six cups of coffee before noon. It had become a necessity, not a luxury. The minutes ticked by, and Casey checked her watch. She was just about ready to say

something when Valerie came out of the bathroom carrying some clothes and a makeup box. She really had forgotten to pack everything. Casey couldn't blame her for being a little scatterbrained. The reporter was under a lot of pressure.

"Do I have time for one more cup of coffee?" she asked as she added the additional belongings to one of the suitcases.

"I'm not sure there's time to drink it here, but you can certainly take it with you. Do you have everything now?"

Valerie nodded. "I hope so." She moved toward the coffee-maker. "The hotel staff put at least a dozen packets of coffee in my room. If I drank all of it, I'd be up for a week."

Casey smiled. "The people here are great. Very supportive."

"I'll make a quick cup and be right out."

Casey picked up the suitcases and put them next to the door leading to the hallway. "Do you want to take these to the car?" she asked Doug, who sat at the desk, frowning at the cellphone in his hand.

"Not yet."

"What's going on?"

"Just finished talking to the chief. There's a problem."

Casey and Doug worked under Richard Batterson, Chief Deputy U.S. Marshal for the District of Missouri's U.S. Marshals Office. Batterson was tough but fair. The deputies who worked under him respected him immensely.

"What kind of problem?"

Doug stood. When he was upset, he'd purse his lips, and right now they were almost tied up in a bow. "Chief says the office isn't secure. There was a call. A bomb threat. They were checking it out when someone noticed a new deputy had signed in a couple of hours earlier."

“So?”

“The real guy’s actually in Kansas City for special training. Until they figure out what’s going on—and who’s using his identification—we’re to stay here. Valerie is our only high-profile witness right now. The chief’s afraid whatever’s going on is connected to her.”

Casey’s stomach tightened, and she took a deep breath. The news was disturbing. “But how . . . ?”

“They don’t know how it happened yet. I’m sure they’re reviewing all the security cameras and talking to the real deputy. Maybe there’s a plausible explanation, but just in case they’ve notified the Federal Protective Police and they’re evacuating the building.”

Casey sat down on the bed and shook her head. “Sure sounds like someone infiltrated our office.” She frowned. “But why?”

“We can’t be sure, but you can see why the chief is concerned.”

“What about the guy from D.C. we were supposed to meet up with?”

The D.C. office had sent one of their deputies to travel with them. Although it wasn’t without precedent, the move made Casey feel uneasy. Was it because they didn’t trust St. Louis to safely transport their witness? She was also worried about who might show up. Casey had worked in D.C. for a couple of years, and there were some people she really didn’t want to see again. She’d left abruptly, for her own personal reasons, and she had no desire to deal with anyone who felt the need to poke their nose into her business.

“What do you mean?” Doug asked. “You’re wondering

if he might be involved?” He shook his head. “The chief had him checked out. One of D.C.’s best. Besides, he’s been staying in a hotel near the airport. Batterson contacted him, and he’s on his way here. We’re to wait for further instructions, but as of right now, we’ll leave from the hotel and go straight to D.C.” He patted the breast pocket of his jacket. “I’ve got our tickets, and we’ve already been briefed, so we don’t really need to meet with the chief again anyway. The D.C. Deputy Marshal will get us from Reagan National to the final drop-off point. It’s not complicated.”

“Something feels off,” Casey said. “I mean, our offices get breached right before we leave town with a witness?”

Doug ran his hand over his short strawberry-blond hair. It was obvious he was bothered too. “I’m not going to disagree with you. Until we know what’s going on, maybe we should be extra careful. I think I’ll wait in Valerie’s room until we get the all-clear.”

“Good idea.”

Doug got up and knocked on the adjoining door. When Valerie opened it, he said, “If you don’t mind, Ms. Bennett, I’d like to stay with you until we’re ready to leave. Just an extra precaution.”

The door closed behind him, and Casey walked over to the sliding glass door that led to a small balcony. She carefully pulled the drapes back and checked the street. Everything looked normal. She couldn’t stop wondering once again who D.C. had sent. Was it someone she knew or a deputy who’d never met her? Would they be surprised when they saw her? Casey was tired of the expressions of disbelief on the faces of her colleagues in law enforcement. She had a slight build

and had been told more than once that she looked like a teenager, even though she was twenty-seven years old. However, anyone who marginalized her would be seriously mistaken. Batterson had praised her many times for being one of his toughest deputies.

She checked her watch again. A quarter to ten in the morning. If they hadn't gotten the call from Batterson, they would be leaving for the office right now. She was headed toward the coffeepot when a loud explosion rocked the room and she was thrown to the floor.