

ELITE GUARDIANS [3]

MOVING TARGET

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to the amazing brains behind it!
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To my family.
I love you for letting me write.

PROLOGUE

“... for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.”

The words grabbed the man by the throat. He pushed the half-eaten plate of spaghetti away and studied the passage again. He had read those words before, but never had he understood them to mean what was so clear to him now.

It had been six years.

Six years and the Lord had not exacted his vengeance. And it suddenly occurred to him why.

He was to be the instrument used to ensure justice. *He* was the one the Lord had chosen and had just now revealed to him how he was to carry out the plans that would set the world right again.

He was the chosen one.

Stunned at the revelation, he set aside the Bible and picked up the other book he’d been studying. Just one book in the hundreds he’d read over the past six years.

“Sweetheart?”

He looked up. “Yes?”

“Could you get me a glass of water, please?”

“Of course.”

He stood and walked to the sink to fill the glass. As the water ran from the spigot, he stared at it.

And knew what he had to do.

Because he was the Chosen One.

[1]

NINE MONTHS LATER

FRIDAY EVENING

5:30 PM

Maddy McKay smiled at the man across the table from her. “Congratulations on graduating from physical therapy.” Detective Quinn Holcombe wore khaki cargo pants, a long-sleeved black T-shirt that he did *GQ* things to—and a scowl. “Be careful, your face is going to freeze like that.”

He lifted a brow. A slight improvement. “That’s something you congratulate someone on?”

She sighed. He was always so grumpy. She smiled again. This one forced. “Of course it is. Do you have no social skills whatsoever? You were almost crushed to death. You lived. You finished your physical therapy. I’d say that’s cause to celebrate—and something to offer congratulations for.” Six months ago, Quinn had been investigating a case and the killer had used a backhoe to flip Quinn’s car, trapping him inside and slamming the arm of the machine down on the vehicle. Quinn’s broken legs had healed and now he walked with only a slight limp.

This morning, they'd run three miles without stopping. "You've come a long way, Quinn."

He grunted. "Maybe so."

She pursed her lips and leaned back, crossing her arms.

His eyes softened. "You're right, I'm sorry."

"For which offense?"

He sighed. "For everything. My lack of social skills for one. My surliness for another. So . . . thank you. I . . . uh . . . couldn't have . . . uh—" he cleared his throat—"gotten through all of this without you. You know that, right?"

The words combined with the flash of vulnerability reminded her of what she saw in the man in spite of his acerbic personality. She gave a short soft laugh. "Of course I know that." She eyed him and wrinkled her nose at him. "Although, with your sunny disposition, I can't imagine why you didn't have people lining up to volunteer to take care of you."

He blinked and shook his head. "There's no one I would have wanted there more than you, Maddy. I know I'm a bear sometimes, but . . . yeah."

"Yeah, you're a bear sometimes." She reached over and squeezed his hand. His willingness to just admit that he'd needed her, *wanted* her to be there, touched her. She'd been so close to smacking him in the head and walking out on their relationship—if one could call it that. Several times.

Now his words gave her hope that one day he'd open up to her. Confide in her. Let her share the pain that never left him.

"I wanted to ask you something," Quinn said.

"Okay. Ask."

"Why do you hang out with me?" he asked softly. "Why did you stay with me in the hospital? Through physical therapy?"

She swallowed. "I . . . uh . . . well, because of your charming personality, of course."

He let out a short bark of laughter. "Right. Really. Why?"
"We've been through a lot together."

"Yeah."

"You didn't leave my side last year when that lunatic slit my throat and left me to die."

He looked away. "That was a bad time, Maddy. I really didn't think you were going to make it."

"I know. I didn't think so either."

He caught her gaze. "Is that why you stayed with me? Because you felt obligated?"

"No."

"Then why?"

"Because, Quinn. Just . . . because." She sighed. "I don't know. Maybe obligation was part of it, but . . . not really." Silence descended. She took a sip of her water. "So, how's the puppy doing?"

He shot her a look that said he didn't want to let her off the hook that easily and she tensed. His scowl deepened. "Sherlock is a pain in my neck."

"But you like having him there."

He shrugged and sipped his water.

"Oh just admit it, you do." She and her co-workers Olivia Savage, Katie Matthews, and Haley Callaghan had all gone in together and gotten him the puppy. A black lab with massive amounts of energy. Quinn had a large fenced-in yard, and she knew the two went jogging every morning and evening.

"Maybe." The scowl faded and a small smile played at the corner of his lips.

"Not a resounding yes, but I'll take it." She also knew if he hadn't wanted the dog, he'd have given him back with a simple "Thanks, but no thanks." And he hadn't done that. She cut into her steak and took a bite. The savory piece nearly melted

on her tongue. She swallowed. "Have you made any progress on finding the serial killer?"

"No. I mean, I don't even know if there *is* a serial killer."

"But the messages keep coming and the people keep disappearing, right?"

"Yes." He shook his dark head. "So maybe it's just a serial kidnapper? We're missing something. Why can't we find them? Alive? Or even dead?"

"He's got a good hiding place."

"Unfortunately." Quinn's scowl deepened. "It's like they've just fallen off the face of the earth. We're stumped."

"That's the way it always seems to go, doesn't it?"

"Yes. Usually. Until he makes a mistake."

"How many victims now?"

"Eight. That we know of—over a six-month period of time." He ran a hand through his hair. "Or maybe none. I don't know."

She shuddered. "I worked several serial killer cases when I was with the FBI. I don't miss it."

"Well, that's not what I was hoping to hear."

Wary, she eyed him. "What do you mean?"

He reached across the table and took her hand. "I need your help on this case."

She shook her head. "You've turned it over to the FBI. Let them handle it."

"I'm part of the task force and I want to recruit you."

She pulled her hand from his and ignored the flutter in her pulse at his touch. It was her turn to scowl. "I'm a bodyguard now. I quit the FBI for a reason, remember?" She shrugged. "And besides, I'd have to be sworn back in as a special investigator or analyst or something, go through the whole background check thing, et cetera. Is it really worth it?"

“That wouldn’t take any time at all. You’re just trying to come up with excuses.”

She grimaced. “Maybe so.”

He leaned back and studied her. She resisted the urge to squirm and took another bite of the steak. While she chewed, her gaze went from person to person in the restaurant. No one alarmed her or caused the hair on the back of her neck to stand on end.

When she realized what she was doing, she let her eyes lock back on to Quinn’s. He was simply waiting. She sighed. “Why me?”

“Because you can get in his mind,” he murmured. “Just like you did with the Butcher.”

The serial killer who’d dismembered his victims and cooked them on the gas grill in his backyard. She still got nauseous thinking about him. “I don’t want to be in his head, Quinn. It’s too . . . damaging to my own peace of mind. We’re not meant to think stuff like that.”

“Unfortunately, we have to have people like you to catch people like him. That’s why you studied psychology, right?”

“Partly.”

He sighed. “He’s going to kill again.”

“Of course he is. They always do.” The steak now sat like lead in her stomach.

“Unless you help me catch him.”

She was losing her appetite. “Did you get another note or something?”

“Yes.” The notes came to the station with the victims’ names and pictures attached—and then the victims disappeared. And no matter how fast the cops moved, the victims were always already gone.

“And what did it say?”

He drew in a deep breath. “Judgment Day is coming.”
 “And whose name and picture were attached to this one?”
 “No one’s.”

She frowned. “That’s odd. Out of eight letters, he’s never deviated from his pattern. Are you sure you didn’t miss the name and picture?”

“I’m sure.”

She rubbed her forehead, the idea of helping grabbed hold. He was right. She was good at her job. Correction. *Had been* good at her job. She’d tell him about her note in a moment. Right now, her thoughts were spinning as to who might be sending the notes. “Could be a copycat,” she said. “I know you released information about the notes to warn the public, but there was nothing about the kind of stationery or if it was handwritten or typed and you never revealed that the victims’ names were on the notes, right?”

“Exactly. I thought the same thing. A copycat.”

“So, it could just be someone getting his kicks by emulating what he learned from watching the news. It wouldn’t take much to figure out who the lead detective on the case was and that’s why you got the notes.”

“Could be.” He shook his head. “But this feels weird.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Thanks, that’s all I ask. Now do you mind if we talk about something else?”

“Actually, I was going to tell you—”

“Seriously, no more work stuff tonight, okay?”

She shrugged. She’d tell him about the note tomorrow. “Okay then, I have something I’d like to discuss.”

“What?”

“Your birthday party tomorrow. You want to come by and pick me up or you want me to meet you there?”

His fork thunked on his plate. She raised a brow and he shook his head. "I don't need a party. Why would anyone want to throw me a party? Do I look like a party person? When have you ever known me to attend a party? I don't party." He picked the fork back up and viciously jabbed his own piece of meat. Then he pointed it at her. "They obviously know nothing about me and are not my friends if they'd do this."

"Right. Because they want to celebrate your birthday with you and went to all the trouble to set this up. I can see how you would come to that conclusion." Maddy could no longer find her smile. Her irritation was easy to locate though. And anger.

"Now wait a min—"

"No, I won't wait. Look, Quinn, apparently they see something in you to care about." She tossed her napkin down. "I'll tell them to cancel it. In fact, why don't I just tell them to cancel their friendship? If you want to be alone the rest of your life, then so be it. Enjoy your dinner. Alone." She stood and gathered her purse.

"Maddy—"

His shocked expression was gratifying, but she'd had enough. More than enough. "I'm getting off the Quinn Holcombe roller coaster. Congratulations. You've managed to push me away. In fact, I think you've managed to shove me straight over the edge of the cliff. Goodbye and have a nice life."

She headed for the door and she felt his eyes on her back. Her heart nearly broke in two, but she was done. She loved him, she freely admitted it, but he was too broken, too damaged to ever fully trust her, and she couldn't live with the stress of loving him anymore. So she'd live with the stress of loving him and losing him.

Because the fact that he let her walk out the door, get into her car, and drive away spoke volumes.

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The Chosen One stood about ten feet from the house and, aided by the gibbous moon, read the directions he'd printed from the internet one more time. How to disable a home alarm system. He'd done his research. He knew the kind of alarm system she had. It was a good one. A pricey one. And a wireless one. And as he'd found out, all wireless alarm systems rely on radio frequency signals. The signals bounce between the door and window sensors. When the system is breached, the alarm sounds and sends a silent alert to the monitoring company.

But what most people didn't know was that the signals could be jammed using radio noise. Radio noise prevented the signal from getting through the sensors and to the control panel. Easy peasy.

Within seconds, he had the alarm disabled and was through the back door. He smiled. Now that he'd found his calling, everything was falling into place.

From watching the house over the last several days, the Chosen One knew she'd enter through the kitchen. Every time she'd come home, she'd parked in the garage, shutting the door behind her.

Now. He looked around. Where to hide? He would have to act fast. She was very skilled in self-defense. He'd never beat her in a hand-to-hand fight. He hefted the canister in his right hand. She'd be no match for the friend he brought along.

After studying her house plans, he knew she had a small closet off the great room. When she came in through the garage, she would enter the laundry room, pass the small utility room and into the open kitchen and dining area. No place to hide there. Now that he was actually in her house, he could see that the closet was his best option. As long as it wasn't packed to the brim. He walked over and opened the door.

He smiled. Two coats, two filters that probably fit the ceiling vent in her kitchen, two tennis rackets, and a box of children's toys. His smile slipped. She didn't have children, but she catered to the mass of nieces and nephews she had. They would miss her.

For a brief moment remorse flickered. He snuffed it out. He was fulfilling his calling, living out his destiny. Just two more and his work would be done. He could go back to living his quiet, simple life and no one would ever know of his greatness. And that was fine.

Because he would know and the raging need for vengeance would be satisfied. His phone pinged and he glanced at the screen.

What do I do about the pits?

What do you mean?

You wanted changes. Should I have some driftwood or a tree limb lying around for them to use to get over some of the pits safely?

Do that for several pits around the perimeter. But space those out so that they have to find the right ones to cross to live. Camouflage the others. Wrong area = death. Right area = they live.

Good idea. Thanks.

Anytime.

He tucked his cell phone into his coat pocket, then slipped inside the closet to wait for Maddy McKay to arrive home.