

***THE
TRAITOR'S
PAWN***

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CHAPTER ONE

“WATCH YOUR BACK . . . this isn’t over.”

Aubrey Grayson tried to bury the ominous warning and instead focus on the clear, southern Texas predawn sky suspended above her. She was safe for now. Lost beneath a million brilliant stars. A rush of happy memories pushed their way to the surface, past the threat, and managed to bring with it the familiar sense of contentment she always found here.

She needed to do this more often. Needed to find time to step away from the frantic pace of life she’d found herself caught up in back in Houston. God had a reason for reminding his people to be still, and three days of trekking through the Texas wetlands in exchange for her high-stress job was exactly what she needed. She took a sip of the steamy coffee she’d brought with her and breathed in the invigorating scent. She’d spend the rest of the morning hunting waterfowl, eating bacon and eggs cooked over a fire in a cast-iron pan, and listening to Papps and his boys swap tall tales from previous trips.

But for the moment she was simply going to enjoy the quiet.

Something splashed in the distance, breaking through her thoughts. She turned toward the noise, immediately feeling a spike of adrenaline, but she couldn't see anything. She shook off the instinctual warning. It was probably nothing more than a duck or a frog enjoying the last moments of darkness, broken only by a thin layer of yellow light now along the horizon.

"Aubrey?"

She let out a sharp sigh of relief. "Papps. I was hoping you'd come join me."

"Sorry . . . did I scare you?"

She motioned for him to sit down next to her. "Just lost in thought."

"I'm not surprised. No matter how early I get up, you always beat me." The former senator sat down on the slice of dry ground Aubrey had found overlooking the wetlands. "I'm glad you decided to come down here. You needed a break."

"You're right, and I'm slowly starting to relax."

"Good, because this is the perfect setting for that. I love the hunting, but I also know how much you love the solitude out here at this hour."

"It's something hard to find back home."

He nudged her with his shoulder. "Which is why you should come down here more often. You know there's always a place at the house, and, next to this setting, the front porch is the perfect spot to watch the sunrise."

She smiled at the offer. "I do need to take you up on it more often."

"I wish you would. The house gets lonely with all the kids gone. With Gail gone."

Aubrey didn't try to fight the wave of sadness that swept through her. "I miss her too."

The former senator Grant McKenna and his family had been a part of her life for as long as she could remember. And Papps, as she'd always called him, had become like a father to her, taking the place of her absent biological father. His residence outside Corpus Christi had become her home away from home.

"Ryan told me you were thinking about selling the house," she said.

"I talk about it every now and then, but I don't think I'll ever bring myself to actually do it. Too many memories. Too much work. And for now at least, it gives you and the boys a place to come two or three times a year."

She reached down and squeezed his hand. "You sound lonely."

"I'm doing okay. Really. Gail's been gone four years now, though it's crazy how it feels like yesterday sometimes. Other times it seems like a lifetime ago."

"How are you doing? I mean really doing?"

"I can't complain. I'm staying busy, and that helps. I'm still volunteering on a couple nonprofit boards, and I'm involved in a Christmas fundraiser next month. On top of that I try to catch as many of the grandkids' sporting events as I can."

She chuckled. "Maybe I'm not the only one who needs to slow down."

"I think about stepping down every once in a while, but staying busy helps. Gail and I had so many plans. So many places we wanted to travel to together. I guess you plan your whole life for retirement with the idea of enjoying it with the person

you love, but sometimes . . . Sometimes life doesn't go the way you think it will."

Aubrey heard the regret in his voice. He wasn't the only one who found it hard to believe Gail was gone.

"But enough about me," he said. "You're the one I'm worried about. You seem tired this trip. More tired than usual."

She stared out across the water as the sun continued to slowly bathe the horizon in yellow and gold. She was tempted to tell him about the threats she'd received, but she wasn't going to add to his worry. "Things never seem to slow down, but moments like this remind me how much I need a break."

"You could always transfer and get a job down here. I understand they're hiring game wardens. It's got to be calmer than what you're doing in Houston."

She took another sip of her coffee. "The job has its ups and downs, but I love it, and can't imagine doing anything else."

"Meaning your promotion to detective?"

She nodded.

"I remember when you first started talking about law enforcement. You were probably ten, maybe eleven. You always had this desire to serve your country."

"And you were one of my biggest influences. If it wasn't for you and your family, I'd be in a different place right now."

"I don't know. You've always been strong, no matter what life throws at you. Besides, I think I'm the one who should be thanking you. I love my boys, but we needed a bit of softness to balance out all the testosterone. We all love it when you're around."

She laughed, loving how he always made her feel like she was

one of his own. “You’ve definitely got that between Ryan and the twins. But now that Kyle and Mitchell are married, it’s a bit more balanced.”

“True. And don’t get me wrong. You know how much I love my daughters-in-law, but you’ll never catch them out here duck hunting.”

“You do have a point.” She watched the rays of light start to edge their way across the marshland, the yellows and oranges of the sunrise reflecting across the water. Renee and Kim had no idea what they were missing. “Mitchell told me they took advantage of their husbands being gone and are Christmas shopping in Houston.”

Even her mother had never understood how she preferred camping and hunting to a weekend shopping trip, but she’d choose time out in the middle of God’s creation over shopping any day. It always helped lower her stress and calm her mind.

Papps squeezed her knee. “I’m glad you’re here, but there’s something you’re not telling me, isn’t there?”

She glanced at him. The morning glow on the water gave her just enough light to read his worried expression. “You always know when something’s going on, don’t you?”

“It must be a sixth sense. In case you forgot, before I got into politics, I was a father, counselor, and youth pastor.”

She let out a slow breath. “I’m just learning how to deal with some of the aspects of my job, but it’s nothing really.”

“Were you threatened?”

She closed her eyes for a moment, wishing she could permanently erase the image of the dead bodies on the living room floor. And the chilling expression their suspect had given her when

they arrested him. But what she'd experienced was part of the job. Part of her commitment to making the world a safer place. And nothing anyone could say or do was going to change that.

"Empty threats," she said. "The man's now sitting behind bars and looking at life in prison."

"If you ever feel like you need extra help, please tell me. I've got friends who work in security—"

"I can't run every time someone threatens me." She shook her head. "I've got a partner who watches my back and a supportive captain. It has unsettled me some, but I'll be fine."

Papps sighed. "Sometimes I forget you're not a little girl anymore, begging me to take you to the aquarium every weekend."

She laughed. "I still love the aquarium."

"I'm not surprised, but if you change your mind . . . seriously—"

"I appreciate it, but like I said, I'll be fine."

She would. She just needed to shake off the alarm. Nico was in prison and couldn't hurt her. Or anyone else, for that matter.

"What frustrates me the most is that even though he's finally behind bars, there are still more out there." She pulled up the zipper of her jacket a couple more inches to block the wind. "The work to get people like him off the streets never ends."

"No, but your job isn't to catch all of them. And everyone you do take off the streets is one less criminal who can hurt someone. That's all you can do—one at a time."

"You always know exactly what to say, don't you?"

He laughed. "I try."

She smiled, reminded once again of how much she enjoyed being with him and his sons. How they'd become like a second family to her after her mother passed away. And how the emo-

tional and spiritual encouragement they gave her was exactly what she needed. She didn't have to worry about Nico. He couldn't touch her here.

"You ready to get in a few hours of hunting?" Papps asked. "I hear Ryan has thrown down a challenge to see who can get their day's quota first."

Aubrey laughed. "Why am I not surprised?"

"You know me and the boys. We always like a bit of competition."

They stood up and started back toward the duck-hunting blind. All three of his sons shared their father's love of hunting as well as his competitive spirit and had made this weekend an annual event. Aubrey just enjoyed the feeling of belonging.

A second later, a muffled shot echoed off the water, followed by the flapping of wings, shifting her attention to the right.

"Aubrey . . ." Papps sucked in a sharp breath and grabbed her arm. "Aubrey . . . I think I've been hit."

"What?"

He stumbled beside her, then collapsed onto the ground, as she tried to decipher what had just happened. A second later another shot rang out, slicing the air next to her as she knelt beside him. She stuffed down the panic, needing to keep them both out of the shooter's line of sight. Water seeped into her rubber boots. In this position, there was no protection beyond the tall grass surrounding them, but what terrified her even more was that she was certain this wasn't an accident. Not only had the shot been suppressed with a silencer, it didn't seem to have been aimed at any birds.

But motivation didn't matter right now. What mattered was

getting Papps out of here alive. The problem was that they were too exposed, and trying to call for help would only expose them further. Staying low, she managed to pull Papps into the outcropping of muddy, tall grass behind them.

“Where were you shot?” she whispered.

“My side.”

She pulled back his shirt, but in the low light of dawn, it was impossible to tell how much damage had been done.

“I have to try to stop the bleeding,” she said, “but you’re going to have to stay as still as possible.”

She untied his neck bandana, folded it quickly, then pressed it into the wound. But stopping the bleeding wasn’t going to be enough. They needed medical help. Mitchell was a doctor and only a few hundred yards away, but hunting hours had just started, and even if anyone had heard the shot, no one would think twice about it. As crazy as the idea sounded, she was going to have to try to take down whoever was out there.

Keeping her hands pressed against Papps’s side, Aubrey shifted her position slightly to the right, then raised her head. Marsh grasses rustled around her. Duck calls and the boom of shotguns sounded in the distance. A flash of sunlight glinted off a gun as she caught sight of the silhouette of a man.

Bingo.

She glanced back at Papps. She’d found the shooter, but her options were still limited. She was irritated at herself for not bringing her weapon with her. All she’d wanted to do was catch a few moments of quiet before the sun rose. Now that had turned out to be a deadly mistake.

No doubt the retired senator had a score of enemies, but he

wasn't the only one who'd been on the receiving end of death threats. There was simply no way to know at this point which of them was the target. She glanced back down at Papps's side. The bandana was already soaked, but she was unsure how much was blood and how much was water. Her heart pounded. A dog barked in the distance. Butch, Papps's Labrador, was already retrieving ducks at their hunting site, and no one had any idea what was going on.

"Stay with me, Papps," she said. "I'm getting you out of here. Can you hold this against your side?" She pressed his hand against the cloth.

"I'll try."

"I'm going after him," she said. "Right now we're pinned down."

"Aubrey, don't . . ."

She caught the panic in his voice, but she didn't have a choice. She kept low, her boots pressing into the mud as she headed toward where she'd seen the shadowy figure. He was still out there. Waiting. Stalking. She stopped behind a large clump of marsh reeds, not moving, barely breathing, and tried not to shiver. Even with her waterproof gear she could still feel the cold seeping through to her skin.

Show me what to do, God. Leaving Papps could mean he bleeds out, but if I go back . . . If I don't stop this person . . .

Aubrey caught movement to her right and turned toward the figure, but she was a fraction of a second too late. He grabbed her, slamming her onto the ground. She groaned as she landed on her back, opened her mouth, and tried to fill her lungs with air, but the muscles in her chest refused to work.

“Don’t scream.” He stood over her, gun pointed at her head. “Don’t make a sound, or your friend is going to end up with another bullet hole.”

“What do you want?” she asked.

“You’re coming with me.”

He dragged her toward the water where a small boat bobbed next to the shoreline. The familiar sounds of duck hunting surrounded them while the sun continued to slowly move above the horizon. So Nico had made good on his threat. She had no idea how he’d found her here. She hadn’t mentioned to anyone except a couple of close friends where she was going.

She felt the barrel of his gun jab into her rib cage. “Get in the boat, on your knees. Now.”

She hesitated before obeying, knowing if she got on that boat and left with him, she was as good as dead. The bottom was wet with an inch of cold water, but that was the least of her worries. If someone didn’t find Papps quickly, he was going to bleed out and die. And if she didn’t get away, his family would eventually find her body floating in the water. If she was going to get out of this alive, she had to escape.

She spun around and jammed her elbow into the man’s Adam’s apple. He countered by throwing a wild punch at her, but she managed to duck, then block his punch. She screamed as he swung at her again. This time, she prayed Papps’s boys would hear her. She leveraged her weight to her advantage and blocked another punch, then struck the guy hard beneath his chin. But she wasn’t the only one trained in self-defense. A second later, he swung the butt of his weapon against her temple, and everything went dark.