

now. With all that's happened, I've lost track of time, but I bet I have been hiding here for over an hour. There is no clock in the room, it's not like the occupants have any pressing need for one. I don't have a watch and my cell phone is in my purse. My purse, unfortunately, is in my car.

My car, a cute little black and yellow Mini Cooper, is in a ditch about two miles from here. I had to leave it there after being deliberately run off the road by Scary Dudes in their big, black Cadillac Escalade. In my haste to get away, I left my bag under the driver's seat. I'm hoping they were distracted enough chasing after me that they didn't think to steal it. It's a bitch having to cancel all those credit cards and get a new driver's license. Although, I could use a new picture and maybe I could change my name back while I was at the DMV. There's always a bright side, right?

Luckily, I managed to grab my car keys, which also had the keys to the funeral home on the ring. I was on my way here anyway, so I continued on foot, running through the trees, between houses, avoiding street lights. A regular secret agent. I was congratulating myself on my stealth and physical fitness because I arrived at the funeral home in what I believed was record time.

That was until I turned the corner, breathless and sweaty and saw the Escalade in the parking lot, lights off, engine running. That was ominous. They appeared to be waiting for something or someone. In case it was me, I decided sneaking in would be prudent. The back door to the funeral home is not visible from the parking lot or the street. It's tucked away between the garage and tall lilac hedges. The perfect location for bringing in the dead without drawing attention, also, not a

bad way for a regular Ninja Girl to sneak in without tipping off Scary Dudes.

Why does everyone want to be at the funeral home before dawn on a Monday morning? I doubted it was to see Mr. Absom. I knew why I was here. Late yesterday, I had an epiphany. A key piece of evidence, one that could end this whole nightmare, might be in Mike's personal effects. What I couldn't figure out was how Scary Dudes knew where I was going in the middle of the night. Had they been following me for a while without my notice? Were they somehow monitoring my conversations? Or, nightmare of nightmares, had I been betrayed by the only person I've trusted since Mike's murder?

I've been pushing that thought out of my head for hours. However, it's persistent and keeps coming back, like a wasp at a picnic. You know the one. It hangs out by your soda can. You swat it away, but it keeps coming back until you absently take a sip and get stung. I'm waiting for the stinger.

The only person I had confided in since Mike turned up dead, the only person who had seen me naked in months, the only person I have *wanted* to see me naked in months, is also the only person who knew where I was headed: Deputy U.S. Marshal Colby Marcus Jameson, III. I knew I was in trouble when he arrived on scene. Tall, mocha skinned, with vibrant green eyes, he hit me straight in the heart. Unexpected, unnerving and unavoidable, every cell in my body said he was different, special. Before he even spoke a word, his eyes met mine and I knew. I knew he was that soul connection we are all looking for and if I wasn't so busy running from Scary Dudes, I'd be running from him at breakneck speed. The last thing my fragile heart needed was *that* type of entanglement.

Of course, all that could have been the adrenaline talking, because Colby was first through the door after I discovered Mike's body. Without a word, he gestured for me to be still and quiet while he assessed the situation. He took control, offered comfort and looked down my shirt, all without missing a beat. He was all that stood between me and the hysteria that threatened to overwhelm me. Before the day was out, he had saved my life, twice. Last night when inspiration hit, he had been my first and only call.

"Colby, it's me. Where are you?"

He answered with his unmistakable deep growl of a voice. "On a stakeout with the State LEOS. Everything okay?"

"I've been going over and over the last night I was with Mike...Marshal Fraser. I think we missed something. I remembered he kept a flash drive on his keychain, but I don't think it was there that last night. We were at my apartment so we could go over the funeral service in detail. He brought take-out..."

"TJ," he interrupted. "A little busy here..."

"Right...right. The flash drive, you didn't find one when you went through his stuff, did you?" There was a beat, and I imagined him mentally taking an inventory.

"No. You think it's important?"

"I do. Nothing concrete, simply a nagging feeling, I'm not even sure why I remembered it."

"Women's intuition?" he teased.

"Really? Mocking me?" I said, my voice unnaturally high. "I've been threatened, shot at, used as an operative, a decoy and the man I was sipping wine with two days ago is dead. And you want to mock me?!" I was little on edge.

“Sorry TJ. I didn’t mean anything. Breathe,” he added gently, “I was trying to lighten the mood. Clearly, I failed.”

“I’m sorry. I’m a little on edge.” To his credit, he remained silent. “I think I should look through his stuff at the funeral home, just to double-check. They have it locked down but no one has picked it up yet. Shouldn’t the Marshals have it?”

“Jurisdiction issues, it gets ugly. No one wants to touch it when it might be a dirty cop.”

“I don’t believe he is...was dirty. I don’t,” I said adamantly. I fought back tears as I thought of my last moments with Mike.

“I know,” he said in a tone that indicated he really did know. “Look, as soon as I can get away, I’ll pick you up and we’ll check it out okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed and he disconnected. I probably should have waited for him, but after lying in bed and staring up at the night sky for hours, I made the fateful decision to get up and head here. Realistically, how could he have known? He couldn’t have tipped anyone off...could he?

I refuse to believe he’d do anything like that. Of course, my judgment in regards to men could be compromised. What did I know? Maybe Mike had been a dirty cop. Maybe my Soon-To-Be-Ex wasn’t gay. Maybe Colby was not to be trusted. Then again, maybe I’m a little jumpy because of everything that’s happened over the last month. Month? It felt like a year.

Maybe I should start at the beginning. When my life began to unravel...