

TITLE-AUTHOR

1

Fatal Threat, Marie Force

CHAPTER ONE

A JOGGER SPOTTED the body floating in the Anacostia River just south of the John Philip Sousa Bridge.

“I hate these kinds of calls,” Lieutenant Sam Holland said to her partner, Detective Freddie Cruz, as she battled District traffic on their way to the city’s southeastern quadrant. “No one knows if this is a homicide, but they call us in anyway. We get to stand around and sweat our balls off while the ME does her thing.”

“I hesitate to point out, Lieutenant, that you don’t actually *have* balls to sweat off.”

“You know what I mean!”

“Yeah, I do,” he said with a sigh. “It’s going to be a long, hot, smelly Friday down at the river waiting to find out if we’re needed.”

“I gotta have a talk with Dispatch about when we’re to be called and when we are *not* to be called.”

“Let me know how that goes.”

“To make this day even better, after work I have to go to a fitting for my freaking bridesmaid dress. I’m too damned old to be a damned bridesmaid.”

His snort of laughter only served to further irritate her, which of course made him laugh harder.

“It’s not funny!”

“Yeah, it really is.” With dark brown hair, an always-tan complexion and the perfect amount of stubble on his jaw, he really was too cute for words, not that she’d *ever* tell him that. Everywhere they went together, women took notice of him. For all he cared.

He was madly in love with Elin Svendsen and looking forward to their autumn wedding. Wiping laughter tears from his brown eyes, he said, "I won't make you wear a dress when you're my best-man woman."

"Thank God for that. I need to stop making friends. That was my first mistake."

"Poor Jeannie," he said of their colleague, Detective Jeannie McBride, who was getting married next weekend. "Does she have any idea that she has a hostile bridesmaid in her wedding party?"

"Of course she does. Her sisters left me completely out of the planning of the shower, no doubt at her request. I'll be forever grateful for that small favor." Sam shuddered recalling an afternoon of horrifyingly stupid "shower games," paper plates full of ribbons and bows, and dirty jokes about the wedding night for two people who'd been living together for more than a year. The whole thing had given her hives.

But Jeannie... She'd loved every second of it, and seeing her face lit up with joy had gone a long way toward alleviating Sam's hives. After everything Jeannie had been through to get to her big day, no one was happier for her—or happier to stand up for her—than Sam. Not that she'd ever tell anyone that either. She had a reputation to maintain, after all.

She'd been in an unusually cranky mood since her husband, Nick, left for Iran two weeks ago for what should've been a five-day trip but had twice been extended. If he didn't get home soon, she wouldn't be responsible for her actions. In addition to worrying about his safety in a country known for being less than friendly toward Americans, she'd also discovered how entirely reliant upon him she'd become over the last year and a half. It was ridiculous, really. She was a

strong, independent woman who'd taken care of herself for years before he'd come back into her life. So how had he turned her into a simpering, whimpering, cranky mess simply by leaving her for two damned weeks?

Naturally, the people around her had noticed that she was out of sorts. Their adopted thirteen-year-old son, Scotty, asked every morning before he left for baseball camp when Dad would be home, probably because he was tired of dealing with her by himself. Freddie and the others at work had been giving her a wide berth, and even the reporters who hounded her mercilessly had backed off after she'd bitten their heads off a few too many times.

During infrequent calls from Nick, he'd been rushed and annoyed and equally out of sorts, which didn't do much to help her bad mood. Two more days. Two more long, boring, joyless days and then he'd be home and things could get back to normal.

What did it say about her that she was actually *glad* to have a floater to deal with to keep her brain occupied during the last two days of Nick's trip? *It means you have it bad for your husband, and you've become far too dependent on him if two weeks without him turns you into a cranky cow.* Sam despised her voice of reason almost as much as she despised Nick being so far away from her for so long.

Twenty minutes after receiving the call from Dispatch, Sam and Freddie made it to M Street Southeast, which was lined with emergency vehicles of all sorts—police, fire, EMS, medical examiner.

“Major overkill for a floater,” Sam said as they got out of the car she'd parked illegally to join the party on the riverbank. “What the hell is EMS doing here?”

“Probably for the guy who found the body. Word is he was shook up.”

Dense humidity hit her at the same time as the funk of the rank-smelling river. “God it’s hotter than the devil’s dick today.”

“Honestly, Sam. That’s disgusting.”

“Well, you gotta figure the devil’s dick is pretty hot due to the neighborhood he hangs in, right?”

He rolled his eyes and held up the yellow crime-scene tape for her. Patrol had taped off the Anacostia Riverwalk Trail to keep the gawkers away.

The closer they got to the river’s edge, the more Sam began to regret the open-toe sandals she’d worn in deference to the oppressive July heat. The squish of Anacostia River mud between her toes was almost as gross as the smell of the river itself. She had her shoulder-length hair up in a clip that left her neck exposed to the merciless sun.

Tactical Response teams had boats on the scene, and from her vantage point on the riverbank Sam could see the red ponytail belonging to the Chief Medical Examiner, Dr. Lindsey McNamara. She was too far out for Sam to yell to her for an update.

“Let’s talk to the guy who called it in,” she said to Freddie.

They traipsed back the way they’d come, with Sam trying to ignore the disgusting mud between her toes. Officer Beckett worked the tapeline at the northern end of the area they’d cordoned off. He nodded at them. “Afternoon, Lieutenant. Lovely day to spend by the river.”

“Indeed. I would’ve packed a picnic had I known we were coming. Where’s the guy who called it in?”

“Over there with EMS.” Beckett pointed to a cluster of people taking advantage of the shade under a huge oak tree. “He was hysterical when he realized the blob was a body.”

“Did you get a name?”

Beckett consulted his notebook. “Mike Lonergan. He works at the Navy Yard and runs out here every day at noon.” He tore out the page that had Lonergan’s full name, address and cell phone number written on it and gave it to Sam.

“Good work, Beckett. Thanks. Keep everyone out of here until we know whether or not this is a crime scene.”

“Yes, ma’am. Will do.”

“Why would anyone run out here during the hottest part of the day?” Sam asked Freddie as they made their way to where Lonergan was being seen to by the paramedics.

“For something called exercise, I’d imagine.”

“When did you become such a smart-ass? You used to be such a nice Christian boy.”

“Things began to go south for me when I got assigned to a smart-ass lieutenant who’s been a terrible influence on my sweet, young mind.”

“*Right.*” Amused by him as always, Sam drew out the single word for effect. “You were easily led.” She approached the paramedics who were hovering over Lonergan. “We’d like a word with Mr. Lonergan,” she said to the one who seemed to be in charge.

He used a hand motion to tell his team to allow her and Freddie in. The witness wore a tank top, running shorts and high-tech running shoes. Sam put him at midthirties.

“Mr. Lonergan, I’m Lieutenant Holland—”

“I know who you are.” His shoulders were wrapped in one of those foil thingies that runners used to keep from dehydrating or overheating or something like that. What did she know about such things? She got most of her exercise having wild sex with her husband. Except for recently, thus her foul mood.

Lonergan’s dark blond hair was wet with perspiration. His brown eyes were big and haunted as he looked up at them.

“Can you tell us what you saw?” Ever since she’d taken down a killer at the inaugural parade, she was recognized everywhere she went. She hated that and yearned for the days when no one recognized her. But that ship had sailed the minute her sexy young husband became the nation’s vice president late last year. Her blown cover was entirely his fault, and she liked to remind him of that every chance she got.

“I was running on the trail like I do every day, and when I came around that bend there, I saw something in the water.” He took a drink from a bottle of water, and Sam took note of the slight tremble in his hand. “At first I thought it was a garbage bag, but when I looked closer, I saw a hand.” He shuddered. “That’s when I called 911.”

“How far out was it?” Sam asked.

“About twenty feet from the bank of the river.”

“Was there anything else you could tell us about the body?”

“I think it’s a woman.”

“Why do you say that?” Freddie asked.

“There was hair.” Lonergan took another drink of water. “Once I realized what I was looking at, I could see long hair fanned out around the head.” He looked

up at them. “Do you think it’s that student who went missing?”

Sam made sure her expression gave nothing away. “We’d have no way to know that at this point.” The entire Metro PD had been searching for nineteen-year-old Ruby Denton for more than two weeks. She’d come to the District to take summer classes at Capitol University and hadn’t been seen since her first night on campus. The story had garnered national attention thanks in large part to the efforts of her family in Kentucky.

“I bet it’s her,” Lonergan said.

“Do me a favor and keep that thought to yourself for now. No sense upsetting the family before we know anything for certain.”

“That’s true.”

Sam handed him her card. “If you think of anything else, let me know.”

“I will.” After a pause, he said, “I was out here yesterday, and she wasn’t there. I would’ve noticed if she’d been there.”

“That’s good to know. Thanks for your help.”

“It’s sad, you know? For someone to end up like that.”

“Yes, it is.” She stepped away from him to confer with the paramedic in charge. “Is he okay?”

“Yeah, he’s in shock. He’ll be fine. You think it’s Ruby Denton?”

“I’ll tell you the same thing I just told him—we have no way to know until Dr. McNamara gets the body back to the lab. Until then, we’d be speculating, and that sort of thing only makes a hellish situation worse for a family looking for their daughter. Ask your people to keep their mouths shut.”

“Yes, ma’am. No one will hear anything from my team.”

“Thank you.”

“What’s going on over there?” Freddie asked, drawing Sam’s attention to the tapeline, where Beckett was arguing with a bunch of suits.

“Let’s go find out.”

They walked back the way they’d come, along the trail to where Beckett held his own against four men in suits with reflective glasses and attitudes that immediately identified them as federal agents.

“What’s the problem, gentlemen?” Sam asked.

“There she is,” one of them said in a low growl that immediately raised Sam’s hackles.

“Let us in,” another one said. “Right now.”

“I’m not letting you in until you tell me what you want,” Beckett said. “This is a potential crime scene—”

“We need to speak to Mrs. Cappuano.” The one who seemed to be in charge of the Fed squad took another step forward. “It’s urgent.”

Sam’s heart dropped to her belly and for a brief, horrifying second she feared her legs would give out under her. *Nick*... Why would federal agents have tracked her down at a crime scene in the middle of her workday unless something had happened to him?

Please no.

Sam immediately began bargaining with a higher power she didn’t believe in. She’d give up anything, anything in this world except Scotty, if it would keep the man in front of her from saying words that could never be unsaid or unheard.

Only Freddie’s arm around her shoulders kept her from buckling in the few seconds it took for Sam to

recover herself enough to speak. “What do you want with me?”

“We need you to come with us, ma’am.”

“That’s not happening until you tell us who you are and what you want,” Freddie said.

In unison they flashed four federal badges.

“United States Secret Service,” the one in charge said. “We need you to come with us, ma’am.”

Sam didn’t recognize any of them. Why would she? Nick’s detail was in Iran, and Scotty’s was with him. “I...I’m working here. I can’t...” Bile burned her throat as her lunch threatened to reappear. With her heart beating so hard she could hear the echo of it strumming in her ears, she somehow managed to choke back the nausea. Later she’d be thankful she hadn’t puked on the agents’ shoes. Right now, however, she couldn’t think about anything other than Nick. “Has something happened to my husband?”

Freddie tightened his grip on her shoulder, letting her know his thoughts mirrored hers. That didn’t do much to comfort her.

Looking down at her with a stone-faced glare, the agent said, “We’re under orders to bring you in. We’re not at liberty to discuss the particulars with you at this time.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Freddie asked. “You can’t just take her. She’s not under Secret Service protection, and she’s working.”

“I’m afraid we *can* take her, and we will, by force if necessary.”

“What the fuck?” Beckett spoke for all of them. At some point he’d moved to the other side of her.

Like someone flipped a switch, they moved with military precision, busting through the tapeline,

grabbing hold of her arms and quickly extracting her before her stunned colleagues could react. Sam fought them, but she was no match for four huge, muscled, well-dressed men who whisked her away with frightening efficiency.

In the background, she could hear Freddie and Beckett screaming, swearing—at least Beckett was—and giving chase, but they, too, were no match for this group. Before she knew what hit her, she was inside the cool darkness of one in the Secret Service’s endless fleet of black SUVs, the doors locking with a sound that echoed like a shotgun blast.

“Move,” the agent in charge ordered.

The car lurched forward just as Freddie and Beckett reached it. Freddie pounded once against the side window with a closed fist before the car pulled out of his reach.

Sam watched the scene unfold around her with a detached feeling of shock and fear. Something awful must’ve happened. That was the only possible reason for this dramatic scene. She was far too afraid for Nick to work up the fury she’d normally feel at being kidnapped by federal agents. Her hands were shaking, and her entire body was covered in cold chills.

If Nick had been harmed in some way or if he was... *No, no, no, not going there.* If he was hurt, what did it matter if Secret Service agents had grabbed her? What would anything matter?

She bit back the overwhelming fear and forced herself to focus. “Would someone please tell me what’s going on here?”

CHAPTER TWO

NO ONE SAID a word.

Silence had never felt heavier or more oppressive. Why wouldn't they tell her what was wrong? Out the front windshield she noticed several other black SUVs had joined their caravan. They moved with stealthy speed, emergency lights flashing as they flew through notoriously clogged District streets. Drivers who regularly ignored police sirens got the fuck out of the way for the Secret Service.

While trying to control her galloping heart and frantic need to know what was happening, she made herself watch the world go by outside the car, trying to figure out where they were taking her. When they hung a left, she realized they weren't going to her home.

How did she even know these guys were actually with the Secret Service? What if terrorists pretending to be federal agents had kidnapped her?

"I want to see your badges. Up close. Right now."

The one sitting closest to her handed his over.

Sam studied it carefully. Thomas J. Jackson, United States Secret Service. The badge seemed legit. She gave the others the same scrutiny, noting the one in charge was named Daniel Cooley. "What do you want with me?"

"We'll brief you fully when we arrive at our destination," Jackson said.

"Which is where?"

"We're not at liberty to share that information."

“Tell me one thing.” She swallowed the largest ball of fear that had ever lodged in any throat ever and forced herself to ask the most unimaginable question of her life. “Is my husband dead?”

Jackson, bless his heart, took mercy on her. “No, ma’am.”

Sam rested her head back against the seat, closed her eyes and released the breath she’d been holding from the second she realized the Secret Service had come for her. Adrenaline coursed through her system, making her feel amped and drained at the same time. “And my son?”

“He’s fine.”

She’d never been more afraid at any time in her life than she’d been in the last ten minutes, and it would be perfectly all right with her if she never felt that way again—ever. Then it dawned on her that Jackson had said Nick wasn’t dead. He hadn’t said he was fine either. Was he hurt? Clinging to life? Taken hostage? Being held for ransom? On a flight that’d been hijacked?

One after another, the scenarios went through her mind, each more horrifying than the last. What if... *Oh God, I can’t even... I just can’t.*

They drove for quite some time before the driver took an abrupt right onto a ramp that descended into what looked like a parking garage. The car stopped in front of a security door that rose to admit them, and the car lurched forward into darkness.

Sam spun around in her seat to watch the door close behind them. What the actual fuck was happening? And where the fuck was she?

The door next to her opened, and one of the agents held out a hand, as if to help her from the car. “Right this way, ma’am.”

She ignored his hand and got out on her own, hoping there’d be some answers at the other end of “right this way.” All four agents surrounded her as they traveled down a long corridor that ended at a closed door.

Cooley punched in a code on a keypad next to the door, and it slid open to reveal another dark room. Sam blinked several times, her eyes protesting the darkness after the bright sunshine outside.

“Ma’am?” He gestured for her to go in ahead of them.

She didn’t want to go in there. Every instinct was telling her not to step forward, to run away, but she knew they’d never let her escape. This was reminding her far too much of the march down the stairs into hell in Marissa Springer’s basement.

“W-what is this place?” Sam hated the hitch in her voice that made her sound nervous.

“It’s a secure facility,” Cooley said. “You’ll be safe here.”

“How do I know that?”

“You have to trust us.”

“Why should I trust you? I’ve never laid eyes on any of you before you showed up at my crime scene and basically snatched me without any information as to *why* I was being snatched. You’ll have to pardon me if I’m currently running a little low on trust.”

“I understand how you must feel, Mrs.—”

“Do you? Do you really? Is your husband the vice president of the United States? Is he protected by the agency that just snatched me from a crime scene for no reason that I’ve been made aware of? Is he in Iran, a

country not exactly known for its hospitality toward Americans? Do you not know if your husband is injured or worse? If you can't answer *yes* to any of those questions, *then you actually have no fucking idea how I must feel!*"

"I'm sorry. You're right. I don't know how you feel, but if you'd please come with us, I assure you that everything will be explained in due time."

"Due time," she said with a bitchy-sounding snort. "Is that agency speak for 'when we get around to it'?"

"We'll brief you as soon as we're authorized to do so."

Sam was about to give in and go into the room when she heard a shout from behind her.

"Mom!"

She spun around to see Scotty heading toward her, surrounded by his Secret Service detail. The sight of the familiar agents was welcome proof that the four who'd snatched her were legit. Her son ran into her outstretched arms.

"What's going on?" he asked. His dark hair was damp with sweat, and his face was flushed from being outside at camp. He was wearing an orange camp T-shirt, a Feds cap and his baseball cleats.

"I don't know," she answered honestly, "but I'm told we're going to be briefed soon."

"Is it Dad? Has something happened?"

"I'm not sure. They told me he's alive, but they haven't said anything more than that."

That he visibly crumpled at the news Nick was alive let her know how afraid he'd been, and for that alone, she'd never forgive the Secret Service for this stunt. It was one thing to scare the hell out of her. It was another thing altogether for them to scare the hell out of her

kid. As soon as she found out what the fuck was going on, heads were going to roll.

“If you would.” Cooley again gestured to the room on the other side of the steel door.

Sam took Scotty by the hand and led him into the huge space, where there were comfortable-looking sofas, tables with books and magazines neatly arranged, and a counter with snacks and drinks on ice.

“If there’s anything in particular you need,” Cooley said, “please let one of my people know. We’ll do anything we can to ensure your comfort.”

“When will this briefing I was promised happen?”

“Shortly.”

Sensing that was the best answer she was going to get, Sam led Scotty to one of the sofas. “Let me see your phone,” she said to him when they were seated together.

While the agents conferred with each other in hushed voices, Scotty handed over his smartphone.

Sam pressed the big button and waited for it to come to life. “How do I get to the Internet on this thing.”

Scotty took it back and pressed a few buttons. “That’s weird. Nothing is happening.”

“There’s no service down here,” Jackson said.

Sam blew out a deep breath full of frustration and anxiety. This was bringing back far too many unpleasant memories of being trapped in Marissa Springer’s basement, at the mercy of Lieutenant Stahl as he tortured her. Sam’s chest felt tight with growing anxiety, and she couldn’t stay seated on the sofa. She got up to pace the length of the room, examining it more thoroughly.

The walls were made of reinforced concrete and the only way in or out, that she could see, was through the

secure door they'd used to enter the space. When she felt herself beginning to hyperventilate, she focused on breathing in a steady rhythm that helped to keep the panic at bay.

A low hum and a clicking noise preceded the door sliding open again.

Sam's mouth fell open in shock when her sister Tracy was escorted in. She wore a black cape over her clothing, and her hair was full of foil packets.

"Oh my God, Sam! What the hell is this? They took me right out of the chair at the salon!"

"I wish I knew. I was grabbed from a crime scene."

"I was on deck at camp," Scotty said. "I missed my chance to bat."

"So they haven't told you anything?" Tracy asked.

"Nothing other than Nick isn't dead."

"You really thought he was?" Scotty asked.

Sam put her arm around him. "I didn't know what to think when they showed up at a crime scene. I asked them straight-out if he was dead, and they said he isn't."

"Jesus," Tracy muttered. "How long are they going to hold us here?"

"I have no idea. They said I'll be briefed shortly. That's all I know."

A low hum and then a click had them turning toward the door as it opened to admit Sam's other sister, Angela, her two young children, Jack and Ella, and Alex, the infant son of Sam's colleague Sergeant Tommy "Gonzo" Gonzales. Angela babysat for Alex.

Ella and Alex were crying as Angela and one of the harried-looking agents carried them into the room.

"Where are we?" Angela asked. "What's happening?"

“No one knows,” Tracy answered as she scooped up her shell-shocked nephew Jack.

Jack wrinkled his nose. “You stink, Auntie.”

“That’s because my hair is now officially overprocessed, buddy, and it’ll probably be purple after all this.”

“Cool purple hair.”

“Glad you think so,” Tracy said. “Do you suppose they’re rounding up my family too?”

Her question was answered by the hum and click of the door opening again to admit her daughter, Brooke, who was dressed in the uniform of the restaurant where she waitressed. Two agents had her by the arms as Brooke fought them every step of the way. When she saw her mother and aunts in the room, she stopped struggling and burst into tears.

Tracy handed Jack to Sam and went to hug her daughter. “Easy, honey. It’s okay. We’re right here.”

“I was s-so scared,” Brooke said between sobs. “I didn’t know why they were taking me. I thought it was happening again.”

Sam wanted to kill someone for putting Brooke through such an ordeal when she was only beginning to truly recover from being drugged and gang-raped at a party last winter. Whoever ordered this operation would live to regret it by the time Sam was finished with them.

Over the next half hour, the door opened repeatedly as the rest of the family arrived. Sam’s dad, Skip, used his one working index finger to roll his wheelchair into the room with his wife, Celia, by his side. Tracy’s husband, Mike, and their younger children, Abby and Ethan. Nick’s father, Leo, his wife, Stacy, and their six-year-old twin boys. The last to arrive were Nick’s

adopted parents, retired Senator Graham O'Connor and his wife, Laine, both of whom were rattled and undone by the ordeal.

The agents produced toys and games for the kids, who went to check out the offerings while the adults speculated as to what might've happened to result in them being plucked out of their lives and brought to this underground bunker.

"Whatever it is," Skip said, "it must be huge to warrant something like this."

Her father's comment didn't help to calm Sam's out-of-control nerves. The only person missing from this family reunion was the one she most needed to see, to touch, to ensure he was okay. Until she knew for certain that he hadn't been harmed, she wouldn't be able to function normally.

The lack of information was the worst part. They were completely sealed off from the outside world with no earthly idea what had prompted the Secret Service to gather up people who weren't even under their protection.

Tracy came over to Sam, who stood by herself, trying to think it through as a detective and coming up empty.

"Are you okay?" Tracy asked. At some point she'd removed the foils from her hair, which was sticking up at awkward angles that would've made Sam laugh under normal circumstances.

"I'm freaking out and have a million questions. Where's Nick? Is he okay? Why won't they tell me anything? Who ordered that everyone be brought here? What is this place?"

"I know it's hard not to go to worst-case scenario, but if something had happened to him, surely it

would've made the news before the dragnet swooped in, right?"

"I suppose, but who knows for sure with him in freaking Iran? Well, *they* know, but *they're not telling me anything!*" She intentionally raised her voice so the agents huddled together at the far end of the huge room would hear her. Not that they gave a shit. In a quieter tone, she said, "I'm losing my mind, Trace."

Tracy put her arm around Sam and led her to one of the sofas, where they sat together, Sam leaning her head on her older sister's shoulder the way she had all her life when she needed comfort. Tracy was always there for her, and now was no different.

With baby Ella in her arms, Angela joined them, sitting on the other side of Sam. "I hope they thought to get diapers, because they didn't give me time to get anything, and this little girl is going to need a change before too much longer."

"What did they say when they came to your house?" Sam asked.

"Just that they were with the Secret Service, that there was a 'situation' and the children and I needed to come with them."

"A situation," Sam said. "That's more info than I've been given."

"What about Spencer?" Angela asked about her husband. "He's in Philadelphia today for work."

"I'm sure they're aware of his whereabouts, but I'll ask when I get the chance," Sam said.

"I'm worried about Gonzo and Christina not being able to reach me when they want to pick up Alex," Angela said. "Someone needs to tell them what's going on."

“Someone needs to tell *us* what’s going on.” She stood and marched over to the group of agents. “I want to be briefed. Right now.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Cooley said, surprising her with his easy capitulation. “Right this way.”

Sam took a tentative look over her shoulder, caught Tracy’s eye and nodded toward Scotty, asking her sister to keep an eye on her son. He’d been unusually quiet as they waited to find out what was happening.

Tracy nodded in understanding and slipped an arm around Scotty’s shoulders.

The last thing Sam saw before she entered an adjoining room with the agents was Scotty smiling at whatever Tracy had said to him.

Sam’s stomach knotted in fear, and her hands were suddenly sweaty. What would they tell her, and how would it change her life? *Please...whatever it is, please let Nick be okay.* Sam could handle anything they had to say as long as her beloved husband hadn’t been harmed.

When they were seated around a large conference table, Cooley began by offering Sam something to drink.

“Water would be good.”

Cooley brought her a plastic cup filled with cold water.

As she took a drink, she realized how dry her mouth and throat were. Fear did that to a person.

“On behalf of the United States Secret Service, I apologize for the inconvenience to you, your son and your family members,” Cooley said. “At eleven twenty this morning, the Secret Service was provided with information that specified a credible threat against the vice president and his family.”

“W-what kind of threat?”

“We’re still in the early stages of our investigation. We hope to know more in the next few hours.”

“Where’s my husband?”

“He’s on his way home and due to land at Andrews at twenty hundred hours.”

Sam checked her watch. Six hours. He’d be home in six hours. Thank you, God. “When can I see him?”

“He’ll be brought here as soon as his plane lands.”

“What is this place?”

“It’s one of several secure sites kept by the Secret Service throughout the metropolitan DC area for instances such as this when we receive a credible threat against the president, the vice president or a member of their immediate family.”

“How long do we have to stay here?”

“We don’t know that yet.”

“Are we talking a day, a week, a month?”

“That I don’t know.”

She threw up her hands in outrage. “You can’t just hold us here against our will!”

“I’m afraid we can.”

“On whose order?”

“The vice president’s, ma’am.”

“*Nick* approved the plan for you to pick us all up?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“So he knows what the threat was?”

“He does, ma’am.”

Sam tried to process that information, but her brain was unable to wrap itself around what kind of threat must’ve been levied against their family for Nick to order such dramatic measures be taken to protect them. “My brother-in-law Spencer—”

“Is en route from Philadelphia as we speak, ma’am.”

Angela would be glad to hear that. “My sister watches my colleague’s child. The boy was with her when you brought them in. The parents need to be notified as to the whereabouts of their child.”

“We can take care of that for you if you give us the contact info.”

“Could he be returned to his parents? He’s not a member of our immediate family.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible. Everyone who’s here is required to stay for the time being.”

“Why? What possible reason could you have for keeping my colleague’s child here? There’s been no threat made against him.”

“We’re under orders, ma’am. I’m sure you understand the position we’re in.”

As a law enforcement officer herself, Sam was able to connect the dots with what he wasn’t saying. She blew out a deep breath, imagining Gonzo and Christina getting word that Alex was being held in a secure facility along with the entire Cappuano and Holland families. At least they’d know he was safe and well cared for with them, for as much comfort as that would provide.

She wrote Gonzo’s name and cell phone number on the pad they provided and pushed it across the table.

“We’ll take care of that for you, ma’am.”

“You can stop calling me ma’am.”

“My apologies, Mrs. Cappuano.”

“What can I tell my family?”

“Exactly what we’ve told you.”

“We have jobs and obligations and places we need to be.”

“No one will be leaving until we’ve neutralized the threat or until we are authorized by the vice president.”

“You can’t hold us here against our will.” Sam gave him her trademark death stare, the one that made seasoned criminals tremble like babies in the interrogation room. Unfortunately, it had no impact whatsoever on Secret Service Agent Daniel Cooley.

“I’m afraid we can.”

“What’s being done to neutralize the threat?”

“Everything possible.”

That was, Sam realized, as much as he was going to tell her until Nick arrived to fill in the blanks. She got up and headed toward the closed door that sealed her off from just about everyone she loved. “Let me out.”

The door slid open soundlessly, admitting her to the big room where the others were scattered about on sofas and chairs, waiting. They sat up a little taller when they saw Sam come in.

Scotty rushed over to her, his distress obvious. “What’d they say, Mom?”

She put an arm around him, hating the worry she saw in his expression. “Dad is fine. He’s on his way home from Iran and due to land at Andrews around eight. He’ll be brought right here when he arrives.”

“Did they say why they rounded us up like cattle?” Skip asked, nudging his wheelchair closer to her.

“All they would say is that they received a credible threat against the vice president and his family. Apparently, Nick authorized them to round us up out of an abundance of caution. Anyone who might be watching us knows what you guys mean to us and what it would do to us if something happened to any of you.”

“What about Spence?” Angela said, sounding as fearful as Sam had felt before she knew where Nick was.

“He’s on his way here with a Secret Service detail.”

“Oh, good,” Angela said on a long exhale.
“That’s good.”

“They’re also notifying Gonzo as to where Alex is.”

“One thing I’ll add,” Graham O’Connor said, “is that whatever this is, it scared the hell out of them or we wouldn’t be here. I used to sit on the committee that oversees the Secret Service, and they don’t do anything without a damned good reason.”

Celia ran her hands up and down her arms as if chilled. “What’re we supposed to do in the meantime?”

“We wait,” Sam said. “That’s all we can do.”