



“S eriously, Bex? You’re not going to fight it?”

Bexley Bowers sighed into the phone as she roamed Dallas’s large downtown mall. “Reggie, there’s nothing to fight. Our contract specifically states no personal liaisons between coworkers.”

Reggie huffed. “Yeah, well, it’s not like you two were actual coworkers. He’s about as high up as he can get. He just didn’t want you to tell everyone what a jerk he is.”

Bexley chuckled, pausing to window shop the boutique clothes. “I’m good, really.”

“I don’t believe that for a second.”

Ignoring her badgering friend, Bexley continued. “I’ll land on my feet, Regg. I always do.”

“Okay, if you say so.” Reggie sighed. “I’ve got to go. It’s getting to that time of year, and we’re trying to work out a schedule for holiday travel. Just think, now you can have a life instead of flying around to different lands protecting a bunch of rich people who don’t want protection.”

Bexley forced out a chuckle. “Yeah, lucky me. Take care.”

“See you when I see you.”

The call ended, and Bexley shoved the phone in her pocket.

Sure. It was easy to have a life now that she had lost her job, the one thing that had grounded her all these years.

With a grunt, she pushed forward down the east wing of the mall. Just because her reputation was ruined and her future empty didn't mean she was completely without. She had her health—that was something, right?

Several interviews and a part-time job later, here she was, clinging to her foundations as they seemed to crumble yet again. With her life in ruins, there had to be something more. Hence the trip to the bookstore.

The smell of freshly baked cookies and salty pretzels filled the air, and her stomach growled. Finding the bookstore needed to happen sooner rather than later, or she'd find herself in front of the cookie counter. And that would be an unbelievably bad idea.

*Man, cookies ...*

Stepping through the opened storefront, Bex gazed across the bookstore. Two women in the aisle in front of her looking over a book, a man to the left on the phone. Her jaw clenched. Being alert and watchful had been her previous job description. Now a part-time librarian, she didn't need to keep noticing every single person, exit, and thoroughfare when entering a room.

As she studied the different genres, her mind shifted. Hopefully, something here would lift her spirits, give her a better focus. After all, she now had the time to find a new path, maybe even a new career.

Standing in the self-help section, she browsed the titles, frowning at all the misnamed masterpieces. *Finding Yourself, Finding Your Inner Peace, Finding ...*

With a sigh, she paused. Her pulse quickened, her skin pricked. Years of training told her she was being watched. Cutting her eyes, she saw an empty aisle.

*Let it go.*

It would be harder than anticipated to accept she was no longer on protection detail, no longer a special operations agent.

Navigating to the Christian section, she perused the covers and titles. It wasn't that she didn't believe in God, but He seemed to be silent in her life, leaving her frustrated, alone, and needing to fill those missing pieces. She halted with her hand on a book and peered over her shoulder.

Once more, nothing.

*Focus.*

Shrugging off past instincts, she fixed her attention on each cover. Finally deciding on a daily devotional that wouldn't take hours of concentration, she started toward the registers. As she paused in the aisle to glance at her book, someone plowed into her from behind.

She spun. A tall, lanky man stared at her.

"I'm sorry, am I in your way?" Her tone came out more heated than intended, her frustration getting the best of her.

"Actually, yes," he sneered.

The smell of cigar smoke and alcohol wafted from him. Her nose wrinkled.

"Problem?" A voice boomed from behind the smelly man.

Her assailant turned to a man in khaki pants and a green polo.

"No," he mumbled.

As the offender turned, a large bulge on his side underneath his long coat became visible. Bexley's uneasiness jumped up. Here in the heart of Texas, the end of October didn't require a jacket, much less a coat.

"You okay?" The man intervening looked past the smelly man to her, his eyes peering from underneath the bill of his hat.

Based on stance and hairstyle, she suspected military. From the tattoo barely visible from under the shirt sleeve, she assumed Navy.

"I'm fine." She nodded at the bulge in the man's long coat before locking eyes with the Navy man.

Navy's eyes narrowed on the smelly man. Bexley turned, dropping the book on the stack and heading for the exit. A force yanked her arm back, and she reactively swung. Pain radiated down her hand as she landed a blow to her assailant's face. The man stumbled backward with a grunt.

Her arm free, she shook out her hand and attempted to leave again. A burly, bearded man stood at the doors, a semi-automatic rifle across his chest.

"You!" Her aggressor yelled, seizing her hair. Her head jerked back as she twisted, attempting to free herself from his grip.

"Stop!"

Navy's order sounded as she fell. Instead of slamming to the ground, Navy pulled her up to safety.

"Easy, man." Navy protectively pushed her behind him, holding one hand up in the air while he gripped her side.

"Give me your weapons." Her attacker aimed his rifle at the two of them, wiping the dark, red liquid as it ran from his nose.

Navy carefully pulled a gun from his waist.

"The ankle too."

Pulling up his khakis, he unsheathed another gun from his ankle.

"Now, move." He fired off a few rounds into the ceiling, creating screams of panic throughout the large store.

She turned and followed the crowd, pulling her purse in tightly, hoping they wouldn't take it.

"Just do as they say," Navy spoke calmly into her ear as he pushed at her waist, guiding her amidst the chaotic scene of people crying and wailing.

"Phones in the bag!" The bearded man from the door now stood in front of them with a bag.

She shoved hers inside, then followed the throng from the bookstore into a small breakroom.

As they entered, a man dressed in black aimed his rifle, motioning them against the wall.

“You, come here.” Turning, her attacker grabbed Navy’s arm, shoving the rifle barrel in his face. “Sit.” He pushed Navy down to the floor as she was guided to the other side. Squeezing between an older couple and some teenagers, she slid to the floor. “Quiet. I want quiet!”

Glancing at her, her assailant spat blood on the floor before marching out of the room, the bearded man in tow. An audible lock echoed, leaving one man to guard the twenty or so hostages now trapped.

Scanning the room, Bexley rubbed her pained fist, shoving her purse out of view. The best exit was the fire door at the far end of the workroom. The sign hung down from the ceiling, but she couldn’t see the door. This bookstore sat on the bottom floor of the three-story mall, the east side. That exit would lead them outside to where she always parked.

Counting heads, she studied those sitting in the room. A mother with two children sat across from her, four teenage girls sat to her left, holding hands and crying. The mix included several women who had to be closer to sixty and the older couple, the manager, and three other employees based on their vests and nametags.

Feeling the hair on her neck stand on end, her gaze filtered through the group and found Navy watching her intently. Once the abductor turned his focus, she rested her hand on her purse, making a gun with her finger and thumb. He nodded, a slight grin forming on his lips.

Taking a second to work herself up, she loudly wailed, “We’re all going to die!” Burying her head in her hands, her body trembled and shook.

“Shut up!”

“I’m so scared. What if I never make it home?”

“I said quiet!” Their guard rushed over and kicked at her side a few times, making her wince as pain radiated through her ribs. She curled up in a ball against the wall to protect herself

The girls to her left shushed her, letting out their own whimpers.

“Hey, let me see if I can calm her down.” Navy’s voice sounded over her fake sobs still echoing in the room.

“Fine, just shut her up.”

In an instant, Navy appeared, pulling her up in his arms. Her knees lay across his lap as she gripped his shirt and pushed her face into his chest.

“It’s going to be okay, calm down.” His soothing voice and gentle touch gave her goosebumps. Ignoring her reaction, she diminished her wails to a soft sob. “Good, just take a deep breath.”

She did so, keeping her face turned into him. Listening for the guard, she squinted, his back to them as he paced. Leaning forward slightly, her eyes locked with Navy’s deep blues.

“You’ll have to chamber it,” she mouthed as he gave her a wink.

She didn’t even hear him unzip the handbag to pull the gun free, but the weight lifted from the strap.

“Distraction?”

He frowned and shook his head slightly.

Scowling, she leaned back against him, hoping to keep his arm hidden as his other arm stretched across her body to grip her shoulder. They needed something to get the abductor’s attention, some way to throw him off so that gun he had aimed at the crowd didn’t inadvertently fire.

The manager caught her gaze and nodded. Footsteps halted behind her. Wiping her face, she turned. The guard stood there staring.

“You, move away.” He pointed his weapon, motioning, then glowered as her lip lowered to a full pout. “Don’t even think about it.”

With the rifle trained on her, she paused her routine, then felt Navy squeeze her shoulder.

“She might keep quiet if you point that gun away for a second.” Navy’s calm voice sounded.

The guard aimed the rifle up toward the ceiling, “Fine, better?”

She nodded and felt the tap on her back.

“I ... I’ll scoot over, okay?”

The guard frowned, nodding as her body eased away from Navy. A single gunshot rang out, and their captor collapsed on the floor.

Navy leaped to his feet. “Everyone out the fire exit,” he yelled, aiming the gun at the main door for cover.

Bodies rose and shuffled to the exit as she jumped up and helped the woman next to her stand.

“Help her,” Bexley snagged the manager’s arm.

The man took hold of the elderly woman and headed for the fire exit. Relieving the now dead man of his weapon, Bexley kept her aim at the door, sliding over to Navy.

“Here, trade me.” She handed the rifle over and waited for her gun, but he tucked it into his waistband.

“You need to go, now.” He started firing at the storeroom door as it cracked open.

“I’m not leaving you here alone.”

“This is my job. Get out of here!”

Finding another weapon on the man lying dead on the floor, she ignored the sight of his blood seeping into the carpet.

“Get out. That’s an order.”

“I’m not a soldier, and you’re not doing this on your own,” she muttered, going to a knee and taking aim.

Bullets pounded through the storeroom door as Navy tackled her to the ground, covering her and rolling her toward the wall.

“Get off.” She pushed at him.

“Then stay down,” he bit out as he jumped up to return fire.

A man burst through, but Navy had him down in a second, then flipped over a table for cover while gunshots rang out. Sitting up against the wall, she waited for the gunfire to ease.

“I’ll get the guy, you cover me,” she called over her shoulder.

“What? No, get out of here,” he yelled as he sent another round of bullets through the door.

Wasting no time, she charged the doorway and pulled the now deceased attacker through, ignoring the sounds of the gunfire. Staying low, Bexley pulled a grenade from the man’s waist and threw it into the main bookstore through the door.

One more yank had the deceased man’s legs free, the door to the bookstore finally shutting. Smoke filtered through the cracks. As she stood, someone gripped her arm and she swung again, missing the target.

“What the ...”

Two men stood behind her in tactical gear, both wearing khakis and green polos underneath armored vests.

One man eased off his rifle, frowning over her shoulder. “Evan?”

Navy rose to his feet, fuming, his face and neck red as he stomped in front of her. “I told you to leave.”

“Ev.”

“And I told you I’m not a soldier. You don’t give me orders.”

His cobalt eyes seared into hers. “Just because you think you can fight—”

“Think? Don’t push it, Navy.”

Her tone fell flat, the adrenaline of the situation falling on her shoulders and chest, making her want to either punch something or pass out.

“Evan, we’ve got to go.”

Navy pushed into her space again. “Get. Out. Now.”

“Then give. Me. My. Gun.” She fisted her hands and straightened her shoulders, not willing to leave her grandfather’s pistol behind.

“I can’t.” He broke his gaze long enough to nod to the men behind her. “Take her outside.”

“Actually, he wants all of us out there right now. We need to discuss the situation. The building is far from secure.”



Navy's friend spoke up as the second guy stood motionless, his gun aimed at the storeroom door.

"Fine. Let's go."

As they headed to the exit, several armed men rushed past them, wearing vests that read SWAT. Navy pushed on her waist to get her out the exit door, stepping into the bright sunshine amid the chaos of officers and armed personnel roaming the lot.