

TACTICAL RESPONSE TEAM  BOOK TWO

PROTECTOR

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*“But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will
soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will
walk and not be faint.” Isaiah 40:31*

PROLOGUE



“Run,” Danica whispered.

She gripped her sister’s hand and pulled, running to the property’s edge. Jumping over the weathered fence, Danica landed on the other side, dirt flying up in her face. She scrambled to stand as her younger sister’s long legs perfectly rolled and stood her up.

“Did he see us?” Kyra gulped.

“Stop!” the gritty voice boomed in the evening air.

Danica guided Kyra silently, pushing deeper and deeper into the darkness of the woods.

“Dani, you said we wouldn’t get caught,” Kyra moaned.

“Quiet,” Danica hissed. “I didn’t think anyone lived there.”

They jumped over leaf piles and fallen logs. A strong odor surged as Danica staggered to a halt.

“What’s that?”

Danica turned to Kyra’s wrinkled nose, glancing behind to see the still forest. “I’m not sure. Probably a dead deer or something. Stay close.”

“Dani,” Kyra whimpered.

Ignoring her sister, Danica slid between the rocks and brush. The smell grew stronger and stronger. An enormous pile of dirt

loomed in a clearing. Danica took one look at the purple shoes pointed to the sky and swallowed the bile in her throat. “This ... this way, hurry!”

Dragging Kyra to the left, Danica raced faster and faster. They had to reach the field, they had to make the clearing. Her heart pounded in her chest.

It can't be her. Danica took a deep breath. Who else has those purple shoes? And that smell ...

The trees thinned. Crisp, yellow leaves materialized through the spaces. The tall corn husks reached the sky.

Kneeling where the trees ended, Danica glanced back. “When I say run, sprint to the house and don't stop. Promise me.” Danica stared into her twelve-year-old sister's teary eyes. “Promise you won't stop for anything.”

“I ... I promise,” Kyra sobbed.

At the rustle and crash of leaves, Danica stood, yanking once more on Kyra's arm. “Run!”

Racing through the dried corn husks, Danica viewed Kyra's disappearing form.

God, don't let her get caught because of me.

Only one thing made that smell, only one person had those shoes on all the time, but Tony had mentioned she was on vacation with his little sister ...

A gunshot sounded. Danica screamed as heat seared through her shoulder. Her heart pounded, and she closed her eyes.



Fourteen Years Later

Smoke and debris covered the windows as Haiden Blake let out a billowy breath.

“I’ve got no shot,” he mumbled into the com.

Swinging the rifle to the left, he traced the movements of the rest of his team. Jeff Powers directed as Evan Mitchell and Sergio Chavez followed.

His jaw clenched.

Where is she?

Lifting from the scope, he peered into the crisp winter morning. Frost in the air, stillness settled across the overgrown yard. The empty business complex before him had several entrances—too many for their small team to cover. They were supposed to be backup.

But a gunshot had them advancing without a police presence.

“We’re entering the side door. You see anything?”

Haiden gritted his teeth at Jeff’s voice. Still no sign of her. Foggy windows obscured his view. No movement, no sign of a shooter. “Nothing. No visual.”

“Check.”

Jeff entered first, Sergio holding the door. Haiden fixed his gaze on his team through hazy first-floor windows. The trio began a slow walk down the hallway. Haiden tracked them.

Raising the scope to the next floor, a wisp of movement directly above the team made him pause. "Possible sight. Hold."

Whatever was still clouding the windows made it impossible to see clearly.

"Movement above, nothing now. Finding a clear line of sight."

"Go." Buck Thompson's gravelly voice sounded.

Shifting up, Haiden snatched his rifle and headed to the left. Perhaps the other side of the building would give him a better view.

Still no sign of her. She'd better be somewhere safe.

"Stop!" Jeff's voice echoed through the com.

Jumping a log, Haiden's heart pounded as gunshots echoed from the building.

"Engaged, taking fire."

With a groan, Haiden dropped to the ground and set up once more. Black vests and quick motion led his sight to the left. There, a man leaned over the stairs, a rifle in his hands.

"Got sight. Above you on the stairwell."

"Yeah, we know," Evan gritted.

More shots fired.

"Haiden? You able to get a shot?" Buck asked.

"Not clear," Haiden responded.

As the shooter stood, Haiden took a breath, letting out a smooth exhale as his finger rested on the trigger.

"DON'T MOVE." Danica Freeman aimed her rifle at the man in the stairwell.

"Why not?" His sneer echoed in the empty building.

"You've got a bead on you right now. Our sniper will shoot if you don't drop your weapon and raise your hands."

“Nice try.”

Danica sighed. “Do it.”

A shot shattered the window, the bullet embedding into the wall behind the man. He screamed, reaching for his shoulder as he turned.

“Drop it! Now!” Danica lowered as he spun to her, lining up her shot.

Another piercing bullet fired, and the man fell backward, his rifle dropping as he hit the floor.

“Dani?” Jeff came flying up the stairs from behind the body.

“I’m good.” She stood as Jeff cleared the man. “Did you fire?”

Jeff shook his head, Evan and Sergio coming in behind him. “Not us.”

Gripping her weapon, she motioned behind her. “Let’s clear it.”

In ten minutes, they had the two-story building cleared. They found two women locked in a closet, wrists and ankles bound. A kidnapping gone wrong? Thankfully, the Tactical Response Team arrived before the captors had time to move them, or worse.

“All good?”

Danica turned her gaze from the women sitting with the police and nodded at Buck as he approached. “What happened? How did we beat the police here?”

“We were detained. Glad you guys were here to handle it.” An officer stepped around Buck with an extended hand. “Sergeant Sutton.”

She shook his hand with a nod. “Detained?”

“It was unexpected. Won’t happen again.” Sutton grinned. “But it looks like you didn’t need our help.”

“We’re always here for back up,” Buck gritted out. “But back up only. Next time, get a call to me or to Jeff Powers. This is your show, not ours.”

“I appreciate the concern.”

“Sir?” A uniformed officer approached.

Sutton gave a wave. "I've got to go talk to these young ladies. Thanks again." He walked off with the officer in tow.

"That could've ended badly if we hadn't been here," Danica muttered.

Buck stood, staring after Sutton.

"Buck?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you okay?"

He nodded. "What could possibly detain the police when an eyewitness called in a woman running, followed by shots fired?"

"So, there were three?" Danica shivered at the cold breeze and the thought of that man kidnapping three girls.

"The police are sweeping the area. They're having trouble IDing the caller. I'm sure they'll find her."

Jeff approached. "Did he give a reason for the police showing late?"

"Detained."

Jeff frowned at her explanation. "That isn't an excuse."

A group of officers rushed past, carrying a woman wrapped in a blanket.

"She was in a culvert. Get her to the ambulance!"

Danica blew out a breath, relieved at the third woman being found.

"Let's get back to the office and recap." Buck nodded to the group and turned toward his vehicle.

As Danica gathered her things, a deep drawl came from behind her.

"You good?"

Turning with a flinch, Haiden stood a few feet away, but she never sensed his approach.

"Of course. And I had him." She narrowed her eyes. "You didn't have to take that shot."

"He was turning with a gun," he mumbled.

"I had it covered."

Haiden nodded, his jaw clenched as he searched the area. “Where were you?”

“What do you mean?”

“I had no line of sight, but when I did, you weren’t there.” His green eyes stared into hers.

“I went around back to see if I could find another entrance.”

He grunted and stepped closer. “Bad move, Dani. No back backup,” he took a breath. “You can’t just go in without backup.”

“Buck was following me in. He went left, I went right.”

“We had no information other than a shooter. What if someone had rigged the building? What if there had been more than one shooter?”

Working her jaw back and forth, she ended the conversation before she let Haiden have a piece of her mind. “Let’s just drop it, okay?”

“Dani.”

She stepped forward. “I can handle myself. Thanks for the concern.” Spinning, she struggled against tears as she neared the SUV.

Sliding the gear into the back, her heart hurt.

Slamming the SUV door, she started up the car and gripped the steering wheel. The last three months had been a miserable, uncomfortable silence between her and Haiden, and she was ready for it to end. She longed for normal again.

What now, God?