

Black Friday

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**ALEX
KAVA**

**BLACK
FRIDAY**



CHAPTER

2

Newburgh Heights, Virginia

Maggie O'Dell slid a pan of stuffed mushroom caps into the oven then stopped to watch out her kitchen window. In the backyard Harvey entertained their guests, leaping into the air to catch his Frisbee. The white Labrador retriever was showing off. And her guests were humoring the big dog, laughing and chasing him through the fallen leaves. Three adult professionals acting like kids. Maggie smiled. Nothing like a dog to bring out the inner child in everyone.

“This is all quite an accomplishment,” her friend, Gwen Patterson said, trying to point with her chin while her hands stayed busy chopping onion.

At first Maggie thought her friend meant the spread of munchies the two of them had prepared. It was a feast that

looked more like a cocktail reception than a college football big-screen marathon. But Gwen wasn't talking about the food.

"I mean getting us all here together," Gwen explained. "All of us in one place without a crime scene...or a corpse."

"Yes, but there's free food and beer," Maggie said. "That's usually enough."

"True." Gwen smiled. "You never did tell me why your brother couldn't make it."

"Guess he got a better offer," Maggie said, relieved that her back was to her friend. She didn't want Gwen to see the disappointment. It was best to keep things light. No big deal. Her psychologist friend would poke and probe if Maggie wasn't careful. "Hey, I can't expect to drop into his life and have an instant relationship."

She risked a glance over her shoulder only to see that her instinct was right. Gwen had stopped chopping and was watching her.

"There's always Christmas," Maggie added, trying to sound positive when she knew it was a long shot. She hadn't even brought up the subject with him. One rejection per phone call seemed sufficient.

"Do you think we have enough food?" Maggie wanted off the subject. This was supposed to be a day for relaxation. No stress. Just watching college football with friends, sharing a beer and some killer salsa.

“This is plenty,” Gwen reassured her and went back to chopping.

Maggie stood with hands on her hips, assessing the island countertop that showed off trays and platters of finger foods. She had never thrown a party before. She didn’t attend many either. In fact, she rarely invited guests to her house. Funny how getting an extended warranty on life had a way of making a person do things she thought she’d never do. Less than two months ago Maggie and her boss, FBI assistant director Kyle Cunningham had been exposed to the Ebola virus. Maggie had survived. Cunningham hadn’t been so lucky.

“I don’t know if we have enough. I’ve done a couple of road trips with Racine,” Maggie said, trying to ward off the memories of being confined to an isolation ward and the helplessness of watching her boss go from a vibrant leader and mentor to a skeletal invalid sprouting tubes and lifelines. She closed her eyes, again keeping her back to Gwen as she grabbed onto the counter, pretending to survey their spread.

Keep it light, she reminded herself. Relax. Breathe. Enjoy.

“You’d never guess by looking at Racine but she can put away a pile of food.”

As if summoned, Julia Racine came in the back door, her short spiky blond hair tousled, her sweatshirt sporting a few dry leaves, a smudge of dirt on the knee of her blue jeans. The scent of fall trailed in with her. She looked more like a punk rock star than a D.C. homicide detective.

“Your dog cheats,” Racine announced, running her fingers through her hair as her eyes took in the kitchen activities. “He knows all the shortcuts,” she said but the carefree frolic in her voice disappeared as she glanced from Maggie rinsing celery at the sink to Gwen chopping onion at the island counter.

Maggie could tell in an instant Racine wasn’t comfortable, not just in Maggie’s kitchen, but in any kitchen. The tall, lean detective crossed her arms and stayed pressed in a corner. She’d probably rather be back outside with Harvey, Ben and Tully. Racine wasn’t a woman used to the company of other women. Maggie understood that. Too many hours spent with male colleagues. In many ways Julia Racine reminded Maggie of a younger version of herself.

“Back behind you,” Maggie said, pointing to the cabinet Racine leaned against. “There’re some white square appetizer plates. Could you pull out a stack and put them on the counter. Some glasses, too.”

Racine seemed startled by the request but Maggie moved on to her next task without further instruction. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Racine recover and nonchalantly get the plates and glasses.

Maggie plopped down the freshly washed bunch of celery on a paper towel next to Gwen’s cutting board. She pulled out a couple of stalks, handing one to Racine as she munched on her own. This time when the detective leaned against the counter she didn’t look quite as rigid and out of place.

“So,” Racine said, taking a bite of the celery and letting the word hang there. Obviously she was more comfortable. “What’s the deal with you and Benjamin Platt?”

Maggie glanced at Gwen.

“That’s actually a good question,” Gwen said then shrugged in defense for joining in.

Maggie realized she might regret making Racine feel comfortable in her kitchen.

“He’s quite a hottie,” Racine continued without prompting. “I mean if you’re into that soldier of fortune type.”

“He’s a doctor,” Maggie found herself countering.

“An army doctor,” Gwen added.

Maggie stopped what she was doing, ignoring Gwen but getting a good look at Racine, making eye contact briefly before the detective felt it necessary to straighten the plates and glasses she had put on the counter minutes ago. Maggie’s first impulse was to wonder if the young, tough-as-nails detective was jealous...of Platt, that is. Not Maggie. Several years ago when Racine and Maggie first met, Racine admitted she was attracted to Maggie. She had even made a pass at her. Somehow the two had gotten past it all and became friends. Just friends. Though in times like this, Maggie wondered if Racine still hoped for more.

Maybe it was due to a temporary setback in Racine’s own love life. Racine hadn’t even mentioned her most recent lover, though Maggie had told her to bring a guest. Instead

of asking about the elusive lover, who, if Maggie remembered correctly, was an army sergeant and soldier of fortune herself, Maggie simply said, “Ben’s good company.”

Maggie’s cell phone interrupted any further discussion. She found herself relieved.

“This is Maggie O’Dell.”

As soon as Maggie heard her new boss’s voice, the muscles in her neck went tight. Her holiday weekend off was about to end.

CHAPTER

3

Bloomington, Minnesota

They called him the Project Manager. He didn't mind. It was better than some of the names he'd been called in the past. Like John Doe #2. Project Manager was definitely better than that. He still bristled a bit at the John Doe #2 label. He was always in charge. Never number two. Didn't matter that being mistaken as number two had been to his advantage. Besides, that was almost fifteen years ago.

The name on his new driver's license was Robert Asante and he took time to correct anyone who didn't pronounce it accurately.

"Ah-sontay," he would say. "Sicilian," he would add, like it meant something to him when, in fact, he simply wanted them to believe his olive complexion was from Italian ances-

tors and not from his Arab father. Though it was his white American mother whom he truly owed for his deadliest disguise, indigo-blue eyes. Anyone who doubted his ancestry usually put all hesitation aside when they looked into his eyes. After all, how many blue-eyed Arab terrorists could there possibly be?

And how many of them would be wearing a gold wedding band on his left ring finger? Everyone who asked to see his ID also got a glance at the photo inserted on the opposite side of his wallet, the photo of him with his family, a beautiful blond woman and two little girls. Even the wireless earbud in Asante's right ear, the leather jacket he wore with jeans, a T-shirt and designer running shoes portrayed him as an all-American businessman. Minor details that he knew made all the difference in the world. Details that had earned him the nickname, the Project Manager.

He retreated to the parking lot and now stayed inside his car, parked across the street, a safe distance from the shopping mall. Close enough to hear only the echoes of the blasts and far enough away to avoid the initial chaos. This particular parking lot was also out of view of any security cameras. He had double-checked during one of his many practice runs. Although it hardly mattered. Already the car's windshield was filled with snow, obscuring the view inside if anyone happened by.

Earlier, he had watched on the small handheld computer

monitor as each of his carriers moved into place. Three separate carriers. Three separate bleeps in his ear. Three separate blinks of green light skipping across the computer screen as he tracked them.

Tracking them had been the easy part. Without them realizing it, Asante had planted GPS systems on each carrier. Now he detonated each one with a simple touch of a button. His well-planned mission reduced to nothing more than a touch-screen video game, blowing up each carrier. One after another, leaving only seconds in between.

First CARRIER 1, then CARRIER 2, and finally CARRIER 3.

He could hear the echo of each blast. Each explosion confirmed each detonation. Confirmed success of the mission.

There was nothing like this adrenaline rush. It was better than drugs. Better than sex, better than a well-aged single malt Scotch. His fingertips still tingled. Okay, maybe it was only the frigid weather.

He sat back against the crackling-cold vinyl of the car seat. After hundreds of hours, weeks, months of planning, step one was complete. He took several deep breaths, not bothered by seeing his own breath as he exhaled. Not feeling the cold, conscious of the adrenaline still pumping through his veins.

He was ready to call in confirmation. Then he heard it in his ear. Faint at first.

“Bleep.”

A pause. Maybe the monitor had malfunctioned.

Another bleep.

Impossible.

He shot forward in the car seat. Pulled up the computer monitor.

The machine gave another bleep. Then a *bleep, bleep, bleep*.

A green light started blinking across the screen in unison with the annoying sound.

Asante brought the small computer screen close to his face until it was almost touching his nose. And yet he still couldn't believe his eyes.

One of his carriers was still alive.

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