

Chapter One

June, one year ago

Scott Delacorte was a lucky man.

Meeting women had always come easily for him. He'd long ago perfected the subtle charm that drew women in, and the easygoing, never serious attitude that kept them from staying too long. His only rules were no married women and no fellow FBI agents.

Last night, he'd broken the second rule.

Scott rolled over in bed, his eyes closed, still blissed out from a night with newly minted negotiator Chelsie Russell. Tall, blonde and blue-eyed, she looked more like a cover model than an FBI agent, but the thing that had sucked Scott in was her smile. Too big for her face and way too infectious, it came with an impressive ability to read people and a willingness to go toe-to-toe with any agent at Shields Tavern. Including him. And he'd been more than eager to take her up on the challenge.

He'd met her before, in passing. She'd joined the FBI a year after him, with his sister Maggie and their close friend Ella, and over the years, he'd seen her with them. But he'd never really talked to her until last night.

She'd shown up at Shields as he was walking to the door. He'd just said goodbye to his fellow agents from the Hostage Rescue Team when she'd walked in, already grinning. And he'd turned right back around, pushed by a few other guys who'd noticed her, too, and introduced himself. He bought her a drink when she told him she was celebrating officially becoming an FBI negotiator.

He'd done his best to monopolize her at the bar, but he'd been sure she'd turn him down when he invited her back to his place. Instead, she set down her drink, threaded her fingers through his and suggested he lead the way.

In bed, eyes still closed, Scott breathed in the scent of her strawberry shampoo and reached for her. He'd finally fallen asleep sometime after 4:00 a.m., and his internal clock told him it couldn't be much past seven now. But he was already craving the feel of her long hair draped around his face, her nails skimming over his back as she kissed him. His fingers stretched across the bed, searching, but all he felt was empty sheets, still warm on her side.

Opening his eyes, Scott glanced around his bedroom. Empty.

He sat up, stifling a yawn, and peered toward the bathroom. The door was open. She wasn't in there. Last night, he'd strewn both of their clothes all over the room. Now hers were missing.

Cursing, he jumped out of bed. He still felt her warmth on his sheets, so she couldn't have been up long. Not bothering to get dressed, he hurried through his small bungalow to the entryway.

He lived in rural Virginia, so he didn't have to worry about curious neighbors as he opened the door and peered outside.

Her car was gone.

Scott stared at the empty drive for a minute before slowly closing the door. She'd actually sneaked out on him. He couldn't believe he hadn't heard her get up. Normally, the smallest noise woke him. But she'd completely worn him out last night. Then slipped away without a word.

He'd had his share of flings, even a few one-night stands, but he'd never sneaked out on anyone. And although he would've bet good money that Chelsie Russell had never had a single fling before last night, he was shocked that she'd slunk off.

It probably served him right. All the years of never wanting a serious relationship, and the one woman who'd completely captivated him didn't want anything real with him.

Still, the knowledge stung. It didn't matter how stupid it might be to expect something real to develop out of a one-night stand. The fact was, he'd already been planning their first real date, and the one after that, before he'd invited her home.

But he hadn't made it into the FBI's elite Hostage Rescue Team by giving up at the first sign of failure. Chelsie's first day as a negotiator at the Washington Field Office started today. The WFO was less than twenty-five miles from Quantico, where HRT was based, and his sister Maggie worked there. It'd be simple to find a way to run into Chelsie. Whatever her reasons for skipping out on him—probably pure and simple embarrassment over jumping in so fast—he planned to use every ounce of charm he had to get her back into his bed, and his life.

He flicked on the coffeepot as he turned back to his bedroom and was pulling on his pants when his cell phone beeped, loud and insistent.

Scott grabbed it off his nightstand. Triple-eight code. An emergency callout.

His pulse spiked as he yanked on the rest of his clothes, then reached for the gear he'd dumped on his nightstand last night when Chelsie had dragged him toward his bed. He strapped on his holster and picked up his BlackBerry. His tactical bag with his sniper rifle was in the back of his SUV, so he double-timed it out the door as he checked the text on his phone for details.

Active shooter. Location: a community center close to his house. The reported targets: military officers in town for a recruitment booth scheduled to open in half an hour.

HRT was going straight to the site and would set up an immediate command post on the outskirts. The community center was close, so Scott knew he'd beat the rest of his team there. Procedure dictated that he move in as close as he could and set up an observation post. Figure out how many shooters there were, and where they were located. His boss would be close behind him with instructions beyond that.

Scott hopped into his Bureau-issued SUV and sped out of his dirt drive, kicking up dust behind him. As he drove, he called the Special Agent in charge of his team, nicknamed Froggy because he'd come from the Navy SEALs before joining the Bureau.

"What's the situation?" he asked Froggy.

"Details are still sketchy. Call came in to 911 eight minutes ago. Reports are there's a long-distance shooter involved, so the locals want us to take it. CNU is sending one of their best."

CNU was the Crisis Negotiation Unit at Quantico. Typically in charge of training negotiators from the FBI's field offices around the country, they also deployed with HRT for major incidents. Right now, a negotiator at CNU was probably closer than one from the Washington Field Office.

The negotiator would focus on trying to talk the shooter down peacefully. HRT's job was to provide a tactical solution if that wasn't possible.

"You'll be first on site," Froggy said. "We'll be right behind you. According to the eyewitness, there's only one shooter."

He didn't have to tell Scott that what that really meant was they had no idea how many shooters there were. Witness reports were notoriously unreliable.

Barreling down the rural highway toward the site of the shooting, his siren blaring, Scott asked, "How many civilians?"

"Don't know. The community center wasn't open yet, but the call came in from a secretary who works there. She and another worker managed to get out of the building and to their cars. She says she thinks the only ones left at the center are the army officers."

"I don't suppose they're armed?"

"I don't think so."

The answer was partly good—it meant he wouldn't have to worry about being shot by a friendly. And it was partly bad—the targets couldn't protect themselves. Scott punched down harder on the gas and shut off his siren. "I'm less than a minute out."

“Watch yourself,” Froggy said. “I’ll be there in five.”

Scott had been called to a lot of shootings since he’d joined HRT. Sometimes the shooters were experienced, sometimes they relied on dumb luck and firepower. But the fact that a long-distance shooter was involved meant they were responding with extra caution, especially since he couldn’t be sure there was only one of them.

He drove his SUV to a line of trees outside the community center, slamming to a stop underneath them. Beside him was the back parking lot; he knew there was another lot at the front of the building. As he shimmied into his bulletproof vest and strapped on the extra gear he’d need, the crack of a rifle split the air.

Swearing, Scott stayed low as he went around to the back of his vehicle for his gear, scanning the area as he moved. The shot had come from the front of the center, but that didn’t mean a second shooter wasn’t out here.

He quickly counted ten cars in the back parking lot, the early June sunlight glinting off the windshields. If one belonged to the shooter, that left at least nine innocents.

The back lot was empty of people, which meant everyone was either in the front lot, where the shooting was happening, or inside the building. He hoped it was the latter, but if that were the case, Scott knew he probably wouldn’t be hearing gunshots right now.

Sweat gathered at his temples, but his heart rate stayed steady. This was the job. It never got routine, but HRT practiced with live fire and he’d taken a lot of calls in the past six months. He’d discovered his tendency was to stay calm until it was all over. Then his adrenaline rush would fade and the reality of what had happened would sink in.

Right now, he needed to assess. His gut instinct was that the single shooter theory was right, but he wasn’t going to take that as a given until he’d confirmed it with his own eyes.

Scott yanked his Remington rifle, complete with a custom scope, out of his tactical bag. Keeping low, he raced for the corner of the building where he could peek around to the front and evaluate. Being first on scene, he was Sierra One: sniper position one, closest to the action.

It was exactly where he liked to be, although usually he found the high ground and set up with a lot more care, with the time to scout out exactly the right angles for all his teammates. Right now, with an active shooter, every second could cost lives.

Crouching down, Scott grabbed his tactical mirror and stretched it past the edge of the building, scanning.

He held in a curse as he realized the recruitment booth had been set up in the front parking lot. He spotted four men down beside the table, clearly dead, and three others sprawled

near the door, likely hit as they'd made a run for the entrance. Two more were lying behind the community-center sign in pools of blood. If the shooter had hit them there, it meant he had high ground, that he'd found a perch with an angle sharp enough to see the men over the top of the sign.

He couldn't be positive until he checked pulses, but he was pretty sure he was too late to help any of them. Scott reined in his anger and helplessness and thought strategically, the way HRT had taught him.

It was likely the tenth car in the lot belonged to the shooter. But where was he? Scott rotated the mirror again, searching, when it was ripped out of his fingers, the sound of a rifle booming.

Scott shook out his hand, which burned from the force of the mirror being shot out of it, and sunk low. He no longer had a visual and no way was he sticking his head around that corner. In the distance, over the ringing in his ears from the rifle shots, he heard the clang of metal.

The bleachers. On the other side of the community center there had once been a high school. It had been torn down years ago and was now mostly overgrown, but kids played baseball in the field occasionally. The bleachers were still there, the perfect spot for a skilled shooter to lie down and wait.

Scott raced back the way he'd come, taking out his FBI BlackBerry. But as he rounded the back of the building, he discovered he didn't need it. The rest of his team had arrived.

Another sniper and six operators, including Froggy. The operators were fast, strapping on gear from their tactical bags, choosing only the most crucial of the sixty-five pounds of equipment they usually carried.

"What's the situation?" Scott's partner, Andre Diaz, was already scanning the area with his scope, his normally laid-back expression tense.

"We've got nine down in the front parking lot. Shooter was on the bleachers at the park, about two hundred yards from the front parking lot, but I'm pretty sure he took off. Be careful. This guy shot the tactical mirror right out of my hand."

Grim faces swung toward him.

"You get a vehicle?" Andre asked.

When Scott shook his head, Andre ran for the other side of the building for a different vantage point. Scott started to follow when a sedan swung into the lot, sirens screaming.

Glaring at the newcomer—the CNU negotiator had finally arrived—Scott sliced a hand in front of his neck and the siren went silent.

Martin Jennings, who'd been a negotiator for the Bureau for nearly two decades, hopped out of his car. "Where's Russell?"

Scott froze in the process of chasing after Andre, but it didn't matter, because his partner was already coming back their way.

"What have you got?" Froggy asked.

"Black Taurus. I got a plate," Andre said. "We'll need to call the locals and have roadblocks set up. He's gone."

"Russell?" Scott asked, his attention fully, anxiously on Martin.

"Chelsie Russell," Martin said. "Brand-new negotiator. I called her to have her meet me here and she was already nearby. She should have beaten me."

Scott glanced at the non-Bureau cars in the lot. Ten cars. And the shooter had been parked over by the bleachers, not here. Was the tenth car Chelsie's? He scanned them, and realized the one way at the back was a small, nondescript white compact. Just like the one Chelsie had driven last night.

Sucking in a hard breath, Scott spun for the front lot again. Behind him, he heard Martin calling for ambulances and Froggy calling the locals to get roadblocks set up. He sensed without glancing back that Andre was following him, that his partner knew something was up.

But all he could think of was Chelsie. He'd seen nine bodies. Was there a tenth?

* * *

CHELSIE RUSSELL HUNCHED outside the front door of the community center, shielded on either side by the brick walls of the building that jutted forward, forming a protective U around her. The bullhorn she'd been shouting into less than ten minutes ago hung limply at her side. Above her, the sky was a brilliant, mocking blue.

She was too terrified to move.

A minute ago, the shooter had taken another shot, although at what she had no idea. All his targets were dead. All except her.

He'd been shooting from somewhere off to her right. Was he maneuvering around now, trying to get a bead on her?

She stared at the army officers who'd ducked down behind the community-center sign, thinking they were safe. He'd picked them off, then shot the three who'd run toward her, ignoring her gestures for them to stay where they were. Nausea rolled through her and she forced herself to look away from the men, their arms splayed wide as if they were still entreating her to help.

They'd been alive a minute ago. Alive and afraid, like her. When she'd crept out the door, she'd seen a sudden burst of hope in their eyes. They'd started to run even though she'd frantically gestured for them to stay put. So she'd put that bullhorn to her lips and done exactly what the FBI had trained her to do.

Connect with the perpetrator. Identify what he wanted. Then convince him through communication tactics that he could achieve it another way.

But he'd ignored every attempt she'd made to talk him down. Resisted every single tactic she'd been taught by the Crisis Negotiation Unit.

She'd gotten here in time. She should have been able to save five of them. But she hadn't made a bit of difference.

Why hadn't she stayed in Scott Delacorte's bed? Instead of dressing silently and tiptoeing through his house out to her car, she could have rolled over and run her hands over his spectacular body until he'd woken up. Until he'd pressed his lips to hers and made her forget everything but the feel of him on top of her.

Instead, she'd slipped out the door, embarrassed and uncertain after waking up next to a man she barely knew. Before she'd turned off his street, she'd gotten the call from Martin, sending her here. She'd felt a surge of nerves mingled with anticipation and a stupid, baseless confidence that she could change the outcome the shooter had planned today.

Right now, more help was on the way, possibly even Scott himself, but she was the only one left to save. Would they arrive before the shooter found her?

Chelsie eased back toward the door of the community center, erasing her view of the dead soldiers, of the blood painting the concrete red. Ears ringing from the gunshots, she clutched her Glock so tightly her hand ached. She didn't have the range of a rifle, and whoever had been shooting had been deadly accurate.

She opened the door, staying low, and slipped back inside the community center, her heart beating a too-rapid tempo. A haze fell over her thoughts and she couldn't shake it. Six years in the FBI and she'd never seen anything like this.

Six years in the FBI and she'd never failed like this. She'd joined on a fluke, an attempt to find a place she finally fit. And she thought she had. She'd started in the Los Angeles

Field Office, thrown into counterterror as a rookie, and discovered she had a knack for understanding people, agents and criminals alike. That knack had helped her to shed the Barbie-doll nickname she'd been given her first day, and to fit in with the mostly male agents. And it had ultimately led her to negotiation.

Becoming a negotiator had made her feel as though everything in her life had finally snapped into place, as though she'd found where she belonged, the place she could make a real difference.

Resolution through dialogue—it was CNU's motto. In the intense, unforgiving two-week training, she'd excelled. In real life, apparently, she didn't.

Martin Jennings had told her to wait for him before she engaged the shooter. He had more than twenty years' experience talking down dangerous subjects; she had training exercises in a classroom. She'd inched as close to the scene as she dared without putting herself in the line of fire, fully intending to wait. But two people had been shot as she stepped out the door, and she'd known she couldn't sit on the sidelines a second longer.

She'd done her best, and she knew it. But her best hadn't been close to good enough.

Worry about it later, Chelsie told herself, her eyes darting left and right. She stuck close to the wall as she walked through the empty, silent community center. Then the sound of a siren reached her ears. She let out a relieved breath, but it caught less than a minute later as a shadow passed by the glass door on the side of the building. A tall shadow, carrying a rifle.

Flattening herself against the wall, Chelsie set the bullhorn carefully on the floor so she could grip her Glock with both hands. She inched closer, stepping soundlessly in her practical flats. Her senses seemed to shrink, until all she saw was the glass door to the side of the building, until all she heard was her own even, deep breathing. If there was no talking him down, she wasn't letting the shooter get away, wasn't giving him the chance to go after anyone else. Not today or ever again.

Slowly, slowly, she turned the handle and opened the door, inch by inch. She sensed before she saw that he'd heard her, so she ripped the door open the rest of the way. Her Glock came up fast and steady, taking aim at center mass. "FBI! Don't move!"

She instantly processed the Kevlar vest, the extra weapon strapped to the leg, the Remington rifle in his hands, then recognized more before he finished spinning toward her. The dark blond hair. The tall, lanky body. The long, slim fingers gripping the stock of the rifle.

"Scott," she blurted. The fun-loving, quick-to-smile agent she'd been unable to resist last night seemed like someone else entirely in his tactical gear, his expression fierce and determined.

“Chelsie.” Relief bloomed in his chocolate-brown eyes, so strong it made her own eyes water.

Another HRT sniper materialized from around the corner, but she couldn’t take her eyes off Scott. Heat rushed up her face, but it wasn’t from the embarrassment of being caught in the same clothes he’d peeled off her last night, or from seeing him so soon after sneaking out in the darkness. Seeing Scott couldn’t distract her from the weariness and splintering anger she suddenly felt.

Nine people had died today. And it didn’t matter what the FBI thought of her actions. Her career as a negotiator had ended before it had even begun.

Copyright © 2015 by Elizabeth Heiter

Permission to reproduce text granted by Harlequin Books S.A.