

## *Chapter One*

“Invisibility in three...two...one...now!”

The words echoed in Maggie Delacorte’s earbud as her SWAT teammate stepped back from the neat hole he’d cut in the window. Behind her, everything was quiet in the predawn darkness. But that wouldn’t last for long.

The FBI had gotten the word that a wanted fugitive was hiding out in this gang-infested part of DC, armed with an AK-47 and surrounded by a pack of die-hard supporters. Maggie and her teammates were here to make sure his time on the run was finished.

She moved quickly forward, tossing a flash-bang grenade through the window. The world in front of her exploded in white light, a massive boom echoing as the flash bang landed. Smoke billowed, providing cover.

“Go, go, go!” Grant Larkin yelled in that deep voice that always sent goose bumps running up her arms, as he used a ram and his massive upper-body strength to break down the door.

Maggie raced around the corner to follow, just as the door flew open into the one-story hideout. Grant went in first, moving right as planned, then the two teammates behind him dodged the splintered door and went left.

Her MP-5 raised and ready, Maggie barely felt the weight of the extra fifty pounds of gear she carried as she darted through the door, clearing it fast the way she’d been trained.

A bullet whizzed by her ear, coming from her left, but she didn’t turn her head. That was in a teammate’s sector. He’d handle the threat. Maggie’s sector was straight ahead, and she stayed focused as she forged through the swirling gray smoke.

Reports came in over her radio as she entered the hallway to the bedrooms. The fugitive’s allies were dwindling fast, either from bullets, or because they threw their hands up and their weapons down at the sight of the six FBI SWAT agents converging on them. But there were at least two left, including the fugitive himself, a three-time offender, who was surely looking at a life sentence this time around.

A gangbanger popped out of a doorway ahead of her, his modified AK-47 coming up fast, and Maggie moved her weapon right, firing at center mass.

The threat down, she kept going until she was beside Grant. He outweighed her by a solid eighty pounds and in the narrow hallway, with all their gear, they barely fit side by side.

He nodded his head to acknowledge her presence, glancing briefly her way. She registered it through her peripheral vision, but kept her focus where it needed to be: on the rooms to the right side. One more for her to clear, one for Grant.

Grant went through the doorway to the left and Maggie through the one on the right, her weapon instantly sighting on the threat in the corner. The fugitive himself, all three hundred pounds of him.

His finger quivered on the trigger, and Maggie barked, “Drop it! FBI!”

She’d been on the Washington Field Office’s SWAT team for the past four years, but perps sometimes made the mistake of thinking she wouldn’t fire just because she was a woman. So Maggie leveled her meanest stare at him, hoping he could see it through her goggles. She wanted this guy alive, wanted him to rot in a cell and help them bring down the rest of his crew.

He scowled back at her with a nasty grimace even as his eyes watered from the smoke. But the modified AK-47 he’d been clutching fell to the floor beside him.

From the room across the hall, she could hear Grant yelling at another suspect to get down on the ground, and Maggie demanded the same of the fugitive.

She didn’t get close until he’d followed her order to lie flat on his stomach on the filthy carpet, his hands clasped behind his head. Then she switched her MP-5 to safe mode, slung it over her back and unhooked the handcuffs from her belt. She approached him and planted a heavy knee in the center of his huge back. Yanking his left hand down fast, she slapped on the cuff then grabbed his right hand.

As she shifted her balance right, he ripped his cuffed hand away, using his bulk to toss her sideways.

She landed hard on her MP-5, and pain tore through her back. That was going to bruise. Cursing loud and creatively, she was up before he could get to his feet. Wrenching his cuffed arm backward, she rammed a foot in his armpit.

He squealed as she muttered under her breath about men who thought bigger meant they had the upper hand. A decade ago, she might have agreed with that assessment. But six years in the FBI, four of them on the super-competitive SWAT team, had taught her it just wasn’t true.

She didn’t have to be bigger. She just had to know how to leverage her strength, and her skill set.

The fugitive was still screeching as she slapped the cuff on his other wrist and then Grant was in the room, dragging a gangbanger behind him as if the guy weighed nothing. He took a handful of the fugitive's shirt, and the two of them pulled him to his feet.

"Nice job, Delacorte," Grant said.

Her heart rate—which had stayed relatively even during the entire arrest—picked up at the sound of his voice.

Grant Larkin had moved from the New York Field Office to the Washington Field Office, WFO, and her SWAT team, nine months ago. He was just shy of six feet, but even on a team filled with muscle-bound men, he stood out. The guy was built, which was why he was usually the door-kicker.

He also had deep brown eyes, light brown skin and an infectious grin, even in the middle of a grueling SWAT workout. In short, exactly her type. If only he wasn't a teammate, making him off-limits. And if only she didn't have baggage from her past that weighed more than he did.

Maggie nodded at him and called in their status over her radio. She got the "all clear" from all sectors and told Grant, "We're set. Let's get out of here."

"Sounds like a plan to me," he replied, letting her go ahead of him with the fugitive as he brought up the rear with the cuffed gangbanger.

The rest of the team was waiting outside the dilapidated one-story, loading a few other prisoners into their vehicle for transport. A couple of her teammates hooted when they saw her pushing the enormous, scowling fugitive in front of her.

She grinned back, because she knew they were laughing at the furious threats the fugitive was making, and not at the fact that she, at five foot eight and a hundred and forty pounds, was bringing him out. She'd worked with most of them for four years, and they'd learned fast not to coddle or underestimate her because she was a woman.

That was why being on SWAT had been good for her. It had shown her exactly how much she was capable of, and she wouldn't trade it for anything.

After they'd loaded the last two prisoners, Grant came over to her, yanking his goggles up over his helmet, and leaving behind indents around his eyes that didn't diminish his attractiveness at all. "I think this calls for celebration."

"O'Reilly's?" Clive Dekker, the team leader, asked. It was the pub the team usually hit after a particularly good or bad day.

It didn't matter that it was almost three in the morning. O'Reilly's catered to cops. They stopped serving liquor at two, but they were open twenty-four hours. And after the adrenaline rush of a high-risk arrest, most of the team couldn't just go home and go to sleep.

"Let's do it," Grant agreed. He turned to her, looking hopeful. "Delacorte?"

She hadn't gone with them in six months. Not since she'd started getting the letters, because the stress of it made it impossible to go out and joke around, to pretend everything was okay.

A lump filled her throat, and she tried to push back the memory that always surged forward when September 1 came around. In exactly thirty days, it would be ten years since the day that had changed her life. The day that had led her to the FBI. To SWAT.

And whatever happened on that tenth anniversary, would she regret not having spent as much time with Grant Larkin as she could?

She nodded at him. "Sure. I'm going to run home first. I'll meet you all there."

He looked surprised, but then grinned in a way that made her positive she'd made the right choice.

She stared back at him, momentarily rooted in place. Maybe it was time to forget her past. Maybe it was time to forget the rules.

Maybe it was time to see what could happen between her and Grant Larkin.

\* \* \*

MAGGIE FELT HERSELF smiling with anticipation as she unlocked the bolts on her DC row house and entered, flipping on the lights. She stepped over the mail scattered in the entryway, realizing she hadn't been home in close to twenty-four hours.

As she locked the door behind her and kicked off her boots, it occurred to her that she should be exhausted. She'd worked a full day on her regular FBI civil rights squad, then been out with her brother and best friend when she'd gotten the call to come back for the SWAT arrest. But she was full of energy. When was the last time she'd been this happy?

Six months ago, she realized. Before the first letter had arrived. Grant had been on her team for three months at the time. They'd hit it off from his first day. Besides being a solid addition to the team, he was funny and just so dang happy all the time. Being around him made her happy.

SWAT was an ancillary position—agents did it on top of their regular squad duties. Still, dating a teammate, even in a secondary team like SWAT, was forbidden. So she'd

tried to keep her feelings hidden. But just knowing that she was capable of feeling this way, after everything...

Stop dwelling on the past, Maggie scolded herself. She knew Grant had been able to tell these past few months that something was wrong. But unlike a lot of agents at the WFO, who'd heard the rumors over the years, she was pretty sure Grant didn't know her history. And she wanted to keep it that way.

She liked the way he looked at her, no trace of pity or worry. He'd never shown any sign that he'd heard about her past. The case agents had been good about keeping her connection under wraps over the years; though inevitably agents who'd been in DC for a long time found out. But Grant had only been here nine months. In that time, the only thing she'd ever seen in his eyes was friendship and camaraderie. And lately, something else, something that went beyond the bonds of the team.

Maggie carried her gear up the narrow stairs to her bedroom, flipping lights on along the way, then stared into her closet. She didn't own date clothes. Not that this was a date.

Everything in her closet belonged to a woman who, somewhere deep inside, was still afraid. Not of being a victim, not anymore. But when was the last time she'd actually wanted a man to look at her with appreciation?

Frowning, Maggie grabbed what she'd always worn to O'Reilley's—jeans, combat-style boots way too similar to the ones she wore for SWAT and a loose-fitting T-shirt. They'd only stay an hour or so anyway, chat and play darts and let the adrenaline fade. Then, one by one, the exhaustion would inevitably hit, and they'd head home and conk out.

She needed to get over there, or she'd miss everyone. Changing quickly, she looked into the bathroom mirror, taking a minute to lift her shirt up and look at the damage to her back. A bruise was blooming fast, huge and purple, snaking its way along her spine in the general shape of a sub-machine gun.

She poked at it and flinched, then pulled her shirt back down, combing a finger through her bob. It was just long enough to cover the back of her neck, and Maggie's fingers twitched as they skimmed the puckered skin there.

The tattoo she'd gotten years ago hid the image of a hook, but nothing could fix the damaged skin underneath. The brand that had been left on her.

She threw some water on her face, then dug through the drawer under her sink until she came up with some lipstick and mascara. The guys were probably going to stare at her as though she'd grown an extra head. Or maybe they wouldn't even notice. Most of them were like brothers.

Only Grant might spot—and appreciate—her pathetic attempt to look a little more feminine, since most of the time she tried to hide it.

She stared at herself in the mirror, resisting the urge to wipe off the makeup, then laughed aloud. She was being ridiculous. Just because she didn't wear makeup to work didn't mean everyone at the bar would know why she'd put it on tonight.

Maggie took the stairs down two at a time, still grinning. It wasn't that she didn't date, but most of the time, even when she truly had feelings for a guy, it felt obligatory. An attempt to feel normal that never quite worked.

But nothing about Grant Larkin felt obligatory.

And she was ready to take a chance. She had no idea how they'd handle the FBI rules—assuming he was interested. But the heated glances he hadn't quite been able to hide over the past few weeks told her he was.

At the bottom of the stairs, Maggie picked up the pile of mail and dumped it on the table and reached for her keys. But before she'd finished turning away, dread rushed over her. The plain business envelope. The corner of a neatly printed return label sticking out from the huge pile of mail like a flashing beacon.

She looked back at the mail slowly, dreading what she was going to find. But she hadn't been dreaming. She didn't have to open it to know. Another letter.

All the excitement drained out of her, buried under a decade-old fear.

Her movements robotic, she walked into her kitchen and slipped on a pair of latex gloves before returning to the front hall, even though she knew there'd be no prints. There never were.

She shouldn't even open it. It was evidence in an ongoing case. She should call the agents from the Violent Crimes Major Offenders, VCMO, squad assigned to the case. They'd have to be called anyway, because this letter would have to go in the case file along with the others. She should just let the case agents open it.

But even knowing what would be inside, she couldn't stop herself from carefully slicing open the top of the envelope. She slid out the plain white paper and unfolded it carefully, only touching the edges. She knew it was useless, but she still tried to numb herself as she started reading.

Anger and resentment—along with the guilt and shame she couldn't suppress—crept forward, even as she tried to remain clinical and approach it the way she would one of her own cases. It read just like the previous letters, three of them over the past six months. To

someone who didn't know the sender, it would sound like a love letter, fondly recalling their time together.

But it wasn't. It was a letter from the Fishhook Rapist, the predator who'd evaded capture for almost a decade. The predator who had started by abducting her on her way home to her dorm room at George Washington University all those years ago. He'd let her go the next morning, drugged and disoriented, carrying a permanent reminder on the back of her neck.

Maggie felt herself sway and clutched the table as she read the last line. It was different from any of the previous letters.

The Fishhook Rapist was coming back to DC. And he was coming back for her.

Copyright © 2015 by Elizabeth Heiter

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