

Chapter One

The instant Isabella Cortez left the safety of the FBI building, goose bumps skittered across her skin and her senses went on high alert. Her instincts and training, like a sudden alarm shrieking inside her head, told her she wasn't alone.

The door slammed shut behind her before she could dart back inside, and Ella cursed the heavy briefcase weighing down one hand and the stack of file folders clenched in the other. Just because she was taking her first real vacation in two years didn't mean killers took time off, so her cases were coming with her. Assuming she made it to her vacation.

Tonight, she was the last one out of the bland office building in Aquia, Virginia. It was set back off the road, nestled deep in the woods, and manned by an armed guard. Entrance to the parking lot was supposed to be reserved for the FBI's Criminal Investigative Analysts who worked there and no one else. If a visitor was arriving, the guard at the gate called ahead. Anyone who could make it past security was a threat.

Pushing back her fear, she blinked, trying to adjust to the darkness outside. Her arms tensed, but she didn't drop the files and reach for her gun. Not yet. Not until she identified the threat. If she acted too soon, she'd probably get shot.

No, all the instincts honed by two years in the Behavioral Analysis Unit told her to let him think she was oblivious. Let him show himself before she brought him down.

Her heart thudded too fast, reminding Ella all too clearly of her first years in the FBI, in the gangs unit in Dallas, when she'd taken a bullet to the leg and her partner had taken two to the chest. At the memory, all the nerves in her leg burst to life, painful and fire-poker hot.

Lock it down, Cortez. Focus.

A tiny movement made her glance left, toward the only two cars in the lot. A bulky figure shifted beside her car, stepping into the dim glow of the overhead light.

He was big, taller than her by half a foot and outweighing her by a good fifty pounds and all of it muscle. But none of that mattered if she didn't let him get close.

Her eyes darted to his hands. Empty. She let out a breath, but it caught when she spotted the telltale bulge at his hip. No way was she giving him a chance to go for the weapon. She dropped her briefcase and files fast, yanking her Glock pistol from its holster. "Hands up!"

"Whoa!" He lifted his hands near his head. "Look, I—"

"Higher. Get on your knees."

"Hey, I didn't—"

"Now!" Ella took a step closer, let him see the dead seriousness in her eyes, the solid, steady aim of her gun. "Pull your weapon out with your left hand. Toss it over here."

"Crap." He complied, getting on his knees and sending his own Glock skidding across the pavement toward her.

"You have any other weapons on you?"

"No. Look, I'm a homicide detective. I flew up here from Florida to talk to a profiler."

She narrowed her eyes, noting the slight Southern drawl in his voice now that she wasn't laser-focused on containing him. "How'd you get in here?"

"The guard let me in. My badge is in my pocket, okay?"

Ella frowned. With the regular guard on maternity leave, maybe the newbie had broken protocol. "Fine. Toss it to me with your wallet."

He let out a breath through his nose, something like amusement in his voice.

“Wow, you’re thorough.”

He was right about that. At the BAU, her job was to create criminal personality profiles of the country’s most depraved killers. Every day, her work told her what one inattentive moment, one second of blind trust, could cost.

It was a lesson she’d first learned nearly ten years ago, when her best friend had been violently attacked. It had introduced Ella to a kind of evil she’d never known existed, and completely altered the path of her life. Now, viewing everyone as a potential threat seemed almost normal.

He tossed his wallet and badge over, but even before she picked it up, she knew it was the real thing. Still keeping her weapon leveled on him—mostly for scaring the crap out of her and making her dump her case files all over the ground—she flipped open the wallet to his ID. The face staring back at her, with its hard lines and no-nonsense stare, looked every bit a homicide detective. “Logan Greer. Oakville, Florida.”

Reholstering her weapon underneath her blazer, she tossed the wallet back and tried to slow her heart rate to normal speed. “Way to make an impression, Greer.”

He gave her a smile full of self-deprecating humor that made her realize again that the bulky size that had unnerved her in the darkness was impressive muscle tone, that beneath the piercing stare were moss green eyes. She was a sucker for green eyes. Too bad she hadn’t run into him on the beach next week with a margarita in her hand instead of on her last day before vacation, toting a gun.

As he gathered his badge and weapon, Logan asked, “And you are...?”

Ella brushed her bangs out of her eyes and extended her hand. “Special Agent Ella Cortez, BAU.”

“Perfect,” Logan said, giving her another hit of that one-sided grin as he took his time shaking her hand. “Because I need a profiler to look at my homicide case.”

Ella pulled her hand free and collected the files scattered on the pavement. “You’re gonna have to go through channels.”

“I did that.” When she started to walk past him, he put a hand on her arm. “Please. Look, they wouldn’t assign anyone to it.”

Ella sighed, frustration warring with sympathy. He’d flown here for help and she knew if her boss had already refused, he would get shut down again. Getting a profiler assigned meant that the case needed one. The most likely reason Logan hadn’t gotten help was because he had a case where the killer would logically come up without resorting to a profile.

She couldn’t take this on even if she weren’t about to leave on vacation. Even if she were allowed to pick her own cases. She already had more files stacked up than she could possibly handle with the attention they needed in her regular ten-hour days.

“Sorry.” Ella didn’t look at him as she dumped her briefcase and files in the trunk of her car.

“How is your office supposed to know whether I have a serial killer from a one page form?” There was frustration in Logan’s voice, but steel underneath. “I’ll wait as long as I have to, but I need help on this.”

“I’m the last one out. Everyone else has already gone home.”

He stepped around in front of her, leaning against her car between her and the driver’s door, his arms crossed loosely over his chest. “I’ll wait here until tomorrow if I have to.

But wouldn't it be easier for everyone if you took a look? Please, just hear me out. An hour of your time. That's all I'm asking. Just take a look at my case file. Give me something I can take home and use, before the bodies start piling up."

When she heaved out a sigh and looked up, he shot her a determined stare, as if he could get her to agree through force of will alone. She stared back into his imploring green eyes, which were close enough that she could see little flecks of gold around the edges of his irises.

She didn't have time for this. And she needed to get away from case file after case file of vicious murders. She needed those two weeks at the beach with her two best friends, while they all tried to distract themselves from the anniversary coming up too fast, the one they all wanted to forget.

She needed to have dinner, then pack and make her way to the airport. Of course, three weeks of late nights trying to get ahead of work before taking time off meant her refrigerator was stocked only with condiments. She looked into Logan Greer's green eyes and heard herself say, "Tell you what. You can buy me dinner and while we eat, I'll look at your case."

The genuinely grateful smile he flashed her sent unexpected shivers of awareness over her skin that reminded her she hadn't had a date in months. Another casualty of the job.

Wow, she really needed this vacation.

* * *

"TEN O'CLOCK IS a little late for dinner. Is the FBI opposed to meal breaks?" Logan asked, one eyebrow quirked, as she scarfed down French fries as if she hadn't seen food in weeks.

In the light of the little diner, which Ella frequented because it reminded her of something she'd find back home in Indiana, Logan looked a lot less like a potential threat and a lot more like the kind of guy she'd try to flirt with in the grocery store. The kind of guy she'd be tempted to chase after, no matter how it would inevitably end.

Wearing jeans and a faded gray T-shirt, with a five-o'clock shadow heavy on his chin, he looked exactly like her type. Laid-back attitude, but intensity in his eyes. Masculine, but judging by the easy way he was teasing her half an hour after she pulled her gun on him, secure enough not to find her intimidating.

Of course, that was her initial read on him. Given that her longest relationship in the past had lasted a whole five months, she'd decided she was far better at profiling murderers than potential dates. Not that Logan Greer was a potential for anything except being easy on the eyes while she helped him with his case.

“You're the one who showed up late at night expecting someone to be there.”

“I came straight from the airport. And you weren't the first profiler I harassed in the parking lot. You're just the first one who succumbed to my charm.”

Ella snorted. The agent out the door before her had been Jack Reid, perpetually in a foul mood and perpetually using a foul mouth. “You mean Jack didn't invite you out to dinner?”

“Well, he invited me to do something. But it sounded anatomically impossible.”

“Probably a come-on,” Ella joked, then feigned hurt as she stuffed another fry, heavily coated with ketchup, in her mouth. “So, you're telling me I wasn't your first choice?”

Logan's gaze shifted appreciatively over her, lingering on her mouth. Then he gave her steady eye contact, let her see an interest that went beyond the case. "Believe me, if I'd known you were coming, I would have waited."

Ella rolled her eyes, even as she willed her cheeks not to heat. This never happened to her, this instant, powerful lure to a man she'd just met, let alone to one she'd just pulled a gun on. "I was trying to get caught up on some work before I left town." She held out a hand, palm up. Back to business. "You have a case file?"

He set a thin manila folder in her palm, his big calloused hand brushing hers. "Where are you going?"

"Vacation with some friends. I plan to sit on the beach and do nothing more strenuous than put on sunscreen." Of course, that would last about a day and then she'd be searching for kayak rentals or somewhere to take surfing lessons. Sitting still wasn't her strong suit.

"I don't suppose you're coming to Florida? Because I'm willing to help you out with the sunscreen."

One of the cases in the trunk of her car—the only one she hadn't actually been assigned—was from Florida. No, she and her two best friends were heading as far from Florida as possible. "California, actually."

"Too bad. Other than the recent murder, Oakville is a pretty nice place to visit."

Ella blinked, so surprised to hear real disappointment in his tone that she almost missed the part about the case. "Wait a minute. Murder? Not murders?" No wonder her boss hadn't assigned an agent to create a profile. Well, this was going to be a quick dinner. At least

she'd be able to put Logan's mind at ease and hopefully point him in the right direction. One kill probably meant the perpetrator had been in the victim's life.

“Yeah, I know. One murder doesn't make a serial killer. I get it.” He leaned forward. “But look at the file, okay? This isn't a first kill. We got lucky, finding this body. There are more. I'm sure of it.”

“Why?”

“The kill was too perfect. I don't think it was someone she knew, and the evidence is so slim. The fact that we even have a body—that we even know she's dead—is a fluke. We don't have a lot of murders in Oakville, but a killer just doesn't get that good without practice.”

Logan frowned. The attraction he'd been broadcasting since they'd arrived at the diner was still in his eyes, but now it was tempered, pushed behind a sudden seriousness telling her he'd do whatever it took to find this killer.

Ella didn't need to see him work to believe it. She knew he was a good detective. It was there in the doggedness of his stare, in the trust he put in his instincts, in the way he was chasing this lead with all he had.

But she also saw this was more than just another case to him. He'd flown all this way for help, probably on his own dime. “You knew the victim, didn't you?”

“Jeez, you're good. I didn't know her well. But she was a friend of my sister's. Visiting from out of state. She'd actually left for the airport and we assumed she was back home.” His lips tightened into a hard, thin line. “When all along, she was in Oakville. We found her in the marsh. Well, what was left of her anyway. We've got gators in the marshes, which is

why I say we got lucky. Why I think there are more victims—because that’s a pretty genius way to destroy evidence.”

Ella nodded, flipping open the file folder next to her sandwich. The sight that greeted her should have made her lose her appetite, but she’d long ago learned to eat while reviewing case files. “Doesn’t look like you had much to work with at the autopsy.”

When she glanced up at Logan, he was carefully not looking at the photo and she reminded herself he knew the woman. She flipped past the autopsy photos, folded her hands under her chin and leaned toward him. “Why don’t you give me the highlights?”

Logan raked a hand through his dark, close-cropped hair and she noticed the shadows under his eyes, the weariness lurking underneath those quick smiles.

“The victim was Theresa Crowley. My sister’s age—twenty-five.”

She must have looked surprised, because he said, “Yeah, Becky’s ten years younger than I am. My parents didn’t think they could have any more kids after me. Anyway, Theresa was a friend of Becky’s from college. She lived in Arkansas. Flew in to visit for a week. She left as scheduled and my sister assumed she was already home until we identified the body.”

“Who found her?”

“Local fisherman. He pulled out the remains and brought her in by boat.”

Ella realized she was gaping as Logan continued, “Yeah, I know. Not great for evidence, but better than not having a body at all because the alligators finished her off.”

“How long was she missing?”

“She left for the airport early Sunday morning and her body was found Monday afternoon.”

“Short window to run into a killer.”

“Unless he’d already been stalking her,” Logan argued.

“What makes you think it wasn’t someone she knew? Statistically, that’s much more likely.”

“Yeah, believe me, I don’t run to the FBI every time we get a murder, whether or not I know the victim. But who did she know in Oakville? My sister and some of our family. That’s it. Her rental car turned up the next day, abandoned in a mall parking lot a few towns over, in the opposite direction from the airport.”

Ella sighed and set down her milkshake. “Are you sure you should be on this case?”

“Why? Because my family are obvious suspects?”

Instead of agreeing, Ella said, “Because you knew her.”

“Another detective on the force already cleared my family. It was pretty easy. We were at a town function at her time of death.”

Ella stared at him, looking for any tiny twitch that would tell her he knew—or suspected—his family could be involved. All she saw was his determination to get her to help. And that heavy dose of attraction. Her heart rate picked up and she glanced down at her food before she gave anything away. “She have any obvious enemies?”

“Stalker exes, that kind of thing? No.”

“Sexual assault?”

Logan shrugged. “My guess would be yes, but too much postmortem damage to tell for sure. She died from lack of oxygen, but there was no water in her lungs. She didn’t drown in that marsh. She was killed somewhere else.”

“Okay—”

“And she had burns on her body.”

Ella felt her hands tense into fists. Hiding them under the table, she forced them to loosen. “What kind of burns?”

“What were they made with? I don’t know. But she had several. On her arm, her back...” Fury pulsed in his voice. “Someone burned her on purpose.”

Ella held back a string of curses. Burns were close enough to branding that those cases hit her hardest. She always wanted them and her boss, knowing why she’d joined the FBI six years ago, always passed them on to another agent.

As much as she hated it, she understood that he was right. She made them too personal, and getting too close to a case meant making mistakes. Like Logan was in danger of doing right now.

She gave him her best profiler stare, the one she’d learned from her boss—a legend in the Bureau. “I’m going to read this case file and give you my best insight. But I’m going to tell you something you already know. You’re too close to this case. You shouldn’t be on it.”

It was hypocritical advice, given the very, very personal case file sitting in the trunk of her Bureau-issued car right now, and judging by his scowl, Logan didn’t seem any more inclined to follow it than she was.

“I’m not handing this over to someone else, not when everyone seems to think it was a fluke. I’m not going to sit around and wait for the next body to show up before I investigate this. This was my sister’s friend and someone murdered her and tossed her in the marsh like garbage. I’m going to find this guy and make sure he pays.”

Realization struck Ella. “You’re not supposed to be here, are you?”

Logan let out a sound that was half laugh, half exasperation, but his face told her he was impressed. “Tell you what, profiler. Check out the file and tell me I’m wrong.” He gave her a smug look that said, “I dare you.”

Ella nodded slowly. “Okay.” She skipped over the autopsy photos and started reading. The further she got in the file, the more she felt her mouth tug downward.

When she looked back up at him, Logan raised his eyebrows. “Well?”

“You’ve got good instincts, Greer.”

Logan tapped his fingers heavily on the table. “I thought so.”

She had just flipped the file back to the beginning when he suggested, this time sounding completely serious, “Maybe you and your friends could vacation on some Florida beaches instead.”

“No.” The word came out more harshly than she’d intended, so she covered up her instant reaction by tilting her head and offering him an exaggerated coy smile. “Are you trying to solve a case here or get into my pants, Greer?”

He blinked and leaned back, but just as quickly sat forward with a full-wattage version of the smile he’d been laying on her all night. “Is it too much to hope for both?”

A short burst of laughter escaped her lips as desire zinged through her body. “Probably.” She turned back to the file and all humor and lust instantly fled.

She lifted the page closer, squinting at one of the close-ups underneath the main autopsy photo, and her entire body suddenly felt as though it had been submerged in ice. The blood left her head so fast she actually swayed in her seat.

From a great distance, she heard Logan saying, “Whoa. Are you okay?” and before she knew it, he was squeezed in next to her in the booth, his hand on her back like fire against the frost that had come over her. “Ella?”

“What is this?”

Logan studied her face with concern before looking down. “The burn on her neck?”

“Yeah.” She thought of marshes and fishermen. And images of hooks, burned into human flesh. “Could it be a brand?”

His forehead creased and he was staring into her eyes again, searching.

This close, he’d be able to see too much. Fear, maybe. Pain, probably.

Recognition, definitely.

She’d seen a mark like this before, way too up close and personal. Her friend had covered it with a tattoo, but Ella would never forget how it had looked the day Maggie stumbled home to their dorm room. An angry red permanent reminder of a man the media had dubbed the Fishhook Rapist. He’d started with Maggie nearly a decade ago, then claimed a new victim every year since in a different part of the country. His last victim had been in Florida.

Ella had joined the FBI to catch him. She’d never even come close before. But maybe—just maybe—that was about to change.

“I don’t know,” Logan answered. “It’s possible. Why?”

Ella released her breath, tried to regain control as she slapped the file shut. “I’m coming to Florida.

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