

# Chapter 1

*My office. 911*

A text from the boss? Travis “T-Bone” Bostwick abandoned his drywall project and hauled ass from his condo to the San Francisco high-rise that housed Blackthorne, Incorporated’s public offices, reviewing anything and everything he might’ve screwed up enough to be summoned. With a 911.

True, he’d been banged up a bit, but what was an op without a few bruises, aches, and pains? Overall, it had been a cakewalk, and everyone had been happy with the outcome.

Or *had* they?

He made the thirty-minute drive in twenty-three minutes and tapped his feet as the elevator rose to the twelfth floor.

In the boss’s office, Travis paused at Maddie Scott’s desk. “Morning.” Dalton’s admin frowned and fingered the ever-present strand of pearls she wore. Should he have changed out of his torn-at-the-knees jeans, the paint-stained sweatshirt with the sleeves cut out? Nope. Dalton’s text made that a no-brainer.

“Is that Bostwick?” Dalton’s voice, normally controlled, bellowed out from his office.

“He just arrived, boss,” Maddie said with an apologetic smile in Travis’s direction.

“Send him in.”

Maddie’s brows lifted, and she tilted her head toward Dalton’s inner sanctum. Maybe someone *had* complained about the way the team had handled the last op.

But why was he the only one being called in? The first thing he’d done—after racing to his car and setting off for the city—was to check in with his colleagues. Dalton hadn’t sent messages to anyone else.

Travis’s pulse thrummed in his ears. No point in stalling. Straightening his shoulders, he tapped on the jamb, then opened the door and stepped inside.

Emiko Miyake’s spiky, rainbow-hued hair peeked above the back of one of the visitor chairs. The odds that she, Blackthorne, Incorporated’s top intel gatherer, had screwed up were slim to none. The odds that they’d *both* screwed up were even less.

Not as apprehensive, Travis waited for an official invitation to sit.

“Park it, Bostwick.” Dalton’s tone sent Travis’s pulse thrumming again. The man was *not* a happy camper. He hadn’t offered his usual butterscotch from the ever-present candy jar on his desk.

Travis gestured to his clothes. “Sorry, Sir. I was patching drywall,” Travis said as he took the seat next to Emiko. Not until then did he notice her tight lips, the stress in her long-lashed eyes, the dark pillows beneath them. Reddened eyes. Had she been crying? Emiko? Nothing got to Emiko. She was more unflappable than Maddie Scott.

“You’re here. Let’s get on with it.” Dalton nodded to Emiko. “Lay it out.”

Emiko gave a quiet sniff, pinched the bridge of her nose. Travis wondered how she kept from scratching her eyes with her long, multi-colored fingernails. “It’s my sister. Half-sister, actually. She’s missing.”

Emiko’s private life was ... private. At least as far as Blackthorne was concerned. Travis

couldn't remember her ever mentioning family. Emiko had a sister? And she was missing? There was nothing Emiko couldn't find.

"Tell us what you know, Emi," Dalton said.

She folded her hands in her lap, stared over Dalton's head. "Chelsea's always been a free spirit, but with a heart of gold." She grimaced, raised her hands. "That sounds so clichéd, but she's one who rescues every stray in the neighborhood, volunteers at shelters, both human and animal. She has this ... determination ... to make everything right, everyone happy. I wasn't pleased, but not surprised when she decided to quit her job teaching middle school English in Irvine and head off to a small town in the Colorado mountains. She said she had a job developing a new community center where she could do 'Great Things'" —Emiko made air quotes— "for the less fortunate in the area. Give them goals. Help them reach them."

As Emiko rambled, questions raced through Travis's mind, but he blocked them and waited to see where Emiko went next. Or if Dalton would guide her obviously distraught offerings along a more direct and efficient path. A rambling, disjointed Emiko was unheard of.

Dalton didn't interrupt. Maybe he knew where she was going. Or maybe he knew she needed to get everything out first, organize it later.

Now, he opened the butterscotch jar, pushed it across the desk. Emiko seemed confused, so Travis pulled three candies out of the jar and handed each of them one. With barely a glance in his direction, she unwrapped it and popped it into her mouth. Travis did the same, as did Dalton.

After a moment of candy-induced distraction, Emiko took a long, shaky breath. "I'm not being very coherent, am I? This would never work on a mission."

"You're upset," Dalton said. "Which is why we don't let anyone with a personal connection to a case serve on a team. Back up and tell Travis everything you told me."

Emiko closed her eyes, and when she opened them, Travis recognized the woman he'd worked with. Cool, driven by facts, not emotions.

"Chelsea and I aren't close, but we keep in touch. My parents divorced when I was five, and Mom remarried a year-and-a-half later. Chelsea was born seven months after that, but I had no clue what that meant until I was older. The seven-year age difference meant Chelsea and I had our own lives. I had my friends, my interests. Looking back, I can see that Mom understood we were different personalities, not to mention both my parents were of Japanese heritage, and my stepdad was Anglo. And Jewish."

Travis let that play around in his brain, but since the meeting had opened with Emiko saying Chelsea was missing, he thought she was layering in more backstory than was needed for whatever op this might turn into. Not his call, though, so he waited for her to go on.

Emiko tugged at her spiked hair. "When Chelsea told me about the project, I looked it up, and everything appeared legit. And, because I was stupid and trusting, I never looked below the surface. Until this morning. That's when I discovered the man who hired Chelsea doesn't exist—at least not under the name he's using on the website. The project seems to be a front to raise money. For the man, not the project. Chelsea's not responding to texts." She focused her attention on Dalton. "Before I used any company resources for personal reasons, I wanted to run it by you, Sir." She shifted to face Travis. "And he told me to wait until you got here."

"You're Blackthorne, Emi," Dalton said. "That makes you family. While I appreciate your strict adherence to company policy, you shouldn't have waited this long to come to me. You have permission to use any company resources at hand to find your sister. Find out whatever you can, and report back. Bostwick and I have a few things to discuss. Then, I'll send him to you with any questions."

Travis watched as Emiko rose and glided out of the room, closing the door behind her. Dalton folded his hand on the desk. “What do you think, Bostwick?”

It was obvious the op was to find Chelsea. The question Travis kept trapped behind his lips was, *Why me?*

~~~

Chelsea Goldman steered her aging but new-to-her Jeep along the pair of rocky tracks that posed as a road, glad she’d gotten rid of her low-slung city sedan. Ahead, barely visible through the trees, was the RV her new boss, James Williamson, had told her would be her workplace. She parked next to a dust-filmed Outback SUV, the color of the pine trees, and hurried toward the RV’s door, checking her watch. She wasn’t late, but she’d hoped to be early. First impressions were important.

Taking a calming breath, she tapped gently. The door swung open.

“Ah, you must be Chelsea,” the man she assumed was James Williamson said. “Come in. I’m glad you found the place.”

“Your directions helped,” she said. “The phone signal disappeared right where you said it would.”

“This area still hasn’t been digitized, but we’re hoping that’s resolved in the near future.” He extended a hand and motioned her to a small sofa beneath a window in a sitting area that appeared to double as an office. Desk, filing cabinets. A printer-copier combo. A compact galley kitchen which would come in handy if she was working here all day.

She sat, assessing her new employer. There was a grandfatherly air about him. Wire-rimmed, oval glasses, short-cropped hair more gray than brown. A brush of a moustache, more brown than gray. A warm, welcoming smile.

“I’m James Williamson, as you must have guessed. And this is headquarters for the soon-to-be Trapper Lake Center. Have you settled in yet?”

Chelsea shook her head. “No, I left Pueblo this morning and came straight here. I’m ready to start working.”

“I think tomorrow is soon enough,” Mr. Williamson said. “I can give you a brief tour of the property, get the paperwork out of the way, and you can have the rest of the day to yourself.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“Please. Call me Jim.”

“Jim, then.”

He stood, gestured to the door. “Shall we proceed?”

“Is there someplace I can ... freshen up first?” She’d meant to stop before she got here, but didn’t want to be late.

“Of course.” He directed her to a small bathroom. Sink, toilet, and a stall shower. She used the facilities, then pulled out her cell phone. Emi was a royal pain, always stifling Chelsea’s independence under the guise of looking after her safety. She’d been that way since they were kids, but Chelsea figured she owed her a quick check-in, even if it wasn’t their regular Sunday. She hadn’t been in touch since she’d told Emi she was leaving Irvine. An unscheduled text to let her know she was safe might get Emi off her back.

No bars. So much for that. She’d text her from the hotel tonight. She’d have more information by then. Let Emi know she could take care of herself.

Her job, as she and Mr. Williamson—Jim—had discussed, was to help with fundraising and establish a school. She’d suggested that a library be a priority, and he’d agreed and seemed

pleased with her initiative. To do her job, she'd need a phone. Internet.

She exited the bathroom. Jim sat at the desk, a file folder and a pen on the table.

He motioned her over. "I thought we'd get the paperwork taken care of first."

"Sure." She accepted the folder he slid her way. He moved to the sofa, and she busied herself with the forms.

Once she'd filled out and handed over the papers, he stepped to the door. "Now, let's have a look at the property. It's faster if we drive. I prefer to have my office away from the construction noise."

He held the passenger door of his Outback open for her, and she climbed in. They bumped and bounced for five to ten minutes before he pointed out a double-wide trailer nestled beneath pines and aspens. "Construction headquarters," he said.

They drove on to the site, and Jim parked. "This is it."

Chelsea got out and followed Jim toward the beginnings of what appeared to be three buildings. Piles of cleared trees. Holes in the ground—basements, probably. Dusty yellow string marked where the exterior walls would be, she assumed. Not as far along as she'd expected from the pictures on the internet.

"Nobody's working today?" she asked.

"Just us right now. That's life in the construction game. Busy one day, nothing the next." He swept an arm across the site. "Three buildings to start. An activity center—which will include the library you suggested—and two housing units. One for those with families, the other for singles."

"What about pets?" she asked.

He paused, frowned. Rubbed his chin. "I hadn't thought of that, but if people have small animals, I can see that they'd need sheltering as well. Good point."

Pleased he was accepting her ideas, Chelsea brought up the lack of phone and internet.

"Up here, it takes time to make things happen," Jim said. "We have an appointment with a satellite company to get us coverage, but it's not for another week."

"I can work from the hotel until then."

"There's a lot of office organization that needs to be done that doesn't require internet or phones," he said. "But I see your point. Maybe you can split your time."

"That would work," she agreed.

"We can stop at the construction trailer and I can show you the plans."

"I'd like that."

They got in his car again, and drove to the trailer. Chelsea followed him up the metal stairs to the door. He pulled a ring of keys from his pocket, flipped through them, found the one he needed, and inserted it into the lock.

"After you," he said.

She stepped into the dim space. Behind her, the door closed, darkening the trailer even more. She paused, blinked, waited for her eyes to adjust.

"Not very homey," Jim said, "but I know you'll make do."

A quick, sharp pain in her arm, and the darkness was total.

~

Chelsea awoke to a blinding headache and a roiling stomach. Taking slow, shallow breaths, she fought to remember what had happened.

She'd been drugged? Who? Why?

Thoughts danced through the fog in her brain, coming into focus, then blurring into a mist.

Her new job. Mr. Williamson. The RV. The construction site. The trailer.

She was lying down. She struggled to her feet. The room spun, and the world disappeared.

This time, when she woke up, her head was clearer, her stomach calmer.

Chelsea flipped up her wrist to check the time. Her watch was gone. A high, narrow window covered by a thin curtain let in a modicum of light, enough to tell she was in a room. On a duvet-topped twin bed with a headboard of black metal rods. The highlight of the room. No other furnishings.

She sniffed. No objectionable odors. The door opened. A backlit figure paused in the doorway.

The person—a woman, Chelsea determined—stepped closer and set a tray on the foot of the bed. “Welcome to hell.”