

CHAPTER ONE

Midnight, November 18

Naperville, Illinois

The wasp crawled into Emily's ear.

She couldn't swat the beast—one of the psychos might notice the jerky movement. It took a blood bite, crawled into her hair for dessert. She gasped at the searing pain.

Then brought her eyeballs to the window, peeking through the gap between Budweiser's neon bowtie and the flashing green bikini of Coors Light.

Two bulky shadows raced up the aisle, waving flashlights. They stopped every few seconds to look toward the back, then shoved liquor into bags.

The cold bite of adrenaline scoured her arteries.

She inched to the entry door. Squatted till her rump smacked her heels, examined the quarter-inch gap between door and frame.

No lock.

She tugged the door's handle.

It moved.

Too freely for midnight, when the store closed at ten.

Armed robbery in progress, she decided. Time to call in the cavalry.

Vibrating with excitement, she crept backwards, brushing the yellow brick wall with one hand and pulling her pistol with the other. She glanced around every few seconds, made sure she wasn't a target herself. The walking crouch blowtorched her thighs. She ignored it. She had to stay below the windows while moving. She couldn't chance alerting the heavily armed bandits inside.

She settled in twenty yards west, pulled her iPhone from her Wranglers. Her hands were dewy with August humidity. She pushed nine. Her thumb slipped sideways, mashed the pound sign instead. Scowling, she dried her fingers on her jeans, pushed more carefully. Connected. She clamped the phone between shoulder and ear, bashed the wasp with her free hand. Looked at her palm. Grinned. *Suck my blood, will you . . .*

One ring.

Two rings.

Anybody home? she fumed, impatient to get the attack rolling. *Let's go, c'mon, let's—*

"Naperville nine-one-one," said a nasally voice. "What's your—"

"This is Detective Emily Thompson," she interrupted. "Officer needs assistance at Premium Wine and Spirits, 111thth Street and Route 59."

"For?"

"Armed robbery in progress, two robbers, maybe more." The adrenaline made her voice squeak. She elbowed it out by clearing her throat.

"Any chance it's our bad boys?" the dispatcher said.

"I hope so," Emily said.

A three-man stickup crew—two goons and a wheel man—had terrorized bars and liquor stores throughout the Chicago area since Memorial Day. Sometimes they burgled. Mostly they robbed, brutal and efficient, whipping out steel guns and beating employees toothless if the cash register was even a penny short of expectation. One such victim was in a coma. Another had undergone complete facial reconstruction, with another scheduled.

She hoped the bastards chose to shoot their way out, rather than surrender.

“Describe the suspects,” the dispatcher said.

Emily shook her head as if he could see. “I saw only silhouettes from their flashlights,” she said. “They’re still inside. What’s the status of backups?”

“Ten units inbound, running silent,” he said. “I’ve mobilized SWAT. What else you need?”

“An armored car,” Emily said, feeling naked without her bulletproof vest. She’d been heading home from the gym, so exhausted from cardio kickboxing she could sleep for a week. But Chief Ken Cross had asked everyone to eyeball liquor establishments during their drives around town, on-duty and off. She took that duty seriously—the first coma victim was behind the register because his Social Security didn’t stretch far enough. The bandits bounced his head off a refrigerated case, cracking his skull in three places. “Just kidding. I’m fine. I’ve moved west of the store’s front entrance.”

The dispatcher repeated her new location. She confirmed.

“Tell me how you’re dressed,” he said.

“Blue jeans, mango top, running shoes. Black leather jacket. I’m carrying a Glock and a SureFire.” Pistol and flashlight. “My badge is on my belt.”

“Got it. I’ll describe you to all units,” he said.

So they don’t shoot me by mistake, Emily translated. His head’s-up play impressed her. Friendly fire was a serious risk for plainclothes cops, as adrenalized responders sometimes mistook them for bad guys and bombs away. She owed him a margarita.

“There’s no imminent danger,” she said. “I’ll stay put and observe till backup arrives.”

“Understood. Let me know when—”

She didn’t hear the rest because her face began to pulse heat. Her arms trembled and her thighs went numb. Disemboweled bodies spun and danced in her brain.

No, no, no, she screamed at herself. *Not now, dammit. Not now.*

The feeling disappeared.

“Uh . . . sorry . . . repeat that, dispatch?” she said, trying to catch her breath.

“Let me know when backup arrives,” the dispatcher said.

From the corner of her eye, she saw a black-and-white bump into the sprawling asphalt lot of the multi-store complex. Per the drill on silent runs, its sirens, flashers and headlights were off. She straightened herself, fanned November air under her jacket. The Crown Victoria Police Interceptor aimed her way. Twenty seconds later it was angled into the curb, out of the line of vision with the liquor store’s windows.

Another on-the-ball colleague, she thought.

The door opened without sound or interior light. The driver unsnapped a hip holster and hustled her way. The orange anti-crime lights turned his navy-blue Naperville Police uniform mildew green.

She smiled at the driver’s gelled, spiky hair.

“Hey, Hawk,” she whispered, glad for such fearsome backup.

“Back at ya, Em,” said Sergeant Robert Hawkins. He was five-nine and rangy, with wide eyes and a smile that displayed a gap between his top front teeth. The gap made the smile charming, not hillbilly-ish. He had ginger-colored hair, spatters of reddish freckles on his face and neck, and rosy veins along his muscled arms. He was a computer crimes cop, cracking felonies committed via Internet. He kicked down doors for SWAT. Occasionally, he filled in as a night shift patrol sergeant, to keep his street skills fresh. “Situation?”

She explained.

“We’re eyes and ears only?”

“Till the rest of the circus arrives,” she said.

“Cool. I’ll go around back,” he said. “In case they—”

A long, wet shriek erupted from the store.

Hawk moved forward a quarter step. Emily's heart kicked as fresh adrenaline scoured her body. Her vision sharpened, her muscles tightened. She hardened her grip on her custom-made 9-mm. Glock.

"So much for waiting," she said.

"Screams in the building," Hawk spat into his radio. "We're going inside."

"First three backups are one minute out," the dispatcher objected.

"She doesn't have that long," Hawk said, holding out the mike to the rolling wail.

"Jesus," the dispatcher said. "Uh, go."

Hawk hustled to the cruiser, pulled a Heckler & Koch MP-5 machine gun from the trunk.

They sprinted to the unlocked front door.

Emily crouched next to it, breathing fast and shallow. Hawk jammed up behind her, so close she could smell his cologne. They peered through the door, saw no one. She gripped the door handle. "Three, two, one . . ." he counted.

She yanked the door and exploded into the gap, staying low as she swung her pistol into the left side of the store.

Hawk followed high, sweeping his machine gun right.

Their Sure-Fires lit the aisles like miniature lightning strikes.

No bandits.

No victims.

Just Chivas and Ketel and Bud.

"They moved," Emily stage-whispered. "Let's try—"

Another curdling female scream.

"Shut up or I'll kill you now," a male voice warned. A dozen slaps followed. The scream tailed to a whimper.

Emily pointed to a vertical hole in the darkness at the rear of the store.

Hawk nodded to show he understood.

They raced down the tiled hallway, her in front, him trailing, muzzles up and hunting, staying as quiet as possible. The only light was a doorway next to the back exit. It was triple the brightness of the usual office fluorescent. Music poured out with the whiteness.

They crept the final ten feet.

Hard-core rap thumped their spines. “Bitches” and “whores” and “pig-ass Five-O” blended with “slaughter, maim, destroy.” The woman’s howl became so toxic Emily strained to not shoot her tormenters through the wall.

“All right, scream all you want,” male voices taunted. “It’ll hurt that much more when we drink your blood . . .”

Hawk stiffened, and put the machine gun’s red laser dot on the wall next to Emily. She snapped her Glock to eye level.

Three, two, one . . .

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