

# ON DANGEROUS GROUND

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## CHAPTER ONE

FBI Agent Terri McKinnon ran as if her life depended on it, feet pounding through puddles just deep enough to slow her progress. Terri's partner, Agent Robert C. Kraft, known to the world as Bobby, splashed through the puddles behind her. A suspect, a kid of really not much more than fifteen or sixteen, ran as if his life depended on it, until he was stopped at the end of the alley, progress impeded by ten vertical feet of chain link fence and a rather greasy-looking Dumpster.

Terri kept running, closing the distance, while the perpetrator in the ratty field coat appeared to weigh his options. Reaching to the small of her back, she tucked her SIG Sauer P-228 automatic handgun into its holster, freeing up her hands. The perp climbed up and slid on the slick surface of the Dumpster, fighting against his own feet, attempting to reach the fence, but he never made it as Terri caught the hem of his coat and yanked hard. She watched him tumble backward and braced for the collision as his body came crashing down, driving her from her feet, knocking her flat on her back with a splash in a nearby puddle. Dripping wet, Terri grabbed the kid by the jacket and started pounding the shit out of him.

“You shot her, you bastard.” She raised her fist to strike the kid again. She wanted to kill him, but something stopped her.

“Terri.” She heard the male voice, demanding her attention. “Agent McKinnon, pay attention.”

“What?”

Bobby loomed over her with his hands on his hips. “Get your head back in the game, Terri.”

Lying on a dry mat, looking up at the bright mercury vapor lights of a gymnasium, Terri blinked, clearing her head of the vivid memory. “Sorry, Bobby. You’re right. I lost my focus. Let’s try that again.” Accepting the hand that was offered, she pulled herself up off the mat, squared her shoulders, lowered her stance, and pulled her thoughts out of the rainy alley and back into the workout. Bobby faked right, but Terri saw it coming. She stepped in quickly, threw a leg behind his knee, and pushed, tripping him and sending all six feet, five inches of him crashing backward hard into the mat.

“Time,” he gasped, crossing the palm of his right hand with the extended fingers of his left. “Good shot, sweetie.” She continued to wait, bouncing lightly on the balls of her feet, as Bobby struggled for the wind that she’d quite effectively knocked out of him. “Terri, relax. I need a second here.”

She stopped smiling and bouncing. Terri hated it when Bobby couldn’t keep up. Truth be told, she pretty much hated anything that gave her too much time to think, but the physical training was necessary to ensure that she stayed ready for anything. She went to a nearby bench and grabbed two towels and two bottles of water. She tossed one of each to Bobby, and opened the water. “Bobby, you’re getting too old for this.”

He laughed and sat up. “Bullshit. I’m only thirty-one, same as you. That was just a lucky shot.”

Terri glared at him. “Lucky shot, my ass.” She continued

to glare and waited for the sarcastic return shot that she knew from experience was coming.

“What? You’re kidding, right?” She shook her head as he continued. “You’re saying that if I stay home every night, read, and talk to my cat, that I’ll be what? Faster? Stronger? Boring?”

“Hey, I’m not boring. I prefer to think of myself as introspective.” She put her hands on her hips and continued to defend her choices. “So stop trying to convince me that just because my social schedule is, well, light—”

“More like nonexistent.”

Undaunted, she ignored his little comment and wiped the sweat from the back of her neck. “My social calendar is my business. We’ve had this conversation plenty of times over the last seven years. I come and go as I please, and I like the quiet. You act like because I’ve been single for a while—”

He interrupted again, holding up a hand, wiggling his fingers for emphasis. “Five years.”

“Wow,” she answered, a little surprised. Had it really been that long? “Five years, huh? Good thing one of us is keeping score.” She wanted to laugh, but that wasn’t how she felt. Five years. It was a long time to miss someone. Bobby must have seen the shift in her demeanor.

“Sorry, sweetie. I didn’t mean to bring it up.”

“What?”

Bobby gave her his best I-don’t-believe-you face. “Terri, I know the look, the one that you get when you think about what happened. It wasn’t your fault.”

Bobby was only concerned because he wanted her to be happy, and she knew it. He’d made this fact abundantly clear during their time working together, but she certainly didn’t feel like discussing it during a workout. “C’mon, Agent Kraft. On your feet. Let’s settle this thing.”

He finally caught his breath. “Are you sure?”

She waved him off. “I need to work it out. I’m fine.”

“Okay then.” Bobby assumed a fighting stance and waggled his eyebrows. “So, Agent McKinnon, do you want to make it interesting?”

“Sure. What did you have in mind?”

“If I knock you on your ass, you go out with me tomorrow night. I might have a date for you.”

Oh, this was beginning to get scary. “Might? What the hell does that mean, might? Oh, God, I hate to think what kind of poor defenseless girl you’ve cajoled into going out with you...I mean me.” She crouched back down, ready to go, and stopped, standing back upright. “Hey, wait. What do I get if I knock you on your ass?”

He thought for a second and brightened as an idea formed. “How about this? If you win, I pick you up and drive you home for a week. Then you don’t have to ride the Metro.”

No DC Metrorail commuter headaches for a week. Terri liked the idea. “Okay, I’m sold. Let’s go.” She crouched, ready to pounce, and Bobby mirrored her stance. “On three...”

She got as far as two, and Bobby jumped. With no time to react, she hit the floor hard, mad as hell. “Hey! You cheated.”

“Too bad.” He got up and loomed over her, smiling, while she stayed on the floor and fumed. “I’ll pick you up, tomorrow night at seven. Dress nice, okay?” He didn’t wait for her to answer. He just turned away, picked up his stuff, and headed for the locker room, waving and calling back as he left. “Have a nice ride home on the train.”



The Metro escalator emptied out into the lights and bustle of the Dupont Circle area of Washington, DC. Terri walked

north on Connecticut Avenue, past Lambda Rising books, and over to Twentieth Street toward the townhouse that she shared with her cat, Jojo. “Just an accident,” she muttered when she caught her reflection in the bookstore window. She wanted to believe it. “Sick twist of fate.” Why shouldn’t she believe it? The FBI did. Bobby was there. He saw what happened and he believed it, too. “Wrong place at the wrong time. Nothing more.” Terri shook her head and kept walking. She opened her front door and found herself greeted with a cheery “meow” and fuzzy figure eights around her legs. “Jojo!” She greeted her with a scratch to the ears as she dropped her computer bag on the chair just inside the door. “C’mon, kiddo, you must be hungry.”

Jojo commenced the figure eight motion once again, almost tripping her in the process of scooping kibble. Terri left the cat to happily crunch away at her dinner while she leaned over to remove her sensible black work shoes and swore at the ever-present white cat hair around the hems of her black suit pants.

“Dammit, cat. Why can’t you just not shed?” Terri mused inwardly that maybe if she could wear something else, like something with color of any kind, cat hair wouldn’t be a problem.

Terri went up the steps to her bedroom to change, but flopped down on the side of her bed instead. She stared at her closet, mostly loaded with identical black jackets, black pants, and white shirts. She kept a few casual items of clothing for the occasional night out that Bobby forced her to endure, but these were often left hanging in the closet for long, uninterrupted spaces of time. Besides, casual clothing that was the least bit fashionable made it terribly difficult to conceal the automatic handgun that she was required to carry on her person at all times.

Alyssa had hated the fact that Terri always had to carry a gun. Said it gave her the willies. Terri removed her weapon from the belt holster at the small of her back, unloaded it, and placed the weapon and ammo in the top drawer of the dresser. Terri hauled herself off the edge of the bed and peeled off her work clothes. Her usual uniform at home, a loose pair of red sweatpants and an oversized “Brutus the Buckeye” T-shirt, seemed like the best idea. She dressed and headed back down to start water on the stove for tea. While she waited for the water to boil, she thought about the mess she’d managed to let herself get tricked into for tomorrow night. A night out with Bobby usually meant she’d wind up walking home alone after he hooked up with some cute boy thing, but a blind date was worse.

Instead of walking home alone, she’d managed to get herself trapped into a night out that she wasn’t interested in, followed by walking someone else to the Metro, and then walking home alone. Shaking her head, she bent over to talk to the cat. “Jojo, I know he’s my best friend, but will this never end?”

Jojo answered simply by using more figure eight motions to deposit white fur around the elastic bottoms of the red sweatpants.

## CHAPTER TWO

The code stretched across the width of the twenty-one-inch monitor and extended several inches down its length. To the uninformed it looked like pure nonsense, but it was the art of Jennifer Rosenberg. A resident of the tiny village of Mount Crawford, Virginia, Jen loved the peace of living nestled in the Shenandoah Valley, with its rocky hillsides full of cows and spectacular views of both the Blue Ridge and Appalachian Mountains. She'd had enough of big city life to finally move her consulting practice to the restored farmhouse that she shared with Snickers, a pug-Chihuahua mix of indeterminate origin. Both friend and early warning system, Snickers had the ferocity of a rottweiler packed into a twelve-pound body. Not that he could do a lot of damage if someone seriously wanted past him, but they were in for a fight as far as he was concerned.

Jen checked the code one last time. Certain that it was safely running on its own, she left the converted downstairs bedroom/office that contained two desktop systems, two laptops, a router for the satellite uplink, a small server for additional space, and a twin bed. Jen usually just curled up with Snickers on the office bed while some important code

ran so she could tend to it immediately when the beep that signaled its completion woke her up.

“C’mon, little dude, let’s get you some dinner.” Jen headed for the kitchen, but stopped when her phone vibrated in the pocket of her cargo pants.

She removed the offending device and checked the display for the identity of the caller.

Joe Edwards was Jen’s oldest friend. A classmate from public school, Joe had been her one and only boyfriend for exactly three weeks in the tenth grade. The fact that Joe liked Jen and Jen liked girls added up to one completely disastrous romantic relationship, but a truly fast friendship. Joe was a carpenter by trade, and he frequently worked at the busy Hollywood studios building both location and soundstage sets.

Joe always sounded happy when he called. “Hey, farm girl! Just confirming my ride from that poor little excuse for an airport down the road from you. Are we still on for my little skiing adventure Friday?”

“Of course, doofus. You think I’d make you walk? And I am not a farm girl.” She paused, contemplating her last statement. “Well, not really, but then again, I do own a farm—”

“Jen, stay with me.” Joe laughed and continued, “Anyway, I’ve seen more than one horse and buggy in that godforsaken place that you call home. I just had to ask.”

“Hey, you know those are Mennonite farmers, and most of the people around here drive real cars. Well, I guess they’re real cars, if you call a ’65 Chevy pickup truck with a gun rack in the rear window and a fifty/fifty ratio of Bondo to rust a car, but you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, babble girl, I getcha. Just had to give you a little shit for bailing on me. But then again, at least you decided to settle somewhere close to a ski resort, so it’s all good.”

“Of course I did. I knew you’d never come see me if I didn’t offer some special amenities. I can’t offer you any hustle or even a little bit of bustle, so I had to settle for manmade snow and Civil War battlefields as far as the eye can see.”

“I know, Jen, it’s everything we’ve ever dreamed of.” Jen could practically hear the rolling of his eyes, but she knew he was only giving her a hard time.

“Hey, nothing but the best for you,” Jen said while she cradled the phone to her ear to look for the paper where she had scribbled the arrival information for his flight. “You’ll be here at seven forty-three p.m. on US Air flight 3462, barring weather complications or cows on the runway.”

“Yep, that’s it. Barring bovine intervention.” Jen groaned at the really bad pun, said her good-byes, and hung up.

Jen leaned over with her hands on her knees in order to talk to her little dog pal. “C’mon, Snicker-man, let’s check that code one more time and get this place ready for company.”