



Edge of Betrayal: An Edge Novel

By Shannon K. Butcher

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Mira Sage knows Adam's dark past. She's created a database of Threshold survivors whose lives were destroyed by the experiments of the twisted Dr. Stynger—and is driven to save them. If working with the duplicitous Adam will help her, she'll play along.

Even as Mira secretly seeks to prove Adam is still a traitor, Adam has his own agenda that no one must discover. But when the two find their goals pointing in the same direction, Mira will be tested to believe in the one man she can't trust. The one man she can't resist...

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Editorial Review

Review

“What an entertaining and thrilling series!”—Fresh Fiction

Praise for Shannon K. Butcher’s The Sentinel Wars:

“Prepare to be spellbound.”—#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Sherrilyn Kenyon

“The same appeal as Christine Feehan’s Carpathian series.”—*Booklist*

About the Author

Since launching her career in 2007, **Shannon K. Butcher** has penned more than twenty titles, including the paranormal romance series the Sentinel Wars (*Willing Sacrifice*, *Falling Blind*, *Dying Wish*); the action-romance series the Edge (*Edge of Sanity*, *Razor’s Edge*, *Living on the Edge*); and a handful of romantic-suspense novels and works of short fiction. Being a former engineer and current nerd, she frequently uses charts, graphs, and tables to aid her in the mechanics of story design and to keep track of all those pesky characters and magical powers. An avid beader and glass artist, she spends her free time making jewelry she often gives away in contests on her Web site.

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PRAISE FOR SHANNON K. BUTCHER AND THE SENTINEL WARS

THE EDGE NOVELS

SIGNET ECLIPSE

Chapter One

Dallas, Texas, February 18

There were only two men in the world Mira Sage had ever hated enough to consider killing with her bare hands, and only one of them was still breathing.

She watched the man on her tablet, ignoring the fact that she was breaking about seven laws by doing so.

Adam Brink was up to something, and no matter how many bugs she had to plant, no matter how many traffic cameras or surveillance systems she had to hack into, she wasn’t letting the man out of her sight.

His tall, lean body glided swiftly over the cracked pavement in the alley behind a vacant distribution facility.

His arms were filled with more boxes of who knew what—just like the boxes he'd been carrying in for the last hour. He glanced over his shoulder occasionally, checking to make sure he wasn't being followed.

Even from this extreme distance, with the poor camera angle and night descending on the area, Mira swore she could see guilt riding his angular features.

Whatever he was doing, she was going to catch him in the act. Maybe then her coworkers at the Edge would believe her when she said Adam Brink was still the enemy.

Mira started her car's engine and moved in on his location. Still out of sight, she slipped from her car and did her best to slink closer to the building where he was up to his nefarious deeds.

Without any windows in the building to peer through, she had no choice but to slip inside and follow him. There was no way to know what greeted her in there—dead bodies, illegal human experimentation, a meeting of twisted scientific minds—but she was ready for anything.

The gun holstered under her arm still felt awkward. She was a much better shot now, thanks to her boss's insistent training, but skill and resolve were two different things. As much as she wanted to believe she could shoot someone if she had to, she wasn't sure she had it in her.

She knew intimately just how much being shot sucked.

Bella had promised that the will to survive would shine through if Mira got into trouble, and that she'd be able to pull the trigger. She wished she had even half of her boss's confidence.

The employee entrance, at the back of the brick building, was unlocked. There was no light spilling out from under the door. No sign that anyone was inside.

With a deep breath for courage, she drew her gun, turned the doorknob, and slipped inside.

There was little light to see by—just the glow from another room ahead beckoning her forward, and even with that, all she could see was dust and open spaces. She heard nothing but the frantic drum of her own heartbeat. Beneath her clinging black layers, sweat collected along her spine. The revolver in her hand trembled.

You can do this, she told herself. Bella has trained you well.

A deep, melodic sound rose from the glowing opening ahead.

Singing? The sound seemed so out of place here, she was sure she had to be imagining things.

As the sound continued, she realized that she knew that voice. It was filled with quiet strength and, like everything about Adam, skill.

Hearing him do something so normal gave her pause. There was no evil in the simple act of singing. It was all too human, shaking her resolve.

And that pissed her off.

Adam Brink had tricked her, lied to her, drugged her, abducted her, and delivered her to her father, who had been more than willing to kill her to get what he wanted. A sweet, crooning tune didn't change any of that.

Mira steadied her weapon and moved forward, being careful to follow in the footprints left behind in the dust. For all she knew, this place had been filled with explosive traps to keep out unwanted visitors.

As she moved forward, the singing grew louder. There were no other voices, but she could hear low strains of music filling the lighted space that was blocked from sight by the wall on her left. She vaguely recognized the tune as one from the 1940s. Dramatic, romantic, and filled with the hope of new love.

The way Adam sang it almost made her forget he was a monster.

She steadied her weapon and eased around the corner just enough to get an idea of what faced her on the other side of the wall.

Adam sat at a table covered with a pristine white cloth. Atop it was a glass bowl filled with water topped with floating candles. She could smell something savory, sinfully rich, and loaded with garlic coming from the room. Two dome-covered plates were laid out, along with sparkling stemware filled with deep red wine. Candlelight glinted off the flatware and made Adam's pale gray eyes sparkle with warmth as they met her gaze.

"I was hoping you'd come," he said.

Mira jerked her head back around the corner and stood on the other side of the wall in shock. He was alone. There were no instruments of torture, no screaming human subjects, no evil scientists. Just Adam and a candlelit dinner for two.

She was so confused by the sight, she looked again. Sure enough, nothing had changed. He hadn't even shifted in his seat.

"Will you join me, Mira?" he asked.

He'd seen her. There was no sense in pretending he hadn't.

She stepped around the corner, revolver raised and aimed at his chest.

"Your hand is shaking. I'd really prefer not to be the victim of an accidental shooting."

"Wouldn't be an accident. Bella told me never to point a gun at anything I didn't want to kill."

A sad flicker of disappointment wrinkled his brow. "I see."

"Who else is here?" she demanded.

"No one. You've doubtlessly been watching me all day."

How had he known? She'd been so careful in her surveillance.

Adam continued. "Have you seen anyone else enter the building?"

Mira hadn't, but she wasn't about to say so. "I'm the one asking questions here."

He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. His shirt pulled tight across his shoulders, and for a second, the memory of him covered in blood sprung back into her mind. She wanted to feel some kind of satisfaction in his pain, but all she felt was a queasy swell of nausea.

“Ask away, then,” he said.

She swallowed hard, shoving the bloody image from her mind. “Why are you here?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

She steadied the weapon, forcing her shaking to even out. “I don’t assume anything you do is what it seems.”

“In this case it is. All that’s going on here is dinner.”

“Who’s coming?”

“You.”

That news rattled her, but she tried to hide her surprise. “You didn’t know I was coming.”

“Of course I did. You’ve been watching me for weeks. All I had to do was give you an enticing enough reason to investigate.”

“All this trouble so I’d come to dinner with you? Even you aren’t that desperate.”

“I’ve tried to talk to you at work. Repeatedly. You walk away and lock me out of your office every time. I went by your house. Twice. You refused to answer the door even though I knew you were home. You’ve left me no choice but to resort to extreme measures to gain your attention.”

“I don’t have anything to say to you.”

He glanced pointedly at the barrel of her revolver. “I beg to differ. You’re speaking eloquently right now.”

“Are you mocking me?”

“Never. All I want is a few minutes of your time. After that, I’ll leave you alone.”

Mira didn’t see how that was possible, considering they worked at the same office. She had made it clear to her boss that she couldn’t stand the man, but Bella had made sure that Mira knew that hiring decisions were none of her business. She would work with Adam, or she’d find a new job.

No way was Mira going to let Adam scare her away from the job and friends she loved.

“The weapon isn’t necessary,” he said. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Again, you mean.”

Adam winced but didn’t break eye contact with her. Nor did he try to pretend that he hadn’t done to her what he’d done. “Yes, Mira. Never again.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I understand why you wouldn’t, but I’m trying to do the right thing by you. Please, just have a seat.”

“If you think I’m going to let you drug me again by eating your food, you’re insane.”

“Fine. Don’t eat. Just listen.”

“Why would I listen to you? I know how well you lie.”

Adam stared at her for a moment, regret plain in the lines on his angular face. Somehow, the emotion made him even more handsome than he was naturally. She knew it was an act—everything he did was a carefully planned series of lies meant to fool her into trusting him—but that didn’t mean she didn’t notice his appeal. Being honest about her feelings was the only way to combat them.

There had been a moment not too long ago that she’d actually believed she could fall for this man.

How wrong she’d been.

Mira had always been gullible like that—willing to trust any kindness offered her, no matter how fake, no matter the ulterior motives.

His posture shifted, moving from relaxed to alert. She could almost feel him coiling to strike. Even so, his voice remained quiet and gentle. “You’ve been ignoring me since I started working at the Edge. I gave you time to heal from your wounds. I gave you weeks to accept that we are now coworkers, but it seems that you’re as immovable as your father.”

A violent surge of fury consumed her, clenching her jaw around her words. “Don’t *ever* compare me to him. Do you understand?”

“Finally, a reaction. You’ve been so cold I wasn’t sure there was any fire left in you.”

Her fingers tightened around the butt of her revolver and she lifted her aim. She wasn’t sure if she was brave enough to pull the trigger, but after what Adam had done to her, scaring him was the least he deserved.

Not that anything she did could scare a man like Adam Brink.

He ignored the weapon aimed at his head and stood. As he glided closer, she swore she could feel the heat of his body shimmering out of him. There had been a time—a few insane moments last December—when she would have done anything to get closer to him. He’d fooled her into thinking he was a decent man. Right before he’d drugged and abducted her for reasons she still didn’t fully understand.

“Be as angry with me as you like,” he said. “It’s no less than I deserve. But it’s a wasted effort. All it’s going to do is wear you out. There are other things that demand our attention.”

“Like you care. You don’t get to pretend like you give a shit about me now. I know better.”

His mouth shifted slightly, his lips pressing together. A flicker of pain wrinkled the skin between his pale gray eyes. Regret hung around his shoulders, making them droop more than she remembered.

It had been a mistake to come here. He was too handsome, too intriguing. Once her gaze was on him, she started to forget that inside that lean, masculine package was a monster. A cold, calculating beast willing to use whoever crossed his path.

“I’m not pretending,” said Adam. “Not anymore.”

“And you just expect me to believe it? How the hell did you get Bella to agree to hire you, anyway? Is she so blown away by your good looks that she lost every bit of good judgment she ever had?”

“Bella doesn’t find me attractive.”

“How do you know?”

“She doesn’t look at me like that.”

“Like what? With drool running down her chin?”

“No, like you look at me.”

Mira hated it that he could see through her so easily. She wanted to deny it, but what was the point? It was better to send him away than to be lured into conversation with him. That’s what he wanted.

“I’m leaving.” She lowered her revolver and started to turn.

Before she could, he reached out, offering her an envelope. Only then did she realize exactly how long his arms were and that she had been within his grasp the whole time. He could have touched her if he liked, just as he had the night they’d gone on their one and only date.

A shiver of something raced through her, gone before she could tell if it was nervousness or excitement.

“What is that?” she asked, diverting her gaze to the envelope.

“Open it. It’s important.”

“If I do, will you leave me alone?”

“Yes, as much as our work will allow.” He seemed sincere.

It was probably another of his lies, but that was a chance she was willing to take. She holstered her weapon and did as he asked. Inside the envelope was a lab report listing test results for a series of diseases. HIV, hepatitis B and C, and a whole list of things she’d never heard of. All test results were negative.

“I’m sorry it took so long to get the results. I didn’t think clearly enough to have myself tested until I’d recovered from my injuries. And then, of course, there was the issue of your unwillingness to speak to me.”

He’d been in the hospital for three weeks after that horrible night last December. Her father, Dr. Richard Sage, had shot him. Shot her, too. But her father was dead now, unable to hurt anyone else.

For that Mira rejoiced. Most of the time.

Confused, she looked up at Adam. Way up. She’d almost forgotten how tall he was, towering over even most men. “What’s this for?”

“The bullet that struck you went through me first. I thought it might bring you some peace of mind to know that I’m healthy, that you couldn’t contract any diseases from my blood.”

That whole horrible night flooded back to her in a heartbeat. The horror of seeing that gun aimed at her. The panic of watching Adam move to block her body just as the shot was fired.

She absently rubbed her chest where the scar puckered the skin along her ribs. The surgeon had told her that if Adam’s body hadn’t slowed the bullet, it would have killed her. He’d saved her life and he’d never mentioned it until now.

“You didn’t need to do this,” she said. “My doctors knew I’d been exposed to another person’s blood. They took precautions.”

“And how many more tests must you endure before they’re sure you’re safe?”

“It’s none of your concern.”

“I’ve done you enough harm for one lifetime. All I want is for you to find some peace.”

“Who says I haven’t?”

“I’ve seen you around the office. In the gym. At the range.” His pale gray eyes caught her gaze and his voice quieted further. “You’re afraid.”

Mira stepped forward. At well over six feet, Adam was easily a foot taller than her. She didn’t care. She got right up in his face as close as she could and growled, “I’m not afraid of you.”

“I would say that’s good—I don’t want you to be afraid of me—but I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t care what you believe. Just keep your distance and no one has to get shot. Again.”

He winced, pain flashing in his eyes for a split second. “I never wanted you to get hurt.”

“Yeah? Well you should have thought of that before you agreed to trade my life for whatever was in that precious envelope my father gave you.”

“I never agreed to trade your life. That exchange wasn’t about you.”

“No, it was about my best friend and using me as bait to lure him in.” She smacked his chest with the lab report, wishing she had the nerve to hit him with her fists instead. “Did you ever stop to think what my father was going to do with me once he had what he wanted? Did you ever think about what he’d do to Clay once he had him?”

“He was your father. I believed him when he said he wasn’t going to hurt you.”

“Shows how much you know. I meant no more to him than a lab rat. He would have used me and dissected me with as much concern, too. If Leigh hadn’t come in to save me, I’d probably be dead by now and no more than a brief note in the margins of his lab reports.”

“I never would have let him hurt you. It’s why I stayed. Why I refused to let you out of my sight after I realized the true nature of the situation.”

“Which would have been all heroic if not for the fact that I was only there *because of you*.”

His eyes closed briefly with regret. “I’m sorry for the pain I caused you, Mira. I always will be.”

“Be sorry all you want. It doesn’t change anything.”

He took the report and tucked it into her jacket pocket. “I’m sure you’ll want to verify that the information is true. If you have any questions, I gave Dr. Vaughn permission to speak to you about my medical records. Anything you want to know.”

“All I want is for you to leave. Preferably out of state. Thanks to my father, there are all kinds of people in those files we found who are in need of help. Go find one of them, do your job, and leave me the hell alone.”

He stared at her for a long moment. The heat of his body flooded over her skin, bringing with it his scent—one that brought back memories of another candlelit dinner when there had been no fear between them, only a shivering kind of excitement she could barely believe was real. “I’ll respect your wishes and stay away. Whatever you need, Mira. It’s yours.”

Chapter Two

Adam was waiting for Bella Bayne when she unlocked her office door the next morning. “What’s up?” she asked, juggling a full mug of coffee and her keys.

Bella was tall, with the kind of self-confidence that commanded respect. She didn’t wear the typical tailored suit one would expect of a CEO, but rather preferred jeans, combat boots, several weapons, and an air of capability that warned others not to cross her. With her glossy black hair pulled back in a no-nonsense ponytail, she almost seemed like a normal woman. Adam knew that in her case, looks were definitely deceiving.

“I need to speak to you.”

“Sounds serious. Come on in.”

Adam followed his new boss into her office and shut the door behind him.

Light filled the space, highlighting a massive glass desk and minimalistic, modern chairs gleaming with chrome. There was no clutter here, only a laptop, phone, notepad, pair of pens, and neat stack of folders.

“Hit me,” said Bella as she settled in her chair.

Adam was uncertain how to start—a feeling so unusual he wasn’t sure quite how to handle it.

Walking away from Mira last night had been harder than he would have thought possible. All he’d wanted to do was beg her for forgiveness, but that would have been its own kind of selfishness, and he’d already caused her enough pain for one lifetime.

He shouldn’t have cared—not that his presence upset her or that he’d once felt *something* for her. Still felt something. It lay hot and vibrant in his chest, urging him to act. But feelings didn’t matter in his world. Only results.

Which was why he was following through on his promise to give Mira the space she needed.

Bella glanced up at him, her eyebrows raised in impatience and expectation.

Adam cleared his throat. “I think my usefulness here has come to an end.”

“Mira’s idea?” asked Bella.

“You’ve talked to her, I see.”

Bella shrugged. "She talked to me. Loudly. Told me what you did. All of it. If not for the part where you saved her life, I would have shot you myself."

"One more reason among many for me to leave."

"I thought you wanted this job. I was told I didn't even have a choice in the matter of hiring you if I wanted the new contract. My ability to help all those people that Mira's father and the other scientists fucked up was tied to you."

"I can imagine how well that ultimatum must have gone over with you."

She set her coffee down on her glass desk with a precise, controlled movement. "I seriously doubt you can. But there are bigger things in this world than what I want. And you know more than most people what we're up against. I may think you're a disgusting waste of human skin, but what Gage has reported after partnering with you is that you kick ass and you seem to be on our side. These days, that's a pretty short list." She opened her laptop and started typing.

"So I can count on a glowing recommendation from you, can I?" asked Adam, sarcasm scalding his tongue.

"Nope. Not letting you go. I want you where I can keep an eye on you. Besides, we got a lead on one of the folks on the List to track down, and I'm shorthanded as it is. Whether or not I like you, you proved that you can get the job done. The people out there hurting deserve the best we can give, and sadly, that includes you."

He wasn't sure if she lumped him in the category of people who were hurting or as part of the best she had to give. Either way it made him uncomfortable. He didn't like that anyone knew he'd been part of the Threshold Project experiments. Then again, he didn't like people knowing anything about him. And yet he'd just handed Mira unrestricted access to his most personal medical information.

Being with the people here at the Edge—working side by side with them—had changed him. He wasn't yet sure whether or not he liked it.

"I'm making Mira miserable. I should go." He gave Bella a hard stare—one that would make most men cower. Instead, she just grinned.

Bella stared pointedly at her laptop. "She'll get over it. Besides, she needs to toughen up a little."

"You've had her in the sparring ring and at the range nearly every night since she recovered from her wounds. I think she's tough enough."

"Hardly. Which is why I'm sending her into the field."

The thought of Mira in danger made some dark, violent force lunge from somewhere deep inside him. He tamped it down, but only barely. Even his best effort to control himself couldn't keep the heat from his tone. "You can't. She's not ready for that."

"She's as ready as she's going to get until she has some experience under her belt."

"A woman with her intellect must be of more use to you here, behind a desk, where she'll be safe."

Bella didn't even glance his way. Her focus was on her laptop. "Her tech is mobile enough. She can still do her job from the road."

“Have you even talked to her about this?”

Bella turned her laptop around, showing Mira’s enraged expression. She was saying something, but the sound had been muted. With the click of a button, Bella turned up the volume.

“What’s he doing there?” raged Mira. A second later she disappeared from the screen, leaving her desk chair empty.

“She knows,” said Bella. “We’ve been discussing it for a while. Like you, she’s been . . . hesitant.”

“Surely she’s smart enough to stay here.”

“It’s not her call,” said Bella. “It’s mine. The decision is made.”

Accusation filled his voice, making it boom out into the space. “You’re going to get her killed.”

“Like you almost did?” asked Mira from the doorway. She must have run all the way here from her office.

He couldn’t tell if the pretty pink flush covering her cheeks was due to exertion or anger. Either way, her pull on him was too strong for his peace of mind. Every time he got near her, all he wanted to do was get closer. That wasn’t fair to her or to him. He’d destroyed his one and only chance with Mira when he’d abducted her and taken her to her father. It didn’t matter that he’d done so only to find his baby brother, who’d been lost to him for more than twenty years—a brother who was suffering and in need of help for all Adam knew at the time.

The irony was that while his brother had no clue who Adam really was, he worked at the Edge and knew what Adam had done to Mira. Whatever connection he’d hoped to have with Eli was now lost to him because of what he’d done to find Eli. Lost, just like that instant attachment Adam had formed to Mira during a few shared moments. He’d traded Mira to reach Eli, and because he’d done so, Eli would never trust him.

“That’s enough,” said Bella. “Adam is an asshole, but he’s a skilled asshole. And he’s proven he’s willing to take a bullet for you, which is why I’m partnering the two of you.”

“No way, Bella,” said Mira, her tone final.

Adam agreed. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“I don’t care what you think. Either of you. I’m headed out of town to track down one of the victims of the Threshold Project who’s just been located. Riley will be back in the office in a day or two, but until then, there’s no one else around to take on this assignment.”

“I’m not working with Adam,” said Mira.

“You’re not ready to work alone yet, sugar,” said Bella, “and I still don’t trust Adam enough to send him out on his own.”

Adam spoke up, hoping to defuse the situation. “I thought Gage was my keeper. You’ve had me paired up with him for weeks now. I’d rather work with him.”

“He has more important things to do.”

“He didn’t mention anything to me,” said Adam.

“Because I ordered him not to. I might be forced to have you on my team, but no one can force me to trust you, and what Gage is doing is way too sensitive for you to know about.”

“I see,” said Adam, trying not to let her mistrust of him chafe enough to show.

“I don’t,” said Mira. “Either this assignment is too important to let Adam touch, or it’s unimportant enough that it can wait until I have someone else to go with me.”

“Not your call, sweetie. This is happening. Your only choice is whether or not you enjoy it.”

“I could quit.”

“You could. But then you wouldn’t get a chance to help all those people your father fucked up. I know you better than that, so please don’t waste my time bluffing.” Bella pulled a file from the stack and tossed it on the corner of her desk nearest Mira. “This is information on one of the men on the List. All I have is a name and address. Research him today. Make contact only after you’re sure of what you’ll face. If he shows any signs of cracking, bring him in.”

“Whatever,” said Mira.

Bella rose, making full use of her impressive height. She gave Mira a stare cold enough to freeze her in place, warning clear in her tone. “If you leave this office to make contact or do surveillance, Adam goes with you. Clear?”

Mira scowled.

Adam nodded. “I’ll make sure of it.”

Mira scowled harder, aiming it in his direction. “I know the drill.”

“Perhaps, but you haven’t executed it yet,” said Adam. “I have. Several times now.”

Bella pulled a pistol from her shoulder holster and checked the weapon with fluid, practiced movements. “And so far, it’s gone well. See that the trend continues. And if Mira comes back to me with so much as a hangnail, we’re going to have words.”

“Your warning is overdramatic but clear. I won’t let her get hurt,” promised Adam.

Mira’s nostrils flared and the file folder crumpled in her fist. “I won’t let me get hurt. I don’t need him.”

“Your opinion is noted and ignored,” said Bella as she holstered her weapon. “Play nice, kids. I’ve got lots to do before I hit the road.” She swept out of her office with her coffee, leaving a fuming Mira in her wake.

“I can’t believe she would do that to me,” said Mira. “She knows how I feel about you.”

“Everyone who works here knows how you feel about me. The question is, are you adult enough to put your feelings for me aside and do your job?”

“Easy for you to say.”

“Of course it is. Compartmentalization was merely one small part of my training. Was it part of yours, Mira?”

She flinched and tucked her brown hair behind her ear with shaking fingers. “What my father did to me is none of your business. You gave up the right to care when you sold me out.”

“I am responsible for everything stemming from my actions last year. There’s plenty of blame to go around, certainly, and I willingly accept my fair share for what was done to you. The question now is do you really think that your hatred of me is going to help anyone in need now?”

She closed her eyes and let out a weary sigh. “Probably not. My father left one hell of a mess, and there aren’t nearly enough of us left to clean it up.”

“We’re making progress. Today, you and I will make more.”

Her green eyes lifted, meeting his. That connection rocketed through him, startling him down to his bones. He didn’t know what it was about her that pulled him in and held on, but whatever it was, its grip was tight enough to drive the breath from his chest.

“I won’t trust you,” she promised.

“I know. I won’t waste time asking you to. But we do have to find a way to work together.”

Her gaze slipped away and her voice rose slightly, giving away her tension. “Give me some time to accept the situation and do the research. Tomorrow I’ll find a way to get past my feelings for you and do what’s right.”

She was lying. Hiding something. The list of reasons why she would do that was short.

Adam nodded, struggling to keep his disappointment hidden. “Tomorrow, then.”

Before he could destroy her willingness to put herself within his reach, he turned and left. Mistrust was a two-way street, and while she didn’t trust him not to betray her, he didn’t trust her not to do something foolish and go out on this assignment alone, just to prove she could.

Adam had promised Bella he’d keep Mira safe. If that meant checking on her every hour to make sure she didn’t do anything foolish, then so be it. It wouldn’t be the first sleepless night she’d caused him. And likely not the last, either.

Chapter Three

Mira glanced up as Bella poked her head in the doorway of the computer room that doubled as Mira’s office. She quickly closed the program she’d had open on her desktop, hiding the evidence of her spying efforts.

Bella’s dark hair was pulled into a tight ponytail that dangled down her back. Dressed in clinging workout clothes that showed off muscles Mira could only dream about having, Bella was either on her way to the gym or had just finished there. There was no sign of sweat or fatigue to give away which one, but then again, Bella always looked fabulous, even when she was sweating.

“Ready for some sparring, sugar?” asked Bella. “As mad at me as you are, I thought you might enjoy it.”

Mira was mad, but not at Bella. Adam was the real villain here—something Mira refused to forget even if others here did. “I thought you were leaving town.”

“I am. Plane leaves in a couple of hours. Thought I’d kill some time in the ring. Wanna join me?”

“Not today. I have something I need to go do.”

Bella propped a hip on Mira’s desk, showing off an envy-inducing body of Amazonian proportions. “You’re not planning anything stupid, are you?”

“Just a personal errand.”

“Liar. You’re up to something.”

“You’re imagining things. I have a very secretive pile of laundry that needs to be dry-cleaned.”

“It’s not even six yet. Since when do you leave work before ten?”

“Since I was shot. I’m still not one hundred percent. I get tired easy.”

“Bullshit, doll. Since we’ve started sparring, you’ve got more stamina than ever.”

“Maybe I’m just tired of spending my life on work. Ever think of that? I am capable of having a personal life.”

Bella snorted. “Yeah, right. You’ve spent more time here since leaving the hospital than you ever did before. So. Why all the lies? You know you can trust me.”

“As much as you trust me?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I told you Adam Brink was bad news. I told you what he did to me. And you *still* hired him.”

Bella’s amusement dried up. “I had no choice. His employment here was part of the contract.”

“You could have negotiated harder.”

“You think I didn’t try? Of course I didn’t want the man who’d drugged you and sold you out anywhere near here. Hell, I would have put a much-needed bullet through his dick if it had been left up to me. But it wasn’t. Would you have rather I’d turned down the contract?”

“We could have found another way to help those people without it.”

“Sorry to burst your bubble, sugar, but that’s not true. As much as I couldn’t care less about the money, it goes to buying things like shiny new weapons. Not to mention the access to intelligence we’ve gained in the deal. You can’t say government resources haven’t helped.”

“I do like having access to the toys, but that means Adam has access, too. You know we can’t trust him.”

“I *don’t* trust him. But I do have to find a way to work with him. So do you. This is bigger than either of us or our feelings. People out there are suffering. They need all the help they can get, even from Adam. You should hear Gage talk about how badass Adam is. I swear he uttered three whole sentences. In a row.”

Mira didn't bother hiding her shock. "That was a lot for a man of few words. But what if Adam is only helping for some nefarious purpose?"

"Then we stop him. However we have to. At least we know where he is if he's working with us every day. Dr. Stynger is in the wind, and we haven't had so much as a hint of where she may have gone."

Mira nodded, trying to keep the sick feeling in her gut from showing on her face. "I've been searching for her. Scouring the data we recovered last year for any clue as to where she might be." She hadn't been spending as much time on it as she should have, though. Too many hours had been spent watching Adam, tracking his movements, monitoring the cameras she'd planted in his house and car. No one else could do the work for her because no one else could know what she was up to.

Even now, Mira itched to open the program she'd closed so she could follow his every move.

Bella sighed. "Stynger's a ghost. It's why she's been able to do so much harm. But we *will* find her." That was Bella's scary voice—the one she reserved for the people she planned to kill.

"I have programs running even as we speak," Mira assured her. "If anything pops up, we'll be alerted so we can pounce."

"Guess that's all we can do for now." Bella pushed away from the desk. "Are you sure you don't want to go a few rounds with me?"

"Not when you're pissed off like this. I still have bruises from the last time."

A slight smile tickled the corners of Bella's lush mouth. "I still have a few you gave me, too, honey. You're getting better all the time."

"You haven't given me much choice."

"Now you know how I feel about employing Adam. I don't like him. I don't trust him. But he does a hell of a job. He's found and helped more victims of your father's experiments than the next two men combined. Think what you want about him, but he is one efficient bastard."

Apparently, Adam had worked his charm on Bella, too. If there was one way to worm his way into her good graces, it was by doing his job well. A few weeks from now and Bella would forget all about how her new star employee had come to them.

"I'll agree with the bastard part, at least," said Mira. "Just hope he minds his manners while you're away. I'd hate to use what you've taught me in the ring and break your new favorite toy."

Bella grinned in amusement at that. "If you do decide to break him, promise you'll let me watch. I'd pay good money to see that fight."

Mira rolled her eyes. "Sure. That'll happen."

"Don't underestimate yourself. You may look all sweet and gentle, but there's a fierce streak in you half a mile wide. My guess? Adam's going to bring that right out. I'm counting on it."

With that, Bella left Mira to the hum of her computers.

Mira spent the next hour completing her research on the man in the file Bella had given her. It didn't take

long for her to lay out a picture of his life. Like so many other victims of the Threshold Project, Corey Lambert led a life that was bleak and filled with pain. All thanks to her father's work.

It made her wonder if there was hope for any of his subjects to find happiness.

Including her.

Those thoughts were too dark for her to face now, so she distracted herself with what had become an all-consuming hobby of hers: tracking Adam.

She pulled up her surveillance video and audio recordings, sending them through several filtering programs designed to call her attention to key words and actions. Every conversation Adam had, she recorded. Every place he ever went, she tracked him. Every room in his home had hidden cameras and microphones. His car was bugged with surveillance devices as well as redundant tracking systems. She could find him through his phone, his company-issued dog tags, his keys, his car; even the soles of his shoes had been implanted with tracking devices while he'd been in the shower at the company gym.

Wherever he went, whatever he said, whomever he met, Mira would know. And when Adam finally showed his true colors and revealed his real boss, she'd know that, too. So would Bella and everyone else.

Maybe then, after he was thrown in some dank prison cell, she'd be able to stop thinking about him.

By the time she'd gone through all the recordings and reports her programs had generated, it was well after dark. The office was empty. She was exhausted and probably should have gone home to sleep, but her mind was still reeling, trying to assimilate the news that Adam was now her partner.

The lab report he'd given her sat on her desk, taunting her. The results were easy enough to alter—at least they would have been for her—but why would he go to so much trouble? What possible goal could he have for putting her at ease?

Maybe he was trying to get her to lower her guard.

Not in this lifetime.

Mira brought up a screen showing Adam's current location. Several different transmitters confirmed that he was at home, so she activated the cameras she'd hidden there until she found him.

He sat alone at his kitchen table, eating a microwavable dinner. He stared straight ahead, eating methodically, almost robotically. There was no TV on in the background. No radio. He had no book or cell phone to distract him. Just dinner and the rhythmic pattern of the fork moving between the plastic tray and his mouth.

Oddly, the sight reminded her of the one meal they'd shared a few months ago. He'd been so animated then, so warm. He'd paid attention to her every word, touching her hand now and then with a gentle caress of his fingertips.

That night she'd anticipated each touch with nervous, girlish excitement. She'd barely tasted her meal for all the butterflies fluttering in her stomach.

His attention on her had been rapt. Absolute. He hadn't even glanced at anyone else, including the pretty waitress who'd served them or the busty hostess who'd seated them.

She'd felt beautiful that night—something she had never felt quite so keenly before or since. No other man had ever put her under his spell so completely.

Mira could have fallen for the man who'd sat across from her that night. Which made her a total idiot.

The real Adam was the one she watched now. Cold. Methodical. Robotic.

And now he was her partner.

Bella was insane for forcing the two of them together. Mira could have worked with anyone but Adam.

Then again, Bella was known for testing her employees. Their work was high-pressure, high stakes. If Mira was going to crack by being paired up with a man she hated, then how could she ever expect to be allowed in the field?

And she had to be allowed in the field. It was the only way to undo some of the damage her father had caused to countless innocent lives.

If working with Adam was the only way to make that happen, then she would be the best partner the man had ever known. He'd hardly have to lift a finger. Bella could have no excuse to keep Mira behind a desk the way Adam wanted.

As far as Mira was concerned, pissing off Adam was just icing on the cake.

Once again she opened the file Bella had given her. The subject's information stared up at her, black-and-white proof of her father's evil.

The secret files that had been recovered last year had all been decoded. There was a massive amount of data, and Mira had spent the past several weeks working to organize it into some helpful format. Test subjects were referred to by codes, and small bits of information about them were scattered through dozens of different files. She had done her best to construct a database to merge all the information together, but there were so many missing pieces. Some victims had been assigned multiple IDs for different experiments. She could spend the rest of her life trying to piece it all together and the picture would still be incomplete.

But there were some pieces that were visible. A few names. People like Corey Lambert, whose file she held in her hands.

His life was a wreck, thanks to Mira's father. Police records showed he'd been jailed a handful of times, mostly for disorderly conduct and assault. He'd filed for bankruptcy a couple of years ago. He was chronically unemployed. Two marriages, two divorces—both within the last three years. No children, which was a small blessing.

Mira still had no way of knowing if what her father or the other scientists had done could be passed on to future generations. There were mentions of genetic manipulation, but she was no doctor, and the notes she'd decrypted made little sense. From what Dr. Vaughn had said, most of the notations seemed to refer to ideas rather than actual research.

But they'd discovered only a small number of files—a tiny fraction of the whole puzzle. There was no way to know if those ideas had turned into something more as time went on.

Movement on her monitor brought her attention back to Adam as he rose from his kitchen table. Cameras followed him to a spare bedroom filled with exercise equipment. He stripped off his T-shirt, leaving him

wearing only a pair of knit running shorts.

Lean muscles followed the contours of his body, easily covered by the suit he usually wore. The scar where he'd been shot was a faint, pinkish pucker of skin in the midst of his naturally tan complexion.

She absently rubbed her matching scar where the bullet had gone through him into her. She hated that they had even that small connection.

He got on a treadmill and started to run.

Mira knew from experience that he'd be there for at least a couple of hours. She had no idea how he could sprint like that for so long, but she'd seen it often enough to know how much stamina he had.

So far, he hadn't found any of her surveillance devices.

Unless he had, and this recording of a marathon running session was his way of distracting her while he slipped out to do something horrible.

That had to be it. No real person could run like he did for hours, breathing evenly, barely sweating. It had to be a trick—a way to bypass her surveillance measures with a repetitive, monotonous activity that was easily reproduced.

A welcome wave of anger swelled in Mira's chest, distracting her from thoughts of her soulless father and all the damage he'd caused.

Adam wasn't going to trick her so easily. She was going to collect proof that he wasn't the man he pretended to be, and once she had that, Bella would have no choice but to send him away and find Mira a partner who didn't remind her of just how gullible she could be.

She gathered her coat and purse and headed for the door. Only when she was halfway there did she stop. After several long seconds, she turned back to her desk and pulled out her revolver. There was no way to know how Adam would react to her discovering his lies, and she needed to be ready for anything.

A few minutes later, she drove by his house. Through the plain, functional blinds covering his windows, she could see his shadow moving as he ran.

All that anger trickled out of her.

She'd been wrong. He really was still here, not slinking around out in the night, torturing kittens or whatever it was he liked to do in his spare time.

Her head fell back on the headrest with a thump.

At this rate, she was never going to find proof that Adam was evil all the way through.

Which made her wonder . . . what if he wasn't? What if she was the unreasonable one, hoping to see what she wanted? If that evil streak wasn't there, she was wasting a hell of a lot of time looking for it.

She had to remember her real goal. Adam was simply a distraction from finding and helping the people her father had hurt. Even now, while she sat in her car outside of Adam's house, Corey Lambert was in pain. Suffering.

She had the power to help him, or at the very least tell him why he felt the things he did, why he couldn't seem to get his life under control. Maybe the simple relief of knowing that he wasn't alone would be enough for him to get himself back on track.

It had worked for others. The lucky few who hadn't fallen too far to be saved.

What if tonight was the night Corey cracked? What if tonight was the night he gave in to the urge to do that one unspeakable act for which he'd never forgive himself?

Mira wasn't going to sit around and simply hope it didn't happen. She was going to *do* something.

Bella would have told her to go knock on Adam's door and drag him along with her. She would have lectured her that it wasn't safe to go alone.

But what Bella didn't yet realize was that it was far safer to walk into a bad situation alone than it was to go into one with a devil by her side. For all she knew, Adam would turn on her the first chance he got.

He'd done it before.

Mira had spent her life trying to prove herself to others. First to her father, then to Bella. It was time to start proving things to herself.

She was smart. Strong. Determined. And armed. She could handle a conversation with one broken man who couldn't even manage to keep a job.

And if she couldn't, she had no business being in the field at all. Better to know now before she got someone she cared about killed.

She pulled away from Adam's house and headed across town. At the first stoplight, she made sure her phone's tracking system was on and the panic code that would dial her best friend, Clay, was partially keyed in. All she had to do was hit one button, and Clay would come running.

Now, *he* was a man she could trust. Too bad she'd never felt more for him than she would have for a brother. He was happily involved with Dr. Vaughn, and Mira could not have been more pleased with his choice.

She doubted it would be long before the wedding invitation arrived.

With that happy thought in mind, Mira pulled into the run-down neighborhood where Corey Lambert lived.

A lot of trailer parks were really nice, filled with shiny, well-kept homes inhabited by people who took pride in where they lived.

This was not one of those places.

The mobile homes here had seen better days. Patches of long, winter-brown weeds grew everywhere. The most prevalent colors were rust and the sad, dingy yellow of decaying paint. A few large trees had grown up here, indicating the age of the trailer park.

Mira inched along the cracked road, searching for the right address. A lot of the lots held vacant, collapsing mobile homes abandoned by their tenants long ago. Even the boards over the windows looked rotten and on the verge of collapse.

The whole place had a sad vibe that made her wish her father was alive to see the price of his precious experiments—right before she forced him to live in one of these run-down deathtraps.

She didn't need to check the house number to know she'd found the right one. Standing outside a rusting trailer was Corey, furiously pointing his finger at a small woman. She cowered back from him, wrapping her arms around her middle and hunching her shoulders as if to make herself a smaller target.

The woman backed up another step, until she ran into the chipped metal railing along the stairs leading into the house.

Corey looked just like his photo: worn-down, angry, desperate. His shaggy blond hair and beard needed a good wash, as did the pit-stained wifebeater he wore. His gut stretched the fabric enough to show her that visits to the gym weren't high on his list of priorities.

That gave her the confidence Mira needed to get out of the car. She kept her headlights splashed over the scene and the car's engine running, just in case. Her cell phone was in her jacket pocket, and under her left arm was a shoulder holster filled with enough firepower to remind her to be careful.

“Corey Lambert?” she asked as she approached.

He turned and squinted, lifting his hand to shield himself from the glare of her headlights. Even from here, Mira could see how bloodshot his eyes were, how much his hands shook.

He was not a well man.

“Did you call someone?” he asked the woman, his tone sharp with accusation.

She flinched and hugged herself tighter. “No. I’d never do that to you.”

Corey took another step toward the woman.

A little ripple of fear slid up Mira’s throat. She slipped her hand into her pocket and gripped her phone. “No one called me.”

“You a cop?”

“No. I’d like to talk to you.”

“I’m busy.”

“Busy making what might be the biggest mistake of your life,” said Mira. “Now, please, all I need is a couple of minutes.”

“Whatever you’re selling, I’m not buying.”

“I’m not selling anything. I swear. I’m here to help you.”

He whirled on her, his face warped with anger. “Do I look like I need your help?”

That ripple of fear turned into a full-blown wave. She had to fight the need to take a step back, away from his anger.

Calm. That's what she had to be now. Firm but calm. Nonthreatening. Reasonable.

Honest.

"Yes," she finally said. "You do need help. I know what was done to you. I know how you suffer."

"Pfft," he hissed. "Get the hell out of here, lady. You don't know shit."

"I do. You have headaches. Maybe even black out sometimes. And the nightmares . . . they seem so real. You're angry all the time. Cry for no reason."

He looked at the woman and issued a harsh "Get in the house."

The woman scrambled away fast, as if glad for any excuse she could find to leave.

Corey turned back to Mira. "You're seriously starting to piss me off, lady. If you know what's good for you, you'll get the fuck out of here."

Mira didn't budge. This was too important. Corey had been damaged by her father, perhaps irrevocably. It was her duty to see to it that he got whatever help she could offer.

She squared her shoulders. "You hear things, maybe smell them, and it sets you off just like that." She snapped her fingers. "You can't control what you see or how you feel. The terror is so real, you swear you're still in that room with the doctor and all those needles. He's hurting you, and he won't stop, no matter how much you beg."

Some of the anger fell from his face and his skin went pale behind his beard. "Who the fuck are you?"

"A friend. I want to help."

"Just leave me alone. That's all I need."

"No, it's not. What was done to you can be fixed." She hoped. "I know people who can take away the headaches, end the nightmares. All you have to do is come with me."

Skepticism quavered in his voice. "Where?"

"I can't tell you. You have to trust me."

"I don't even know you. For all I know *they* sent you here."

"They?"

He moved closer. She wasn't even sure how he got that far that fast until he grabbed her arms.

Corey lifted her up until only her tiptoes reached the ground. His grip was crushing, making pain shoot down to her fingertips. Fear exploded in her gut, and her fingers scrambled to hit the right button on her phone to call in reinforcements.

He snarled, his face only inches from hers. She could see each vein in his bloodshot eyes, each groove that fear and pain had carved around his mouth. "You go back to wherever it is you came from and tell them to back the fuck off and leave me alone. I know they're watching me. I know they have some way of getting in

my head. You tell them to stop.” He punctuated his words with another hard shake that dislodged the phone from her hand.

“No one’s watching you. I can prove it. Just come with me.”

His hand flashed across her face so fast she didn’t see it move. It was the jerk of her head to the right and slightly delayed pain that told her she’d been hit.

Shock numbed her for a second as she struggled to digest the fact that she’d been hit—that she was in far more danger here than she’d thought.

The tang of blood hit her tongue.

Corey tightened his grip on her arms and shook her hard enough to rattle her skull. “If they get in my head again, I’ll come find you,” he promised. “I’ll make you pay. Understand?”

Honesty was quickly becoming difficult, but she wasn’t sure what else to do. “I swear no one is in your head. That’s just a side effect of what was done to you when you were a kid. Please let me help you.”

“They got to you, too, didn’t they? Filled your head with lies, made you do things you didn’t want to do?” There was a crazy light in his eyes—one that was starting to glow a bit too bright for her peace of mind.

She shook her head. “This isn’t about me. I—”

He hit her again, and this time the blow was hard enough to send her flying back onto the concrete. She landed hard. The back of her head hit something even harder.

The edges of her vision went swampy for a second before she managed to fight it off. By the time she did, Corey was standing over her.

He reached down and pulled her revolver from inside her open jacket. “You came here to kill me, didn’t you?”

She tried to deny it, but her tongue was stuck to the roof of her mouth. Her whole body felt slow and heavy, and her normally swift mind was drawing a total blank as to what to do now.

“Maybe this will send them the message to stay the fuck away from me.” Corey aimed the gun at her chest.

Chapter Four

Adam continued with his usual routine so that Mira wouldn’t suspect his mistrust of her. He’d gone home while she was still safe at the office to eat and get in a quick run before executing his plan to spend the night parked in front of her house.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Gregory Rivera:

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