

# Chapter One

You never see the bullet that takes you down.

Somebody who Bianca St. Ives was pretty sure knew what he was talking about once said that.

It was the thought she couldn't get out of her head.

They were hunting her. Pulling out all the stops. Searching the globe.

Along with what was arguably worse—searching the internet.

Sooner or later, they were going to find her.

They were stone-cold professionals. Seeker-finders. Assassins. Locating people and killing them was their job. And they were good at it. The best in the world.

Someday—most likely someday soon—a shot would be fired. Unless she was very, very lucky, she would die.

The thing was, Bianca wasn't a big believer in luck.

She was a big believer in preemptive strikes.

Which was why, at 7:58 p.m. on a cold, rainy Thursday in November, she was in Great Falls, Virginia, a swanky bedroom community not too many miles from DC, staring down the scope of a sniper rifle at a man's shadowy figure as she prepared to blow his brains out.

Here's looking at you, kid.

Cloaked by darkness, she lay flat on her stomach beneath the branches of a towering, too-fragrant blue spruce, settling the stock of the .300 Win Mag into a more comfortable position against her shoulder. A tree root protruding through the muddy ground provided a natural support for the rifle's barrel, taking most of the weight of the weapon so that she didn't have to worry about muscle fatigue setting in in her arms. She was dressed all in black from the military-issue balaclava that covered her head and most of her face to her gloves and combat boots. Her jacket and wristwatch were at least waterproof, which was a good thing considering the steady drizzle. The rest of her was already damp. And cold. The temperature was in the midthirties.

If shivering counted as exercise, she was the workout queen.

Through the Win Mag's magnifying scope, she carefully zeroed in on her target. When he was in DC, he was a creature of habit, and he habitually arrived home at 8:00 p.m. Right now he was in the backseat of the big black car rolling up the oak-lined driveway of a two-story, ten-thousand-square-foot brick mansion at twelve o'clock to her position on a small, wooded rise in the enormous front lawn of the property across the street. The mansion was where he lived. It came equipped with multiple layers of protection, including motion activated security lighting, real-time monitoring via surveillance cameras and a rotating quota of armed guards complete with large dogs patrolling the five-acre property.

The dogs, the guards and the surveillance cameras were all new additions, dating from approximately one week previously, shortly after the time the man in the backseat of the car had returned from his latest "advisory" trip to Europe. So was the bulletproof, bombproof car and the personal protection officer sitting up front beside the driver.

Expecting trouble much? Bianca silently asked her target.

Was she the trouble he was expecting? She'd done her best to make him think she was dead. He was either a careful man, or he wasn't convinced of her death, or he had more enemies out there. She was going with all three. But Reason Number Two was the biggie. It was why she was lying beneath the tree.

Over the last few days, her spiderweb of connections on the dark web had started whispering of an all-out man (woman?) hunt raging across Europe. People she knew of, people she knew, had been swept up, brought in, questioned. Disappeared.

Who were they hunting? No one seemed to be sure. But the entire shadowy community of criminals and their connections of which she was a part was taking precautions. They were running, hiding, scuttling away like startled crabs into their hidey-holes until the coast was clear. Bianca had a bad feeling that the heat wouldn't die down until the target of the hunt was found and neutralized.

She had an even worse feeling that said target was her.

Only she wasn't the scuttling-away type. She was the deal-with-your-problems type.

In the words of some long-ago Mafia boss, if you want to kill a dog, you don't cut off the tail, you cut off the head.

The man in the car was the head.

So here she was, getting ready to cut him off.

She had to give him credit for taking precautions. But they weren't going to be enough.

Sometimes you eat the bear, and sometimes the bear eats you: words to live by. Bianca knew what side of that equation she intended to be on.

Fixed in her crosshairs was Alexander Groton, recently retired head of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency—DARPA—and current sub rosa “consultant” for the CIA. He was talking on the phone. She could just see his dark shape through the rear windshield as the car passed beneath the security lights, which blinked on one after the other and shone in through the tinted glass.

The last—and only—time they'd met face-to-face, he'd been holding a rifle on her, threatening her life. Because, among other reasons, he'd wanted her to come to work for him and the CIA, and she'd turned him down. Then she'd jumped off a cliff and fallen to her death.

Or not.

So she'd already done the flight thing. Now she was in fight mode: calm and centered, her emotions turned off, every sense she possessed focused on what she was there to do.

The morality of it, the ethics, the unnerving glimmer of a possibility that she might be opening herself up to some really bad karma or a long stint in a scary-hot place—she'd considered all that.

Killing him was the only way to keep herself and everyone she cared about safe. He was one of a handful of people who knew that she existed. He'd seen her, spoken to her, could physically identify her. She was as sure as it was possible to be that he was the one who'd set the hunt for her in motion. What he didn't know about her—yet—was her identity as Bianca St. Ives and anything about the life that went with it. With the vast resources he had at his disposal, she was very much afraid that it was only a matter of time until he found that out. And then the hunters would close in.

The only way she was ever going to get away from him was if she died.

Or killed him instead.

Through the obscuring glass, she watched the denser darkness that was Groton as he turned his head. He was directly behind the driver.

Her right index finger quivered with the effort it took to keep it away from the trigger. Her heart rate increased just enough to be noticeable. That, plus the shivering, was not good.

When you're on the job, block out everything except the job: it was one of the rules.

She did. Her heart rate came down. The shivering stopped.

She really wanted to get this over with, but—

Her index finger relaxed.

Not. Quite. Yet.

Like the rest of the car, the rear windshield was bulletproof, although she could always send the bullet drilling through the metal flashing around the window, which was the protective cladding's weakest spot. Still, the angle wasn't the best. With the driver located directly in front of the target and a bodyguard on board as well, there was a real potential for collateral damage. Bottom line, she didn't have the shot she wanted. She would get only one chance at this. She meant to get it right.

Her life depended on it.

The balaclava had a flap specifically designed to accommodate a listening device, and the earwig she'd chosen to wear with it was state-of-the-art audio surveillance. She touched the button on her earwig, switching on its receiver. Primo spyware, it could wirelessly pick up sounds—including conversations—within a range of fifteen hundred yards with no need for a mic.

"...afraid I'm going to have to bow out of next Tuesday's lunch," Groton said into the phone. Bianca made a small grimace of satisfaction as she recognized his voice with no possibility of mistake.. She was using the earwig specifically to avoid such unfortunate occurrences as collateral damage, or just plain shooting the wrong man. It performed as expected, picking up Groton's voice as clearly as if she were right there in the car with him, rather than a thousand yards away burrowed into a carpet of soggy-cold pine needles with the wind shaking the branches overhead so that they creaked and groaned and the rain landing with a steady tap-tap all around. The house that belonged to the yard she was in—another oversize brick mansion—had

lights on in three downstairs windows. She'd already ascertained that an elderly couple lived there alone. The lights came from their kitchen and living room, where they were currently ensconced watching TV, and they would be turned off at precisely nine o'clock when the couple headed upstairs to bed. "I'm heading back to Oslo tomorrow."

Back to Oslo, hmm? Bianca had firsthand, personal knowledge that Groton was lying. She didn't know where he was planning to go, but she did know that he had just come from the near vicinity of Heiligenblut, Austria. At what she'd discovered, after being kidnapped and taken there, was a CIA-controlled black site. Which was where, not quite two weeks ago now, Groton had tried to recruit and then, when she'd refused to work for him and his murderous cabal of covert operatives, kill her. Because as it turned out, she was not the daughter of a world-class thief and con man with an eight-figure price on his head who had graced most-wanted lists all over the world for decades as she had been raised to believe. Instead, she was a genetically enhanced test-tube baby, the product of a highly classified Department of Defense experiment designed to create so-called super soldiers for the military. That experiment had gone horribly wrong and led to the murders of forty-seven of the forty-eight infants that had resulted, along with their gestational mothers.

She was the only survivor of what had been known as the Nomad Project.

She was Nomad 44.

Jump back, Harry Potter. Just call her the girl who lived.

Yeah, she was having trouble getting her head around it, too.

That was the other reason Groton and his minions wanted to kill her. The main reason. The facts were that the Nomad Project was unethical, illegal, unknown to Congress and had resulted in the murders of dozens of American citizens by government-sanctioned killers. The careers and possibly the freedom and even the lives of those who'd been in charge of the program were on the line if knowledge of its existence should ever get out. That was reason enough for them to want to wipe her and every trace of the program that had created her off the face of the earth. Which she was 99.9 percent certain was what they were currently going all out to do.

Big surprise, being the target of a CIA-sanctioned fatwa wasn't her idea of a rousing good time.

That whole super soldier thing? Not her fault. Also, not who she was.

She liked clothes. She liked shoes. She liked makeup. She liked guys. In other words, she was a perfectly normal twenty-six-year-old, five-foot-six-inch, slender blonde with a pretty face and enough sex appeal to occasionally turn it to her advantage.

Who'd been trained in martial arts by sensei masters, weapons and explosives by special ops retirees, pickpocketing, theft and the art of the con by the top pros in the game—

Okay, so maybe Barbie's got a brand-new bag. It's not like she was the Terminator or anything. She was basically just your average girl. Your average girl with an unconventional past. Your average girl with certain mad skills. That included the ability to kill a man with a sniper rifle in rainy, windy, less than optimum conditions at a distance of a thousand yards.

Boo-yah and all that.

The thing was, she wasn't really the kill-somebody-in-cold-blood type. She wasn't even the kill-somebody type.

She was, however, the

didn't-want-to-be-killed-herself-or-captured-and-turned-into-a-murderous-lab-experiment type, so given the choices here she was.

Kill or be killed: it was the oldest rule of all.

She knew which side of that equation she meant to be on, too.

"I'll call you when I get back and we'll set something up," Groton said into the phone. "Say hello to Molly for me." Disconnecting, he added to someone in the car, "Did you tell the pilot that it's wheels up at 9:00 a.m. tomorrow?"

"Yes, sir," came the reply. It was hard to be sure, but Bianca thought the speaker was the driver. The car was now almost even with the house, which for all its grandeur did not have an attached garage. The vehicles were kept in a former carriage house out back that had been converted into a four-bay garage. Ordinarily Groton would have parked in the reconfigured garage and walked into the house through a back door. Also ordinarily, Groton drove himself, and his security consisted of any personal weapons he might possess and a standard security alarm on the house. Bianca got it: desperate times call for desperate measures. Right there with you, sir.

Under these particular desperate measures, Groton's car would stop sixty-two feet short of the garage. He would be hustled out of the car and into his house through a side door under the close protection of his bodyguard.

From the car door to the door to the house was a distance of approximately seventeen feet, including three ascending steps that led to a small stoop. The time required for Groton to cover that distance was twenty-one seconds. She'd timed it, just like she'd measured the distances involved and calculated the best angle for her shot, during her two dry runs.

The period of optimum exposure would be when Groton was on the steps, which weren't wide enough for two men to climb side by side.

That was her window.

She wasn't going to miss.

The light beside the side door of Groton's house came on, illuminating the area where he would exit the car.

A mistake on the part of whoever had flipped that switch, Bianca thought, but not one that was going to make a difference. She would have taken—and would make—the shot regardless of the lighting.

Groton said, "My wife will be coming with us in the morning, by the way. After you drop me at my plane, you're to take her to Dulles. She has a flight to Arizona."

"Yes, sir," the driver said. "You to Andrews, Mrs. Groton to Dulles."

"That's right."

Looking through the scope, Bianca honed in on the spot where she expected to pick up her target even as she registered that the wife was being taken out of the way. A good tactical move on Groton's part: it reduced his vulnerability, which family members always expanded.

Too bad that by morning the horse would already have left the barn.

The car pulled to a stop so that the rear driver's-side door was in near-perfect alignment with the door through which Groton would enter the house. The front passenger door opened. The bodyguard, a tall, fortyish man with a buzzed head and a small goatee, got out and came around the front of the car. He was holding an open umbrella with a solid, dark canopy in deference to the shimmery fall of rain. The bodyguard was a pro: it was there in his walk, in his body

language, in the way his overcoat and suit jacket were left open to allow easy access to the weapon in his shoulder holster. Without missing a step, he visually scanned the surroundings for possible threats. Unfortunately for him and Groton, it was too dark and she was too far away for him to spot her.

Showtime. Bianca had trained with some of the best military snipers in the world. They favored the BRASS method of assuring precise shot placement. The acronym stood for breathe, relax, aim, stop/slack, squeeze. She instinctively began the sequence.

Breathe in.

Many snipers were taught to hold their breath when taking a shot. Bianca's instructors felt that this caused the body to struggle internally as it fought for air and thus interfered with optimum accuracy. Instead, she began to regulate her breathing so that when the time came she would be pulling the trigger in the two- to three-second interval between inhaling and exhaling.

Breathe out.

The house door opened and was held open by someone inside whom Bianca couldn't see.

"Let's go, sir," the bodyguard said as he opened the rear driver's-side door. Groton stepped out.

He was a tall man, rangy in the dark overcoat he wore over his suit, moving easily despite his seventy-three years. Sheltering Groton with the umbrella in a way that blocked the top half of his head from Bianca's view, closing the car door with a backward sweep of his arm, the bodyguard stayed half a step behind him.

The umbrella was unexpected. She would have to make adjustments. Bianca caught herself holding her breath as she concentrated on finding her shot despite its presence.

Relax. Breathe in.

Groton and the bodyguard strode toward the house.

Bianca was still cold and wet, but she was no longer aware of either. The shivering had stopped. Her heartbeat was strong and steady. Her arm and neck muscles were loose, supple. Her trigger finger was relaxed. She briefly glanced into the nearby darkness to take the strain off her eyes, then squinted back down the scope.

Her senses sharpened, focused, while around her everything else seemed to slow down. The spicy fragrance of the wet spruce intensified. The patter of the falling rain became a drumbeat.



The steady drizzle separated into individual, beautifully rendered teardrops. She became supremely conscious of the direction and strength of the gusting wind, of the play of light and shadow over the target area, of the distortion created by uncertain lighting and distance.

“Where’s Mrs. Groton?” Groton called to whoever was holding open the house door.

“In the living room, sir.” It was a woman’s voice. A maid? Bianca couldn’t be sure.

Still shielded by the umbrella, Groton reached the steps.

Breathe out. Aim.

Bianca aligned the target in the crosshairs. A body shot usually yielded the highest percentage of success, but a head shot was absolutely, positively lethal, and she couldn’t afford anything less.

A miss would be disastrous. If she had to shoot through the umbrella, she would. The silky fabric wouldn’t deflect the bullet by so much as a hairbreadth.

Groton put a foot on the bottom step. The bodyguard was still behind him. As her target began to climb, the umbrella tilted back out of the way.

Groton’s craggy features and thick gray hair were exposed. Yes. Bianca refined her aim, refusing to be distracted by the rain that caught in his hair and shone like diamonds in the light.

Stop/slack.

Her index finger touched the trigger at last, the lightest of contacts to ensure that there was no slack in it. She felt its carefully calibrated resistance throughout her body. The only thing that was required now was for her finger to retract and the weapon would fire.

Groton was on the middle step.

Breathe in.

She had an unimpeded shot. All she had to do was pull the trigger.

Squee—

Thud. She was surprised by a sound that made her think of a fist punching flesh. It came through her earwig and was actually the sound of a bullet finding its target, she discovered a split second later as blood exploded in a red geyser from the center of Groton’s chest. The maid screamed.

Grabbing for his weapon, the bodyguard lunged forward with an inarticulate cry. Groton’s body dropped like a stone, then tumbled down the steps.

Bianca's heart leaped. Her finger dropped away from the trigger. Stunned, she lay unmoving, her eye still glued to the scope.

Groton had been shot.

But she hadn't pulled the trigger, hadn't fired her weapon, hadn't taken him out.

Which meant—

There was another shooter on the ground.