

## ONE

Belanger had promised to meet her here at the crossroads, but where was he? Not a soul in sight. Just bald Canadian prairie stretching for miles.

Standing on the road, waiting for this man she had never met, Liv Gardner felt horribly exposed. Vulnerable. It was a new feeling for her, and she hated it. She was used to outmaneuvering corporate adversaries, but the enemy she had come north to stop was far more dangerous than any boardroom suit. This guy was capable of killing. And Belanger, the one ally here she'd thought she could count on, was a no-show. Liv felt a squirm of fear warning her she had come to a place where she was out of her depth.

Calm down, she told herself. He's just late. She wished she could call him, but he had made it clear she was *not* to do that. Yet that's all she had – his voice on the phone.

She stepped away from her car parked on the verge and took a careful look around to be sure she hadn't missed him. Impossible. There was no one. Not even a building. Just brown fields stubbled with – what? Last fall's grain? She had no idea. Northern Alberta was an alien world. In the distance beyond the fields lay dark, endless forest. Above it all, blindingly blue sky. And this sharp, cold wind. Didn't it ever stop?

She turned into it to keep her hair from whipping into her face. Should she have changed her hair color too, like her clothes and her car and her name? She shivered at the chill on her skin. Spring was supposed to be warm, welcoming. Instead, this cold May wind seemed sent to scare her. No friendly city whiffs of burgers, perfumes, cigarettes. In her online research of the

area and its neighboring Rocky Mountains she'd seen an image of a glacier, a mammoth slug of ice hulking between peaks. The wind felt edged with that ice.

It whipped grit into her eye, and she lifted her sunglasses to swipe it away, then suddenly wondered if the Prada shades would betray who she really was. She'd taken care in choosing her clothes. Levis from Wal-Mart. Beige polyester jacket. Cheap sneakers. Even changed her diamond ear studs for blue glass beads. But any local wouldn't be wearing three-hundred-dollar Pradas. She was damn well going to have to watch her step.

She looked up into the vast blue. High up, a bird with broad wings hovered on the wind currents. A hawk? It seemed to be watching her, a predator waiting for her to make a fatal move.

She heard singing and turned back to the car. Chris had lowered her window, her elbow resting there, and was singing along with the radio, head back, feet up on the dash. The song was some country dance tune and Chris was loving it. Twenty-five, but her pixie-pretty face was bright as a kid with a puppy. Liv had to smile. Growing up, they'd done kid karaoke in their cramped bedroom, prancing on the bed to Madonna's *Ray of Light*, Chris fearlessly belting it out, Liv as her steady back-up. Watching her now, Liv felt a rush of love. It had been so long since she'd seen her sister happy. Because she's with me, she thought with a pang. But has no idea of the trouble I'm in. Worries swarmed back. If I screw this up, who'll take care of Chris?

That was too awful a thought – screwing up. It would mean losing everything she had worked so hard for, the company she and Mickey had built from nothing. Already their wedding plans were frozen. And he'd warned her that her last-minute decision to bring Chris along could jeopardize *this* plan. Liv knew the risk only too well. Chris had no social filters. Her brain didn't work that way. *Chris could screw this up. And that could get me killed.*

Enough, she told herself. Get a grip. I can manage Chris. I always have.

But where the hell was Belanger? Right now, *he* was the one screwing up. She gave one last look up and down the crossed gravel roads that stretched out, deserted and silent, into the prairie. She'd waited long enough. He wasn't coming. She was on her own.

So what now? Abort? Turn around with Chris and slink back home to Mickey? No. She *had* to stop the saboteur. This plan of hers was their last hope. Scared though she was, she had to make it work.

"How far to Spirit Creek?" she asked, sliding back behind the wheel.

Chris looked at her eagerly, then down at the map on her lap. "Forty, fifty, sixty," she said.

No way. "That can't be right."

"Goin' like sixty. On route sixty-six."

Liv sighed. *Cars*, the animated Disney movie on the hotel TV last night. Why had she even bothered to ask?

"Let's see," she said, checking her phone's GPS. The town was thirteen kilometers north. Gauging distances, Liv still had to do the mental conversion: sixty miles, a hundred kilometers. "Klicks," the guy at the last gas station had said when he'd pointed the way.

She pulled onto the road to head the half-mile back to Highway 43. When she reached the asphalt, she hit the gas and the car strained forward with a grudge. She'd bought it, a gray 2011 Honda Civic, off a lot in Edmonton, Alberta's capital, to finish this last leg of her journey north to Peace River country. All part of her cover; she needed to arrive in town like a regular Jane Doe. But she missed the sprint power of her Jaguar back home in Houston. A sleek F-Type convertible, caramel-colored inside and out, a present from Mickey. "Matches your hair," he'd said with a grin, handing her the keys. That was ten months ago, back when she and Mickey and

his brother Paul were on a roll. No longer, she thought, her dread creeping back. How long until she'd have to fire-sell the Jag, sell her lovely condo? She hadn't drawn salary in four months. None of them had. The Spirit Creek saboteur had forced them to the brink of bankruptcy. To Liv, the bastard was an outright terrorist. Her hatred of him was raw, like something rancid in her gut. It made her almost sick.

She sped north on Highway 43 and Chris poked her head out the open window, laughing as the wind ruffled her short dark curls and made slits of her eyes. "Like sixty!"

Chris's happy face lightened Liv's heart a bit despite her worries. She grabbed the open bag of Humpty Dumpty chips between them and dug her hand in. Empty.

"I got an apple," Chris offered.

Ugh. It was real food Liv craved. Comfort food. Two hours ago they'd stopped for lunch at a highway diner where a chunky Native waitress in track pants and tank top had served them coffee and then off-handedly waved them over to the salad bar, a meager spread of carrot-flecked lettuce flanked by trucker friendly items: slabs of cold cuts, pitchers of chocolate milk, boiled eggs as hard as squash balls. Liv had felt too nervous to do more than pick at the salad. Driving on afterwards, they'd passed a rancher's herd of buffalo. Or was it bison? Whatever, the sight confirmed her unease that she'd entered the Wild Northwest. She also saw plenty of oil pumpjacks in farmers' fields, rising and bending in the continuous rhythm of extraction. "Grasshoppers," people called them. Good name, it seemed to Liv, since they looked like giant insects feeding. Alberta ran on oil and natural gas. But in Spirit Creek, the saboteur's attacks had stopped the flow of gas.

A lumber truck roared past them loaded two stories high with logs, buffeting the little Civic.

“A-G-S-three-two-five,” Chris said, biting into her apple. “Three-two-five’ll skin you alive.”

Liv glanced at her. For hours Chris had done this rhyming routine with license plates, some ahead of them, some passing them. Not every vehicle got the treatment. Once, after Chris had ignored a Buick right in front, Liv had wondered about her system. “Why no rhyme for that one?” she’d asked.

“Too spiky.”

Aha, red. Some colors were suspect. All numbers, however, had lives. Liv sighed. She was used to Chris’s fixation on numbers. She just wished it extended to reading a map.

A siren wailed. Liv’s skin prickled as she checked the rearview. A police cruiser was bearing down on them, red strobe lights flashing. Why? What the hell had she done wrong?

Chris glanced back, then turned and stared straight ahead. Her body went rigid, head pressing back into the head rest, hands balled into fists of fear. It punched Liv’s heart – she knew Chris was remembering the ambulance. She reached for Chris’s hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “Don’t worry. I’ll handle this.”

She pulled over. The cruiser pulled up behind them. The siren stopped. But the lights kept strobing. In the rearview Liv watched the officer get out and walk toward them. Fit except for a hint of mid-life flab. A stern face. Starched uniform of blue and gray, no hat. The wind didn’t budge his cropped gray hair.

He reached her window. She lowered it.

“Olivia Gardner?” he asked.

Then she realized: Belanger! But wrong place. Wrong time. Instead of relief at seeing him, it pissed her off that he’d put her through all that anxiety. Besides, he’d obviously been

following her, like some stalker, and that creeped her out. “It’s Liv,” she answered tightly. “And while I’m here I’m going by Andrews.”

She could see him mentally trying to match her face with her photo on Falcon Energy’s website. Or maybe trying to accept a twenty-nine-year-old as Falcon’s Vice-President and in-house counsel. Liv was more concerned about Chris. She still held Chris’s stiff hand. “Sergeant Belanger, are the lights really necessary?”

“Anyone sees me talking to you, yes.”

“Could you please turn them off? It’s upsetting my sister.”

He bent and peered in at Chris with a frown. “Sister?”

Before he could say more, Liv got out and pointed to his cruiser. “Lights,” she insisted.

There was a flicker of challenge in his eyes, but he went to the vehicle. On its door was the crown insignia of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. He leaned in the open window and flipped a switch, killing the lights. A few cars sped past them as he came back to Liv and looked at her, waiting.

Liv stared right back. If anyone needed to do some explaining, it was him. He was the loser who’d failed to catch the saboteur. His failure had forced her to come here and put herself in harm’s way. But she told herself to drop the anger; if they were going to work together, she’d have to cooperate, starting with an account of why she hadn’t come alone. She made it brief. How Chris was at loose ends so she’d brought her along. How it actually gave her cover more credibility. Besides, they’d only be staying a few weeks anyway. She didn’t mention how her sister saw the world: colors that were shapes, sounds that were lights, fabrics that threatened, numbers that sang. Didn’t add that she had brought her along because she could no longer afford the nursing fees for Chris’s upkeep at The Willows.

Belanger either didn't get it or didn't care. "You got the job with the lawyer?"

When she'd first heard Belanger's faint Quebec French accent on the phone she'd known that he, too, was foreign to this place. Maybe as much of an outsider as she was. But she also knew that he fiercely considered this part of the West his turf.

"You're looking at his new paralegal," she said. "Don't worry, it's just half days. I'll have plenty of time to get to Wainwright. I'll get the evidence you need."

Belanger said nothing, his eyes locked on hers as though weighing whether to trust her, but also knowing he needed her. The saboteur had outsmarted him and he knew it. No one doubted the culprit was Tom Wainwright, but Belanger didn't have enough proof to make an arrest. That's why he had agreed to Liv's plan of trying to get close to the guy. She had a shot at finding enough evidence against Wainwright to turn him in, while Belanger could only wait and hope she would succeed. It had to be humiliating. Liv almost felt sorry for him.

He squared his shoulders as though to throw off her pity and get to work. "Liv Andrews it is," he said. "What do you need from me?"

She relaxed a little. Despite his failure to catch their common enemy, she felt safer having the local RCMP commander as her ally. "I need to meet him as soon as possible."

"That'll be hard. He's a loner. Hardly ever comes to town."

"Does he have any friends?"

Belanger looked up and down the highway, clearly anxious about being seen with her.

"Sergeant, I need to know who's for him and who's against him."

"Against, that's most of the community."

That sent a flash of fear through her. The thought of being alone with Wainwright on his godforsaken farm. His attacks on her company's rigs hadn't hurt anyone – not yet – but what if he found out who she really was? Could he actually kill her?

The weight of what she was taking on felt like a cold rock in her chest. She looked back to check on Chris who'd turned around in the seat, watching them, her eyes no longer big with fear, just wary curiosity. Liv smiled at her, pretending to be calm. Pretending – that's exactly what her role would be from this moment on. As a lawyer, she'd always taken pride in *not* pretending, in stating her facts with authority and pressing her case with clarity. Maintaining this mask was going to be nerve-wracking. And so risky. Could she really pull it off?

She forced down her fears. Somehow, she would do what she had come to do. Put Wainwright behind bars.

“Come to the meeting tonight,” Belanger said.

“Meeting?”

“To crucify me.” Bitterness in his voice. He opened his car door and climbed in. “Town hall, seven o'clock. The whole damn town will be there.”