

DOUBLE-TAKES



PIPPA GREATHOUSE

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Published by Blushing Books®,
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ABCD Graphics and Design
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901
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EBook ISBN: 978-1-61258-809-4
Print ISBN: 978-1-61258-885-8
Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

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CHAPTER 1



EXPLOSIONS...

Samantha Hillis poked around in the needlework section at Calico's craft shop, picking up the last of the floss she needed for her project. Dropping it into her basket, she grinned. She had cleaned house all morning. Now she could go home and fix a sandwich before spending the afternoon cross-stitching. Her growling stomach reminded her she'd missed lunch.

She paused as a voice interrupted the soft music in the store.

"There has been an escape from Hathaway Haven in Des Pere, Missouri. Nathan Watkins, declared criminally insane, has been missing for forty-eight hours and is possibly armed and considered dangerous. He was last seen in the Garnersville area, near Pike's Bluff. Residents are advised to lock their doors and report any suspicious activity."

The music began again, and Sam continued her shopping, wondering briefly if she'd remembered to lock the door to the house when she left. So, that explained the heightened police and patrol presence when she'd come into town this morning.

She glanced over her cart, noting the purchases and mentally calculating the cost. Things had been tough since Travis' death three years ago, and she was making headway on paying off his medical bills. She was finally at the point where she felt she could buy a craft project or two when she wanted, but this one, Travis had bought for her two years before he died. She'd put it away because she was emotionally unable to work on it at first. This morning, she'd decided today was the day, and when she'd taken it out, it looked colorful and fun. She would even treat herself to some new tapestry needles—the gold shiny ones that were easy to find when they got lost in the carpet.

Tucking her prizes into her basket, she moved up toward the checkout line, opening her purse to look for her billfold and her phone. She set them on the counter, along with the project she'd brought in.

The clerk picked up the project, an orca whale jumping high over the water, with the colorful sunset sending out rays of brilliant oranges and reds behind it. "Ooh, pretty. That looks hard. Is that one with all those crazy stitches in it?"

"Yes, and I've been putting it off too long. It's time to get it done."

Just as she pulled them out, the clerk looked at the person in line behind her and smiled.

"Back again?"

A deep melodious chuckle caused Sam to look up. The tall man in line behind her was obviously amused. In his hands was a square wooden frame.

"I am. I'm afraid I'm about to ruin my masculine reputation, coming in here twice in one day."

Samantha grinned. "You've been in here *twice*? Too late. It's *done*."

He raised an eyebrow in amusement. "Shh. Don't tell anyone."

The clerk turned to Sam. "Do you have a forty percent coupon today?"

But Samantha was prepared for the question and was quickly scanning the bookmarks on her phone for it. "There it is." She hit the button with a frustrated smile as she waited, glancing behind her to see how long the line was. A little elderly woman stood at the end of the line, and her husband was next to her. Samantha recognized her as her own second-grade teacher. She smiled at her and waved.

"Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Gardner. How are you?"

"Very well. You?" He had answered, his wife had not.

Sam smiled. "Good." She looked back down at her phone.

It was still thinking. Finally, a button popped up that said, "too many windows" and she tapped it again, as if that would make it say something different.

"Too many windows? What in the world does *that* mean?" Rolling her eyes, she hit the button on the side of it, frustrated. She dropped it back into her purse. "I'm so sorry. Don't you hate it when people do that while they're in line?"

The man behind her leaned forward. "If you'll hit the little 'x' to the right on each of the windows, you can get rid of them and it'll let you open another one."

She glanced at him. "Really? Thank you, I'll remember that." Then she turned to the clerk. "Typical phone. Just when I need it, it fails."

Behind her, his voice said, "Can she use one off my phone?"

The clerk nodded. "Sure."

Sam turned to look at him. He appeared in his late thirties. His hair was short and peppery gray, his eyes an intense steely blue. He was casually dressed, his shirt-tail out under his jacket, with jeans and boots. On second glance, however, his casual style didn't quite fit his demeanor. He almost looked as though he'd be more comfortable in a suit or a sports jacket. She looked at his phone as the clerk got the number off of it.

Sam's expression was incredulous. "You keep a forty percent

coupon for Calico's on your cell phone?" She laughed softly. "Your reputation is *so* shot now,"

He grinned. "No, I looked it up when you couldn't get to yours." A second passed, and he added, "You're welcome."

She laughed again. "Thank you."

She pushed the cart to the left side of the front doors to put it away and picked up her bag. Mrs. Gardner was still in the line behind the rescuer with the cell phone, and Sam moved quickly to give her a hug. By the time she made it out the door, he was already ahead of her.

The sunlight felt good for the chilly fall day. She wished she'd brought a jacket along with her as she moved toward her car. Travis had always insisted she take extra precautions when she traveled the roads between home and town. And he'd always insisted she bring her phone because of the difficult roads.

Well, at least she'd managed one of the two. She glanced ahead of her at the man from the craft store, feeling guilty for noticing his broad shoulders and narrow hips as he approached an old Jeep. What would Travis say if he knew she had noticed another man so soon after his death?

Don't be ridiculous, his voice said in her head. *It's been three years. I told you to move on.*

She sighed. That was true. He'd made her promise to go on with her life after he was gone. But when she approached her car, all thoughts of their prior life together vanished. Her shoulders sagged.

"Damn," she muttered under her breath at the flat rear tire facing her. She pulled the keys from her pocket and unlocked the car. "Not my day."

The sound of a car door barely registered as she shook her head in dismay.

She set her purse on top of the trunk and opened the back door to put the bag inside the car. Then she reached for her cell phone and stared at it. Could she afford to have someone come and

change her tire? She knew she hadn't renewed her roadside assistance due to lack of funds, but she checked her card to see if it might possibly still be in date. She sighed.

Of course not.

Well, surely, she could do this. Couldn't she? Grabbing her purse from the top of the trunk, she dropped it into the back seat and pressed the button on the fob to open the trunk lid. Just as it popped open, she heard a voice.

"Problem?"

She jumped. The man who had been inside the store was standing right beside her and she hadn't noticed.

"Nothing having Triple A wouldn't fix. A flat." But she didn't look up.

"Know how to change it?"

She made a rueful face. "In theory. Not in practice."

"Pay attention. I'll show you."

"You don't have to do that—"

"Of course I do. Where's your jack?"

She glanced inside the trunk. "Umm—"

"It's hidden under the cover."

"What cover?"

"The cover over the spare."

She rose on tiptoe to see where he pointed. "Oh. I see. If you knew, why did you ask?"

He grinned and lifted the cover. "Because I want you to remember the next time, when I'm not here. See it?"

She frowned. "No."

"It's under the spare tire, and the whole thing is screwed down to keep it from rattling."

"Ooh," she drew out the word, both surprised and irritated.

A moment later, he was down on his knees and had the spare out and on the ground. The jack followed, and the bolts were rapidly being unscrewed.

"You've done this before," she said, watching him.

"A time or two."

"Anything I can get you?"

"Nope. Got it, thanks."

Sam leaned against the car, glancing around the lot, completely unprepared for what happened next. The sound of rapid gunfire caused her to gasp, and she turned, her eyes huge. A car was coming slowly down the next row to her left. Rear windshields were being shot out of cars.

She froze.



GUNFIRE!

"Get down!" A growl from below her brought her gaze downward. Suddenly, her feet were pulled out from under her and she was caught in the arms of her rescuer. Both of them lay on the ground now. His arms were around her.

"Quiet," was all he said.

Sam looked up into his eyes, her own wide and frightened as she heard the shots coming nearer. The sounds of people running was accompanied by screaming and breaking glass, and she immediately thought of the Gardners. Where were they right now? It all seemed to happen at once.

She watched the eyes of the man who held her fast; he seemed to process what was happening all around them. "My purse—" she started to say, but he put a finger to her lips. Reaching inside the right side of his jacket, she saw him retrieve a weapon.

The sounds were nearer now. Sam felt his arms tighten about her protectively as the shots came closer. Above them, her rear windshield exploded, and they were covered with tiny pieces of tempered glass as he wrapped his arms around her head to protect her.

"Don't move," he growled quietly in her ear.

Sam nodded. There was no way she could get to her purse right now. How foolish she'd been to throw it into the back seat where she couldn't reach it.

She tucked her head into his chest, feeling as if her heart was about to stop, knowing the increased noise meant the driver was coming up the row!

"Stay down," came from her protector as he moved her below him and covered her body with his.

Sam had never actually known terror, but she knew it now; the steady stream of shots sounded as if they were only a few yards away. A deafening report came from not far above her. Was it the fire of the gun her protector held? It was followed by sounds of a rapidly accelerating vehicle, and a few seconds later, a loud crash.

Then, silence.

She waited, motionless as a moment passed. The silence seemed more deafening than the shots had earlier. She took a deep breath as the weight on top of her suddenly lessened.

"Are you all right, young lady?"

"Is it over?" Her voice was barely a whisper.

"Yes."

"Then, yes, I'm all right."



FIRE!

He rose first, assessing the situation around them, then offered his hand. She took it as he helped her to her feet, but the first thing she saw was the catastrophic damage around them. Glass blown from the rear windshields was everywhere and holes blown through the front ones as the bullets had gone straight through. The next thing was the huge ball of yellow flames that engulfed a vehicle further down their row. It was impossible to even see the car now. With a final glance around the parking lot, she tried to

pull free of his arms, preparing to move down the row. She didn't get far.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"To check for injured. Or dead. Starting with the driver of the car. And Mr. and Mrs. Gardner might be hurt or—"

"Don't you dare. We'll look for your friends in a moment."

"But—"

"I said, *no*." He pressed her back against her car. "Stay here." He deliberately made his voice sound gruff, and she glared as he strode back to the Jeep.

"Where are *you* going?" she shouted after him.

He glared back at her as he opened the door. "To call 9-1-1. Stay there. There may be someone else approaching. It pays to be cautious for a few more minutes." Keeping an eye on her to make sure she stayed where she was, he moved forward.

The next time he looked back, she'd opened the back door and dragged out her purse, looking down with dismay as a multitude of tempered glass showered down on her sneakers. He ended the call and dialed his boss next, but as he looked back once more, she'd disappeared. He started back toward the car, wondering where this adorable but disobedient young woman had gone.

Keep your mind on the present, Stapleton. She's probably married.

He found her, halfway under her car, only the shapely overall-clad curves of her bottom and legs visible. "First responders are on their way," he said, stuffing his phone back in his pocket as he approached. "What are you doing under there?"

"Looking for my phone," a little voice said from beneath the car. There was a slight wiggle of the delectable curves as she tried to back out from under it, and he tried not to notice—unsuccessfully. "Wait—I found it." A gasp followed. "Dammit—the glass is cracked!"

She was almost out now, and Adam reached down and took it from her. "I'm sorry about your phone—and your car. You won't be able to drive it."

For the first time, she looked at her front windshield. It was still

intact, but there were two bullet holes on the driver's side, and there was no way she'd be able to see through it well enough to drive. She stood, staring down at it, and sighed.

He studied her expression. "I hope you're insured."

She didn't answer but raised her eyes slowly to his and nodded with dismay.

"Are you up to looking for the injured now?"

She sighed. "I can go by myself. I have to go find the Gardners. Miss Lula was my second-grade teacher."

"You're not going alone. Stay behind me."

"Look, I *don't* need your help—"

"Of course, you don't. Nor do you need to listen to me, it seems. Either stay behind me or I'll tie you to the car seat and take your keys so I'll know you're safe." He eyed her. "You don't need your purse."

Her eyes flashed furiously at him. "Yes, I do. My weapon is in it."

He stared at her blankly. "You have a concealed carry permit?"

"Yes. But it was inside my purse with my firearm—"

"Which was in the back seat where you couldn't get to it—"

"Well? How was I to know he was going to—"

"My point exactly. Didn't they teach you to be prepared, when you took the class?" He stared. "Oh, hell. You're a civilian, and I'm being a jerk. Forgive me, miss..."

"Sam. And, yes, you are."

He raised a brow. "Short for Samantha, I assume."

"No. Just Sam. My parents wanted a boy." She scowled. "*Of course*, it's short for Samantha. Yours?"

"Adam."

As angry as she was at him, she was forced to admit he was right about the purse and the weapon. But as her eyes lit on the car that had been within three feet of them and was now six or seven cars down the row, all she could see were the flames that engulfed the entire car.

Sam started around him, and he pulled her back, as if to shield her.

"Let me go. The car's on fire, look! Someone might still be in there!"

But he'd already seen it. He paused abruptly. Before their eyes, the column of flames rapidly reached skyward. With a "*Get back!*" shouted to the bystanders, he pulled Sam into his arms and took both of them to the ground seconds before the deafening explosion. It was followed a moment later by several smaller ones.

Shielded by his body, Sam felt herself held tightly as one explosion after another was heard. The air was filled with debris and, by that time, with sirens—peppered by even more explosions.

She looked up to see him watching her.

"He must have had a car full of ammunition," he said loudly enough for her to hear. She nodded.

Samantha closed her eyes until they had stopped. All she heard now were the sirens as the first-responders pulled up and stopped close by.

This time, when he asked her if she was all right, there was a long hesitation.

"No," she whispered.

He sat up slowly, still holding her in his arms. "It's all right. I've got you," he said softly into her ear. "Deep breath."

She breathed in and out, trying to relax.

Another explosion, and she jumped. His arms tightened around her again. A few seconds later, however, she looked up into his face with an expression of bravery she knew he didn't believe.

"I need to go check for wounded," she said softly.

He studied her. "I'll go with you." He raised her to her feet. "I really am sorry about your car. Wait here a minute. And don't go near the fire. Who knows how much more ammunition is in there. All right?"

"Yes," she responded.

His eyes narrowed. "I'm serious," he said, studying her intently. When she nodded, he turned and moved rapidly toward the first responders. He fought the urge to turn back and look again, knowing she probably wouldn't listen to him.