

HIDDEN ENEMY

CHAPTER ONE

Someone was in the house. My eyes shot open. I strained to hear the noise repeat, but I couldn't hear a thing over the pounding of my heart.

The bedside clock projected the time on the ceiling: 2:55 a.m. I kept absolutely still and concentrated on my breathing. Damn! I thought I'd gotten over this weeks ago. My nerves were now officially fried.

I pushed aside the covers. Living alone meant it was up to me to check the cottage for intruders. Sweat trickled down between my shoulder blades as I tiptoed the perimeter of the bedroom then slid into the hall.

My search of the small cottage revealed nothing out of place. The doors and windows remained locked—just as I'd left them when I went to bed. Was I losing my mind?

The covers were still warm when I crawled back into bed and curled into a ball, holding my knees tight to stop the shakes. I squeezed my eyes closed and tried to push away the fear. God, I hated this feeling.

Tonight was just like the previous times. I could have sworn I'd heard footsteps out on the deck or shuffling up

on the roof, yet not once had there been any evidence. Not a single footprint in the dew; not a single finger smudge on a windowsill.

The lack of evidence suggested my imagination was playing tricks on me. I didn't want to believe it, but maybe a little paranoia was normal when you'd been shot. I just needed more time to adjust. Besides, this cottage had always been my sanctuary, and I'd be damned if I was going to let fear, imaginary or not, drive me from it. This cottage was my home.

Tomorrow I had an appointment with Avery. This time, even if I had to beg, I would convince him to prescribe sleeping pills. A couple weeks of undisturbed sleep would fix me up and then I'd be back to my usual upbeat, glass-half-full, self.

The next day, at my eleven o'clock appointment, I learned that Avery wasn't quite as convinced as I was about the whole sleeping pill solution.

"It's a bad idea, Emelynn." He frowned over the top of his ebony-framed glasses and released the blood pressure cuff with a rip of Velcro. "I'm not surprised you're feeling somewhat vulnerable and anxious, but sleeping pills aren't going to fix that."

He walked over to the small wooden desk and scribbled a note on a scratch pad then turned to lean back against the desk. Avery was tall and fit. He kept his blond hair short and the only thing that gave away his fifty-plus age was the greying at his temples, which you had to look closely to notice.

Avery Coulter was my doctor, but he was much more than that. He was my friend and confidant, and he'd saved my life—twice. For that alone, I would always be grateful, but that wasn't what made him so special to me. It was because I'd come to think of him as my stand-in dad.

My father died in a plane crash when I was twelve years old and though ten years had passed, I still missed him. Dad

had also been a doctor. His name was Brian Edison Taylor. He was forty-two when he died, so he and Avery would have been about the same age. They also shared a similarity in their casual manner and confident styles. I could talk to Avery about absolutely anything and I liked to think that if Dad were alive today, we would have the same kind of relationship.

“We’d be further ahead if we addressed the underlying cause of your anxiety instead of masking the symptoms with drugs.” Avery, as usual, was maddeningly logical, but I’d already heard this particular speech.

“That’s what you said last time, Avery. All I want is to sleep through the night. Is that really too much to ask?”

“The pills will help you sleep, Em, but as soon as you quit taking them—*if* you don’t become dependent on them and *if* you can actually quit taking them, you’ll be right back to hearing noises in the night.” He crossed his arms over his chest. That was never a good sign.

“Well then, what would you suggest I do?” I huffed in exasperation.

“Last time we talked about this, your new fitness regimen was helping. What happened? You’re still working with Malcolm aren’t you?”

Malcolm Perreault was the personal trainer I’d hired after Avery cajoled me into it. Well, actually, that wasn’t the entire truth. In the early days of my recovery, I started having these late-night wake-up calls. Avery, working from the theory that an exhausted body rested better, suggested a fitness regimen.

At the time, it was hard for me to disagree. I was physically weakened from the damage the bullet had inflicted, and still reeling from the naïveté that led to my involvement in a situation for which I was ill-prepared. What on earth possessed me to think I could come out on the winning side of a physical confrontation, let alone one that involved guns?

“Yes, Malcolm’s great. We’re up to 8K now. It gets easier every time, but it’s still a challenge.” I chuckled to myself thinking of my first runs with Malcolm. Between my calf cramps and side stitches, he must have thought he’d taken on an albatross. “Poor Malcolm.”

“Don’t feel sorry for Malcolm—that’s what you pay him for. Besides, trainers like Malcolm run that distance just to pick up the newspaper.”

Malcolm Perreault was almost six feet of flawless, dark skin melted over smooth muscle. I’d met him at the local YMCA after paying drop-in fees at half a dozen gyms in my search for a trainer. He was a refreshing change from the others I’d met, most of whom were Lycra-clad, muscle-bound men and women full of themselves and self-congratulation. Malcolm was different. Within moments of our introduction, I knew I’d found my man. Well, not my man in that sense, though he could easily be a contender if I ever got into that frame of mind again.

Avery finally uncrossed his arms, but that put him back to staring at me over his glasses. “What’s changed to set off your anxiety? Why the uptick in cold sweats in the night?”

“I have no idea. When it’s happening, all I can think is that someone’s trying to get into the house. It’s terrifying, but by the time I’m able to think straight, the noises are gone and I never find any evidence that someone’s been lurking. I can’t keep doing this.”

Avery walked behind the desk and pulled a phone book out of the drawer. He flipped to the back and ripped out a page. “Home Alarms.” He pointed to the column of ads he’d handed me. “Maybe it’s time you invest in a security system. It’ll take the guesswork out of these noises you hear in the night.”

“This is your solution?” I said, underwhelmed, as I looked at the flimsy sheet of yellow paper. He was the only one I knew who used the phone book rather than the Internet.

I considered his idea for a nanosecond before I started ticking off counterpoints. “Sleeping pills are quicker . . . less complicated . . . smaller,” I said, touching my third finger, though that last one was a stretch.

Avery shook his head and smirked. I knew that look well enough now to know he wasn’t about to give in. “A sleeping pill won’t scare away intruders or alert the police,” he said, having a good chuckle at my stubborn stance. “Ah, come on—being a victim doesn’t suit you, Em. Take the reins and get back out in front. Let’s give the non-chemical approach a shot first and if that doesn’t work, then we’ll talk about alternatives.”

Avery bent to put the phone book back in the drawer, but changed his mind and set it aside. He twisted his mouth and flipped through the drawer’s contents. “That’s odd,” he said, puzzled.

“What’s odd?”

“I could have sworn I brought your chart down here this morning, but it seems to have grown legs and walked away.” He replaced the phone book and came around in front of the desk again. “If only they made a pill that could cure absent-mindedness.”

I stared at him and blinked—just once. “Surely you’re not suggesting chemical intervention?” I said, barely hiding my amusement. Avery arched an eyebrow. My bid for sleeping pills was lost.

Perhaps a home alarm was a good suggestion. As his idea settled in, I allowed it some merit. “I suppose I could look into a security system. Maybe Cheney could recommend a company?” I brightened at the thought.

Cheney Meyer was the twenty-five-year-old mechanic who’d resurrected my father’s old red convertible. I’d discovered the abandoned MGB in the garage when I returned here to our family’s cottage on the west coast a few months ago. Cheney and his dad, Jack, restored it so it spewed exhaust like the day it came out of the factory.

Cheney had contacts. He'd know someone in the security business.

"I bet he could," Avery said. "Lie back."

This was our Tuesday routine. First, he took my temperature. Then he checked my eyes and reflexes. Next, he took my blood pressure. The last step was checking the bullet wounds. The paper crackled under me as I lay back on the red vinyl exam table and hiked my shirt. The bullet hole that caused such terrible pain just seven weeks ago was now a dime-sized shiny pink circle of skin. The exit wound wasn't as pretty, but it was on my back so I didn't have to look at it. He examined the wounds with gentle fingers, palpating around them. We did the, *does this hurt; how about that*, routine and then he pulled my shirt back down and I sat up.

"The night sweats, the sudden waking—they're typical symptoms of anxiety," Avery said. "You've been through a lot these past few weeks, physically and emotionally. You need to process it." Avery pushed his glasses up into his hair. "Let's give it more time. If your symptoms persist, we'll discuss it again, but my preference will still be to try behaviour modification therapy before chemical intervention."

I frowned. My preference was still the quick fix of pharmaceuticals.

"But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Your work with Malcolm has already helped heal your body. A home alarm will put your mind at ease and don't forget about Eden. She knows what you're dealing with and she wants to help. Besides, she's one of us—discreet is in her DNA."

Avery was right about Eden. She started off as one of my teachers, but the intensity of our time together had turned our bond into a close friendship. Eden Effrome was four years my senior and five foot nothing to my five foot seven. Her spiky red hair looked nothing like my long, curly mop, and her eyes were bright blue, whereas mine were

green. The physical differences made it impossible to mistake us for real sisters, but she's exactly who I'd pick for my sister if I could. I hopped down from the exam table and straightened my clothes.

"Do you think Jackson was telling the truth?" I asked. "You know—about the military or organized crime, knowing about us? Looking for us?" Jackson Delaney's integrity had been obliterated in the wake of a deception by him that left us questioning if anything he'd told us could be trusted.

"Honestly—I don't know. We're all asking the same questions. Everyone with contacts has put feelers out searching for more information. I just hope we're not stirring up a hornet's nest with all the speculation. Just a few days ago, one of my contacts had his computer hacked. His first thought was that someone was on to him. It's worrisome."

"Everyone's feeling the pressure," I said, gathering my things. I walked out of the small exam room into the empty waiting area. Avery's home office was in a converted garage attached to his Victorian-era home in an old-money neighbourhood. The stately old house filled out nearly every square metre of a large city lot. It was a beautiful home with a small back garden. Avery and I had shared numerous mugs of coffee and pots of tea in the kitchen, and it was upstairs in one of the bedrooms where I'd recovered after the shooting.

Avery put his arm around my shoulder and walked me to the door. "Don't wait too long to look into an alarm. The sooner we address the anxiety, the faster you'll get over it. And call Eden," he said, as he opened the door for me. "Are we still on for Thursday?"

I sighed heavily. "Yes, of course." I stepped into the bright August sunshine. Tuesdays were physical checkup days but Thursdays were when the real work happened. On Thursdays, we challenged my gift, the source of so much

pain and angst. The *gift* was the secret we all kept, but only three people knew that mine was different. That difference would cost me my life if my secret got out.

“Looks like you’ve got company,” I said, watching Victoria emerge from the sleek, navy blue BMW she’d parked behind my little red MGB. Victoria Lang belonged to the class of beautiful that turned all heads, male and female alike. She was as tall as Avery and graceful with long blonde hair that she’d tied back into a ponytail today. Victoria had the look of an heiress; I think it was her confidence.

A glance at Avery confirmed that they were indeed still an item. He was all but drooling. “You know they call these ‘lunch dates’ nooners.” I chuckled and he rolled his eyes.

“Hey, Victoria,” I said, as I headed for the MGB.

“Em,” she said, walking between our cars. “You’re looking good.” She would know, having helped Avery nurse me after the shooting.

“Thanks,” I said, as I opened my door. “See you Thursday,” I called over to Avery as he pulled Victoria into an embrace.

As much as I wanted to go straight home, there was one more stop I had to make. I’d promised to have lunch with Molly. She worked at Rumbles, a quaint old bookstore that I’d discovered shortly after my return to Summerset. I’d known Molly Connolly since kindergarten. We were friends until my dad died, but lost touch when my mother fled the coast and moved us to Toronto. Our old friendship bobbed to the surface after our reacquaintance.

Finding Molly was both a blessing and a curse. When I left Toronto, I promised myself I’d make the effort to change my life. Gaining control of my gift was my biggest priority, but another one was reaching out and making friends. Molly’s ready friendship filled that void. Of course, that was before I learned the full extent of the secrets I guarded.

It would be safer for both of us if I eased out of her life, but I'd only just found her. She lived a life that would have paralleled mine if I'd never accepted Jolene's gift. Molly was smart and funny and upbeat. Spending time with her never failed to remind me that there were things in this life that remained uncomplicated and normal. She grounded me in a good way.

I'd been avoiding her for a while and she knew it; she just didn't know why. We'd talked since the shooting, but I hadn't been by to see her. It was easier to lie and hide my leaky emotions over the phone. I wasn't so adept in person, but I was stronger now. Today I would tell her the "why." Well, not all of it, I could never do that, but I could at least reassure her that it had nothing to do with her.

I eased out of Avery's quiet neighbourhood and headed back to Deacon Street. In the nearly three months since my return to Summerset, the scenery had changed from late spring's cherry blossoms and magnolia blooms to the fluttery leaves of summer in every shade of green imaginable. Now the leaves showed their age, leathery and thickened with the kiss of August's sun.

I never once regretted returning here. The coast's beauty was tied to nature, not architecture. Even the city of Vancouver, a short thirty-minute drive north of Summerset, dripped in all things green. The heady scent of blooms and mown grass permeated the air. Snow-capped mountains played hide-and-seek with skyscrapers and bungalows, providing an ever-changing view.

Molly worked on the stretch of Deacon Street that locals referred to as *the strip*. Each side of the strip had its own feel. The south side was home to the likes of Safeway, Shoppers Drug Mart and the Scotiabank. It was pleasant enough with its mature trees shading the sidewalk, but none of those stores were here when I was a child and it lacked the personality of the north side.

The stores on the north side were smaller and most of them were original to the neighbourhood. Despite the fact that almost all the shops had been renovated, they'd managed to keep their small-town charm. The boutique-style stores sold everything from consignment clothing at Time Again to local vintages at Cottage Wines. And like all trendy neighbourhoods, the strip had the obligatory Starbucks. It served pricey coffee out of a restored storefront that fit in with its neighbours.

I found parking a few doors away from Rumbles and headed for the deli. Dimitri's Deli made a mouth-watering Reuben that they wrapped for me, alongside a crunchy pickle. I then backtracked to Starbucks to get two coffees.

The bell over the door of the bookshop jingled to announce my arrival. The door didn't close automatically like modern store doors. It needed to be pulled shut. Molly often grumbled about having to close it behind inattentive customers. The old store had character. Its tall ceilings accommodated book stacks that reached up so high Molly needed a ladder to get to the top shelves. The old oak floor was bare of finish in places and creaked underfoot. I breathed in the familiar aroma of crisp paper and fresh ink with an undertone of dust.

"Hi," Molly said, from my left. She'd already cleared the small table close to the front window and had settled into one of the worn wingback chairs. The store was empty of customers, as it seemed to be most of the time. Some days I wondered if Rumbles ever turned a profit.

Molly had restrained her short dark curls behind a lime green hair band. She dressed like she often did—as if the fifties had never ended, not that she'd ever experienced that decade first-hand. Today she wore a sleeveless tailored shirt tucked into perfectly pressed capris.

We shared a love of books and similar taste in music and movies, so were never lost for chatter. I think we'd both been surprised at how easily we slid back into our old

friendship. It felt comfortable. Not so close that keeping a few secrets threatened it, but close enough to share some genuine laughs.

I handed her a coffee. “A sprinkle of cinnamon and a dash of whole milk—did I get it right?”

“Perfect.” She pried the lid off the coffee and blew across the top to cool it. She watched me, waiting. “You’ve lost weight,” she said, finally, and I knew that she’d debated whether or not to say that out loud.

“Maybe a bit.” I’d always been on the light side of the scale and Molly had always been on the heavy side. We’d both fallen into the typical girl trap of being self-conscious about our body image. She suited her weight: it made her curvy and sexy, and I assured her of that as often as she assured me that I wasn’t all knees and elbows.

“How are things with you and Cheney?” I asked, changing the focus and stalling as I searched for the words to explain my absence. Luckily, her new relationship absorbed much of her spare time.

“We’re tight, hanging out, still having fun,” she said, blushing. I pictured Cheney’s handsome face and the thick brown hair that Molly probably ran her fingers through. Initially, Cheney had been interested in me, but I’d steered him in Molly’s direction more than two months ago. They’d hit it off and been dating steadily ever since. Some days I regretted pushing him away, but at the time it was the right thing to do.

“I’m glad.” I unwrapped my sandwich while she slowly stirred her fork around in her salad. It looked like tabbouleh. Silence crept in between us.

I took a deep breath and steeled myself. Working from the Band-Aid theory, I decided to blurt it out and get it over with. “Jackson left.”

If she was surprised, I couldn’t tell. “I’m sorry,” she said cautiously. “I figured it was man trouble that kept you away.” She savoured a forkful of her salad and looked out

the window. When she turned back, she asked, “Was his leaving your idea or his—or maybe you don’t want to talk about it?”

“No, it’s okay. He just wasn’t the man I thought he was.” I felt embarrassed to tell her the truth. Jackson had betrayed my trust with one of the oldest possible deceptions and I had been too caught up in him to catch what, in hindsight, were some strikingly obvious clues. “Turns out he was married,” I said, getting it out in the open.

“Oh, that sucks.” Molly looked like she’d bit into a sour cherry.

“Yeah, it does. But I’ll get over it.” That was said with more bravado than I felt. Jackson had been my first lover, so his betrayal was particularly painful. I’d been attracted to him almost from the moment I’d met him, but it took a near drowning to put me in his bed. I could still picture his pale hazel eyes and feel the way his smile made my insides quake. I hated that I still thought of him as handsome; hated feeling used and discarded; hated feeling angry and hurt. Apparently, I was a long way from being over it.

“Sure you will,” Molly said, much more upbeat than I was about it. “I’m glad you came for lunch. I got worried when you put off seeing me. Thought maybe you’d had another fight with the rocks on the beach.” She smiled with a little chuckle. “Last time you went AWOL, you showed up with that horrible bruise on your face and told me the rocks had won. I thought maybe this time they’d finished the job.”

I did remember my *fight with the rocks*, but that wasn’t what caused the bruises. I returned her smile. It was just one more reminder of the secrets I kept. “I’m sorry. I just didn’t feel like pretending everything was okay.”

“At least you called—saved me having to plaster missing-person posters all over the neighbourhood. The latest pictures I have of you were taken at your twelfth birthday party. I would have had to resort to one of those

creepy police composite sketches.” Molly arched an eyebrow and succeeded in getting a laugh out of me.

“Now you’ve got me wondering,” she said, setting her lunch down. She hurried over to the computer and retrieved a sheet of paper from the shallow drawer underneath. She smoothed the wrinkles out against the counter.

“Was his wife’s name Alexandra, by any chance?” she asked, glancing at the paper as she walked back.

“Alexandra? Ah . . . she uses Sandra, the short form, but how would you know her name?” I asked, completely stunned.

“You told me the name of Jackson’s boat, remember? I researched it on the Internet and voila.” She offered me the piece of paper. “The *Aerial Symphony* is registered in New Orleans to one Alexandra Delaney.”

“Well, now I feel like an idiot. Do you know how many hours I spent on the computer researching him and his family and their development business? I even knew he had a *friend* named Sandra, but I never once suspected she was his wife.” In fact, the reason Jackson Delaney had come to Vancouver from New Orleans was to organize Sandra’s rescue. “If only I’d thought to Google the *Aerial Symphony*. It would have saved me a whole lot of hurt.”

“Hardly. I looked it up and it never occurred to me. I just figured the boat was owned by his mom or a sister and didn’t give it a second thought.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” I said, reviewing the printout. I’d managed to ignore or write off all the other things that should have been flapping red flags—why not this one too? “Let’s not talk about it anymore, okay?” I’d hit my *you’re unbelievably naive* limit for the day.

“Sure. I’m sorry it hurts, Em, but he’s not worth it.”

She was right—he absolutely wasn’t worth it, but it still hurt. We ate in silence until Molly finally got us back into safe territory. “How’s the car?”

“I should tell you it’s broken down in my driveway. Then you could ask Cheney to send a handsome and *single* friend to come and fix it for me,” I said with a laugh that didn’t last. Cheney was the first handsome man who had come to fix it and look how that turned out.

“That’s my girl,” Molly said with a grin.