

ON THE RUN by Traci Hunter Abramson

EXCERPT

Elle weaved her way through the Saturday crowd at the street market, listening to the various conversations flowing around her. Since arriving in Germany three weeks ago, she had looked forward to exploring the local scenery and visiting the cities near her new assignment. If only today she had time to enjoy the environment . . . and the shops.

A brisk wind whipped through Elle's long, blonde hair. A few autumn leaves drifted onto the sidewalk. She tugged her overcoat tighter around her, then stuffed her hands in her pockets to protect them against the chill, not bothering to put her gloves on.

She passed various customers, picking up on snippets of their conversations.

Two women discussed what kind of fish to buy for dinner, and an older couple looked over a variety of apples at the fruit stand. At the neighboring booth, a handful of tourists chatted in English as they debated whether some glassware would make it safely home to Canada.

Elle wished she could worry about such trivialities, but she doubted that would happen anytime soon.

Something was wrong with the latest reports on the new drone project. She was sure of it.

When her uncle had sent her undercover as an army lieutenant, she had expected to find some evidence of misappropriation of funds or missing supplies, but uncovering a possible unauthorized access to highly sensitive material lifted her investigative senses to a new level. This wasn't a story to be written. If her suspicions were right, this was espionage.

For three weeks now, she had set aside her true identity of investigative journalist and had acted under her alias of Lieutenant Elaina Martin to send her suspicions up the chain of command. Unfortunately, no one wanted to listen to a lowly lieutenant in a sea of colonels, especially when that lieutenant was a bean counter. She really needed to talk to her uncle about promoting her the next time he sent her undercover as an officer. Of course, no one would believe she was a colonel at twenty-seven, so she supposed her age was going to handicap her for a while longer.

Her assignment to Germany was supposed to be her opportunity to take a break from high-profile cases for a while, a chance to rest and recover from nearly six months of undercover work in the Middle East.

Unfortunately, her first day on the job, she had stumbled across an anomaly that, despite weeks of research, she still couldn't explain.

When she tried to discuss the problem with her commanding officer, she had been told the program supervisor had everything under control. Colonel Doyle's assurances didn't change the facts. Someone without clearance had accessed the developmental software for the new unmanned

aircraft prototype, a prototype that could fly undetected by radar. She didn't need to be an aeronautical engineer to know that the software in the wrong hands could be deadly.

With no one in her unit taking her concerns seriously, she had reached out to the only person she'd known outside her unit whom she could trust with classified information: her sister Abby.

If Abby couldn't figure out what was going on, Elle didn't know who could.

The woman had a knack for seeing what other people missed. Elle should know.

Had it not been for Abby, the theft of weapons at Edwards Air Force Base would have put Elle before a court martial instead of the corporal who had tried to frame her.

The incident had opened Elle's eyes to what she really wanted to do with her life. Abby had spent her years since college protecting their country by keeping secrets, and Elle wanted to protect their freedoms by revealing the secrets that, when kept, could create their own kind of danger, so she'd been working as an investigative journalist ever since.

Elle reached the designated café and stepped inside. Most of the round tables were occupied, the seats positioned so the customers could look out the wide window and watch the world go by. Deeper inside the restaurant, Abby waited for her at a table in the far corner.

Elle weaved her way past several waiters until she reached her sister. When Abby stood, Elle gave her a hug. "Abby, thanks for meeting me."

"You said it was important. From what you sent me, I think it is."

Elle sat beside Abby, then reached into her oversized purse to retrieve a file folder. "I brought you documentation."

Abby took the folder and opened it in front of her. "What am I looking at?"

"The download logs for the new drone software."

"And?"

Elle scooted her chair closer and pointed at the area of concern. "According to command, this software is still in the final testing stage. The only people who should be accessing the files are the programmers."

She tapped on a list of the approved personnel. "Kamile Frost, Dennis Cleveland, and Lance Finney are all listed over here."

"Then who is this?" Abby asked, pointing to the three access codes used during the night shift.

"That's what I want to know. Whoever it is only downloads the updates after everyone else is gone for the day."

"Talk about suspicious."

"I thought so too."

A waiter approached with a carafe of water, slices of lemon floating inside.

He filled both of their glasses. "Have you had time to look over the menu?"

Elle opened hers, quickly narrowing the options to what she could eat without triggering her allergies to citrus, tomatoes, and pork. After they both gave their orders and the waiter left, Elle pulled a water bottle from her purse and took a sip.

"I see you still come prepared."

“Yeah. It’s such a pain that so many restaurants serve their water with lemon.”

Elle didn’t know how Abby had escaped all the food allergies in the family, while Elle appeared to have received a double dose.

Abby sipped her water and tapped her finger on the file folder. “I assume you brought your concerns to the attention of your CO.”

“Colonel Doyle didn’t seem the least bit interested in my concerns.”

“Did he have an explanation?”

“No. He just said the program manager would have said something if there were a problem. Apparently, everyone up the chain of command agrees with Colonel Doyle because no one seems concerned that a top-secret program might have been jeopardized,” Elle said.

“And no one told you who else is accessing it?”

“No. I thought with your resources, you could figure it out.”

“That’s easy enough. When I get back to the office, I’ll look up the access code and see who it belongs to.” Abby lifted her glass and took another long swallow. “I can’t guarantee I can tell you the name.”

“I realize you can’t share classified information, but you would at least be able to tell if this person is cleared on the project.”

“I can do that,” Abby said. “I’m not sure I’ll find anything beyond what the project supervisor would have noticed.”

“Maybe not, but after what happened at Edwards, I’d rather be safe than sorry.”

“The theft of those weapons wasn’t your fault. Adams created such a good paper trail, no one could have been expected to know it wasn’t real.”

“The auditor did.”

“An auditor who has thirty years of experience and was specifically looking for potential thefts,” Abby countered. “Besides, if it was something you should have caught in your ordinary course of business, he wouldn’t have made a point of clearing you.”

“But I sensed something wasn’t right. I just couldn’t put my finger on it.”

“Which is why we’re sitting here now.”

Elle shrugged. “I’m sorry if I seem paranoid.”

“Not paranoid. Cautious,” Abby corrected. “There’s a difference.”

“Whatever you call it, I appreciate your help.” Elle took another sip from her water bottle.

Abby cleared her throat. “How have you liked being stationed here in Germany?”

“It’s been good. I wasn’t sure if I would be able to practice speaking German much since so many people here speak English, but the language has come back faster than I’d expected.”

“I figured it would. You were speaking like a native when we lived here as kids.” Abby cleared her throat again and tugged at her scarf.

“So were you. I never realized how much we learned while Dad was stationed in Stuttgart.”

Abby opened her mouth to respond but, instead, coughed several times.

She reached for her water glass and took a swallow.

Elle leaned forward in her seat. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Sorry, I have this tickle in my throat,” Abby said, promptly coughing again. “Must be the change in the weather. I got a cold last fall too.”

“I’ve been wondering how anyone survives the winters here.”

“You’re about to find out . . .” Abby’s words trailed off into another fit of coughs, then her face turned red, a panicked expression dominating her features.

“Abby!” Elle pushed out of her chair and circled to pat her sister on the back.

Even though Abby hadn’t eaten anything, her hands went to her throat as though she were choking.

The waiter was at their side in an instant and pulled Abby out of her chair to start the Heimlich maneuver.

“She hasn’t eaten anything. I think she’s having an allergic reaction.” Elle fumbled through her purse for her EpiPen. She flipped off the safety cap, pressed the tip to Abby’s thigh, and pushed the button to trigger the injection.

Almost immediately, Abby took a gasping breath.

“Here.” The waiter thrust a glass of water toward Abby. “Take a sip.”

“No.” Elle pushed the glass away and knelt beside Abby’s chair. “Are you okay?”

Abby opened her mouth to speak only to begin another coughing fit.

Elle turned to the waiter. “Something’s wrong. Call an ambulance.”

A waitress approached, her phone in hand. “I already called. The ambulance will be here any minute.”

The waiter picked up the carafe from the table and refilled Abby’s glass. As soon as there was a break in the coughing, he offered the glass of water again.

“Are you sure you don’t want to give her something to drink?”

“Not until we figure out what caused this.”

Again, Abby tried to take a deep breath, but this time, her body trembled before being taken over by a seizure.

“Help me move her onto the floor.” Elle gripped Abby under her arms while the waiter helped ease her onto the carpet. Elle moved the closest chairs out of the way and knelt beside Abby.

“I’ll check on the ambulance,” the waiter said.

Elle sensed rather than saw the waiter head for the door. Helpless to do anything but wait, Elle fought for calm. “Hang on, Abby. Help is on the way.”

The words were barely out of her mouth before two ambulance attendants rushed through the door. Elle stood to give them room to work.

“What happened?” the paramedic asked in German.

“I don’t know,” Elle said, automatically responding in his language. “She started coughing and acting like she couldn’t breathe. I injected her with my EpiPen, and she got better for a few seconds. Then it started again. She started her seizure about a minute ago.”

Both paramedics knelt beside Abby, evaluating her.

“Does she have any known allergies?”

“No, and she was fine when I got here,” Elle said. “When she couldn’t breathe, the EpiPen was the only thing I could think of.”

Abby’s face paled, and her body stilled.

“I’ve lost her pulse,” one paramedic said.

Elle stepped back and watched the paramedics begin CPR and start Abby on oxygen. Adrenaline still pumping through her, Elle lowered herself into her chair. Minutes stretched out, the paramedics continuing the CPR, trading places every few minutes. They spoke with someone on the phone, the voices blurring with the background noise of the crowd who had been cleared out of the restaurant.

Tears flowed freely down Elle’s cheeks. She stood with her arms tightly folded, unable to do anything but watch and pray. She didn’t know how much time had passed when one paramedic tapped the other on the shoulder and shook his head. The paramedic not working on Abby sat beside Elle to confirm that the unbelievable had become the inevitable.

The one performing CPR gave one more chest compression and leaned back on his heels. His eyes lifted to meet Elle’s. “I’m sorry.”

“No.” The word escaped in a whisper. It couldn’t be. Elle stared at her sister’s lifeless body, waiting for any sign that she had misunderstood. Her heartbeat echoed in her head as though beating inside a deep tunnel.

“I’m so sorry.” The second paramedic put his hand on Elle’s arm.

Grief crashed over her, new tears forming. Her sister was gone. She was really gone.

“Can I get you something to drink? Maybe a glass of water?”

Elle shook her head, and her gaze swept over the table. Her water glass wasn’t there. Why that detail mattered at such a time, Elle didn’t know. A quick scan of the table revealed her glass wasn’t the only thing missing. Abby’s glass, the water carafe, and the file outlining Elle’s suspicions were also missing.

Elle swiped at her tears. “What happened to the waiter who met you at the door?”

“No one met us when we arrived,” the paramedic said.

Suspicions cut through her grief and bloomed with a sense of panic. Her file was coded in a way that it wouldn’t jeopardize national security, but if the people behind the suspicious activity got ahold of it, they would know exactly where the evidence was that could identify them.

Elle swallowed hard and forced herself to push aside her emotions and look at Abby’s lifeless body. The only thing her sister had ingested since her arrival was the water their waiter had served them, water Elle herself would have drunk had it not contained lemon slices. She stood and took a step toward the door.

“I have to go.”

“But we need more information from you.”

“Her name is Abigail Bender, and I think she was poisoned.”