

THE WAYWARD TARGET by Susan Ouellette

EXCERPT

CHAPTER ONE

Tyson's Fitness and Health Club McLean, Virginia, Sunday, June 12, 2005

Maggie Jenkins increased the pace on the treadmill, her auburn ponytail swaying like a pendulum with every step. She'd boosted her workout regimen over the past several months and the results showed—firm, muscular legs, a trim waist, and well-defined arms. Last fall, Roger had convinced her to join him at the gym. *It'll be good for you*, he'd promised. *Get you out of the house, get your mind off everything.*

Everything. It was his catch-all word for what she'd been through.

The terrorist attacks. Zara. All the bloodshed.

An image of hundreds of terrified children flashed in her mind.

No! She upped the treadmill speed. The faster she ran—the more her body ached—the easier it was to fight off the memories. The gym had become her therapy, sweat her medication. After several months of intensive exercise, she'd begun to sleep better. The nightmares came less often. But every now and then, like last night, the images crept into her dreams and she woke in a cold sweat, stomach churning, pulse pounding. She knew what had triggered it: the hearing on Capitol Hill about the school siege.

Nearby, a man hopped off a stationary bike, grabbed a remote control from the weight rack, and jacked up the volume on the television hanging on the wall. Maggie shot him a look in the mirror, but he didn't notice, absorbed as he was in the breaking news blaring from the TV.

She snatched her headphones and MP3 player from the treadmill console. Volume cranked, the lyrics from "Refugee" filled her ears. The man stood, staring up at the TV. Maggie squinted to read the graphic scrolling across the bottom of the screen.

terrorist issues threat.

Now what? Another Bin Laden missive from some cave in Afghanistan? She didn't want to think about work on her day off. The latest violence and mayhem, whether domestic or international, could wait. In a few weeks, she'd be headed to the beach for a getaway with Roger. After the gym, she planned to go shopping. A new bathing suit, sandals, and a sundress or two were in order. Thoughts of the trip were interrupted by movement on her left. Several more people had abandoned their workouts and gathered in front of the TV. She tugged out an earphone and caught the anchor mid-sentence.

“—videoed in what British authorities say was his former residence in London.”

The screen filled with the image of an upholstered chair standing before a vivid abstract painting hung on an otherwise blank white wall. The view darkened for a moment as someone in a blue shirt passed in front of the chair. The person turned and sat, his face level with the camera.

Maggie's fingers punched frantically at the treadmill's off button. She stumbled as it came to a sudden stop, sending her flying forward, her face missing the console by millimeters.

“You okay?” a male voice asked.

She regained her footing, her breath heavy, the weight on her chest suddenly unbearable. “Yeah,” she said without looking at him.

“Our brave and glorious martyrs have their reward in paradise. Those responsible for their deaths will be hunted down and executed.”

Behind the gaggle of people watching Imran Bukayev speak, Maggie's knees went weak. *Those responsible?* He meant her. She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment before turning her attention back to Bukayev. This video was filmed inside his house, the one she'd broken into in London last year. She'd recognize that garish painting anywhere. And his olive skin and shock of graying black hair were unmistakable.

“Our work is not done. Your children are not safe. No enemy of Allah is safe. Our valiant soldiers are in place and ready to strike again at my command.”

Maggie tried to make sense of it. Bukayev wasn't in London anymore. He must've filmed this video after the school attack but before he'd fled. Now, nearly nine months later, the Brits had no idea where he was. Neither did she, despite her spending the better part of every day at Langley trying to track him down.

“I dare him to try something again,” one man said, his voice full of bravado.

Sweat coursed down Maggie's face. She steadied herself with one hand on the treadmill rail. The news anchor was speaking, but she couldn't hear him, not with the ringing in her ears. *Roger!* She had to call Roger. *Deep breath. Calm down.* Her lungs felt full, her heart about to burst.

“Is this yours?” A woman's voice cut through the noise in her head.

Maggie blinked. A petite blonde with a bright smile extended her hand, Maggie's headphones and MP3 player resting on her palm.

“Yeah, thanks.” Maggie studied the woman for a moment. Something about her seemed familiar.

“You sure?”

Maggie nodded, snatched her phone and water bottle from the treadmill console, and hurried for the locker room. Inside, she slumped onto a wooden bench set across from a row of lockers. After taking a swig of water and counting backward from twenty, she flipped open the phone.

“Roger? Did you see the news? It's Bukayev. I think he's coming for me.”