

FACING THE ENEMY by DiAnn Mills

EXCERPT

Chapter 1

Houston, Texas
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Risa

Twelve years ago, my younger brother fell into an abyss of drugs and alcohol. He chose his addictions over Mom and Dad—and me. Prayers for healing fell flat, but none of us gave up, proving our belief in unconditional love. Then yesterday he called, and my hopes skyrocketed. Trenton said he missed me and wanted to make amends with his family, beginning with his older sis. We chose to meet at a popular restaurant for a late dinner within walking distance of my apartment.

A knock on my cubicle jolted me back to reality. Gage, my work partner, towered in the entryway and grinned. “Hey, what’s going on?”

The sound of his voice caused me to tingle to my toes. “Thinking.”

“Obviously, you were a million miles away.” His blue-gray eyes bore into mine, the intensity nearly distracting me.

I leaned back in my comfy, ergonomic chair. “My brother called.”

“Trenton? The guy you haven’t seen in years?”

“The same.”

“And?”

“He wants to meet tonight for dinner, to talk about making amends.”

Gage shook his head. “Risa, he has a record a mile long. He’s planning on manipulating you, squeezing every penny he can get.”

I picked up an old photo of Trenton and me as kids. Dad had snapped it while we were in our tree house. I swiped at a piece of dust, then replaced it beside my photo of Mom and Dad. “I must give him a chance. He’s my brother.”

“What if he’s gotten himself in over his head and needs his FBI agent sis to bail him out?”

I bit into my lower lip. Gage’s words had a level of truth, even if I didn’t want to admit it. “I want to hear him out.”

Gage stepped closer. “I don’t want to see you hurt. Remember three years ago when he called you from a bar demanding money, cursed you until you hung up?” The soft gentleness in his whispered tone said more than friend to friend. “Think about canceling the dinner or let me go with you.”

Emotion rose thick in my throat. “You mean well, and I—” Catching myself, I nearly said *love*. “I appreciate your concern. But I’ll be fine. Want me to call you afterward?”

He nodded. “I can run by if you need to talk.”

I peered into the face of the man I adored. “I will. Promise.”

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I arrived early at the restaurant to meet Trenton, anticipating his contagious smile perfected by an overpaid orthodontist. The phone attempted to keep my attention, but my mind swirled with how I wanted tonight to move forward against the reality of what had happened in the past.

The host approached me. Trenton walked behind him, towering several inches above the short man. I held my breath and stood, not feeling my legs, only my pulse speeding at the sight of my brother.

Trenton chuckled low, the familiar, dazzling, heart-crunching expression that had always touched me with sibling love. Clear brown eyes captured mine. Gone were the dilated pupils and bone-thin body. My brother held out his buff arms, and I rushed into them.

“Risa, you look amazing,” he whispered. “Thanks for seeing me on such short notice.”

“Nothing could have kept me away.” I stepped back, noting the miracle before me. Telling Mom and Dad wasn’t a part of tonight’s plan, but I wished they were here. We’d all be blubbering. I swiped at a tear and feared a humiliating sob would replace my already-fragile composure. “I want to remember this moment forever.” *Please stay strong this time.*

“Me too, Sis.” He gestured to the booth. “Sit, and let’s talk and eat.”

I slid in and he took the opposite side of the table. A server presented us with menus and asked for our drink order.

“We’ll have two Dr Peppers,” Trenton said.

He remembered my favorite drink. No mention of alcohol. I breathed in deeply to steady myself. I wanted our reunion to be special, not me a weeping mess. “I’ve missed you.”

Trenton cocked his head, and the mischievous brother from days gone by appeared. “I’ve been clean for four months. Working steady and enrolled in night school for the next college term.” He took my hands, and his features grew serious. “But before I say another word, I’m sorry. I promise you, I’ll never hurt you, Mom, or Dad again. Please forgive me for the mess I made of my life and dragging my family through the stench of it.”

I’d heard this before, from his teen years into his twenties. Dare I believe our prayers had been answered? “I forgave you years ago. All we ever wanted for you is a healthy body and mind.”

“Thanks, Sis. I know you’ve heard this ‘I’m sorry’ junk before, but I’m well on my way.”

His words warmed me like a quilt on a chilly night. “I can see it, feel it. Why tell me first instead of Mom and Dad?”

“Great times with you growing up that never left me.”

Memories rushed over me . . . The time we went camping by ourselves and it snowed. Birthdays. Christmases. All the treasured times I believed had vanished into the chasm of addiction.

The server returned with our drinks, and Trenton released my hands.

“Have you decided on your order?” the server said.

Neither of us had picked up our menus, but I often frequented the restaurant and ordered a vegan dish. Trenton opted for their pork chop and fixings.

“And I’ll take the bill.” He pointed at me. “No arguments.”

“My treat when we have dinner again.”

“Got it.”

“You were about to tell me something about us.”

He rubbed his palms on the thighs of his jeans. “Two things stand out. The first one happened when I was four, so that made you ten. You were watching me trying to climb an oak tree in the back yard. I was crying because my short legs couldn’t swing high enough. Then I felt your hand on my shoulder. You boosted me up onto the branch. Climbed up with me. No long after that, Dad built us a tree house.”

“I loved that tree house. You had your space and I had mine.”

“What I’ll always remember is what you said to me. “Trenton, I’m your big sis. I’ll always help you. I promise.””

I blinked back the ocean of hopeful tears. “Thanks. I remember our times in the tree house, our private little world.”

“One more reason I contacted you. I was six and you were twelve. For three summers, Mom and Dad put me in swimming lessons, but I couldn’t put my head underwater. Not sure why. You convinced Mom and Dad that you could teach me how to swim. So every day we went to the neighborhood pool, and at the end of two weeks, I was swimming. I trusted you.”

I took a deep breath. *Be aware of manipulation, Risa.* “Thanks.” I raised a finger. “I remember being a high school junior and this jerk of a guy followed me home. Wouldn’t leave me alone. You punched him in the nose.”Z

Trenton laughed. “My voice hadn’t changed yet, but I wasn’t going to let him bother you.”

“That’Z love, Brother.” *Oh, Trenton, let this be for keeps. I’m afraid to believe the nightmare is over.*

“And we’ll make many more crazy times together. Do you have plans for Saturday morning? I volunteer at a community center for kids at risk. We have a mixed basketball team, and I could use some help with the girls.”

I shivered. What a blessing to have my brother back. “All I need is a time and place.”

“You never fail me, Sis.” He took a long drink of his Dr Pepper. “Are you writing?”

I grinned. “Dabbling here and there.”

“I never understood why you left a safe job as a college prof and writer to the dangers of the FBI?” He shrugged. “Other than your wild side that you kept more in check than I did.”

“Teaching and writing short stories with a few successful publications failed to fill my adventure deficit. Every time I read about a crime, I wanted to be the one working the case. Dad said I couldn’t create a crime and solve it—I had to be actively involved.”

“Your personality better fits law enforcement. Still married to the FBI?”

I wiggled my shoulders. “Of course. Five years ago, I moved to the Violent Crime Division, specifically Crimes Against Children. It’s stressful and emotional, but protecting children suits me.”

He frowned. "Because of me?"

I blinked. "A little. My main reason is what happened to the little girl who lived across the street from us."

"Right." He shook his head. "I'm sorry her death still bothers you. Isn't there a special team for finding missing kids?"

"Child Abduction Rapid Deployment or CARD. They're an elite, specialized team, and that's all they do. That's not my role, but we often work together."

"What do you investigate?" Trenton seemed interested in my job, another first.

"My partner and I investigate kidnappings, pedophiles, pornography, online predators, human trafficking, involuntary servitude, parental kidnapping, and any other situation that fell into the 'violent crimes against children' bucket."

"I remember you were the neighborhood babysitter." He gave me his unforgettable impish grin. "And I also remember how much fun you had learning how to handle a car at high speeds."

I couldn't conceal my laughter. "Guess I'm part daredevil. Blame Dad for that. I remember loving to watch him race cars."

"He'd still be at it if Mom hadn't insisted his speed-loving days were over."

"When he taught me to drive, I learned a lot of tricks," I said.

"He already knew I was danger on wheels and asked Mom to teach me." He laughed. "Any potential brothers-in-law?"

I waved off his remark. My thoughts swept to Gage. Maybe I had found him, but that was a future conversation. "Nope. My job scares them off. I had more dates during my stint as a dull college professor."

"You dull? Never. You just haven't found the right guy. Pray about it, and if there's a guy good enough for my sis, he'll appear."

I startled. "Did you say pray?"

"Think about it. Who but God could have turned me around? Helped me walk away from drugs, alcohol, and so-called friends?"

Even in his good days, Trenton had steered away from mentions of faith. Maybe he had changed. "I don't know what to say."

"That's a first." He chuckled. "You always had more words in one day than I had in a week. But honestly, no more jail. No more being tossed out of an apartment because I couldn't pay the rent. No more waking up and not remembering the night before."

Wow. A true miracle. I swiped at happy tears. "I can't wait to tell Mom and Dad."

He leaned over the table as though to tell me a secret. "I'll do the honors very soon."

When our food arrived, he asked to say grace. I was so glad our eyes were closed, or he'd have seen a leaky faucet. We chatted through dinner. Laughed about some of the goofy things we'd done as kids. Time seemingly stopped, and my half-full cup of blessings spilled over with joy.

"Will you tell me about your healing journey?" I said.

“You can hear for yourself when I talk to Mom and Dad.” He moistened his lips. “Do you trust me enough to walk you back to your apartment and call them from there? I mean, does your building have a lobby area with a little privacy?”

“It does, but you can call from my apartment. Trenton, they will be incredibly happy.”

“I hope so.”

I was so focused on our conversation that I didn’t think I tasted my favorite dish. We finished and he paid the bill. Outside the restaurant, a few people mingled, and the night sky hosted a half-moon, alerting me to how long Trenton and I had talked. I breathed in thankfulness and expectations for a positive tomorrow. At the crosswalk, we waited for the pedestrian sign to signal our turn.

“How long have you lived in this fancy high-rise?” he said as we ambled across the street.

“Two years. I like the busyness and excitement.”

“It must be in your DNA. One day, I want a small place in the country where it’s quiet.”

“Never for me. I’ll visit you though.” The humid heat mixed with exhaust fumes spiraled around us. “What are you taking in college?”

“Psychology. See if I can’t help a few kids understand life and avoid pitfalls.”

“Incredible. I’m so pro—”

Trenton grabbed my shoulders and thrust me several feet ahead next to the curb. I landed on my side and rolled over. What—?

A horrible thud.

A woman screamed.

Tires squealed.

Horns blew.

Stinging pain radiated up my leg, side, arm, and head. In agony, I managed to roll over and glance at the street.

My brother’s body lay in the intersection, a twisted mass of flesh and blood.