

KIM MCMAHILL

**MIDNIGHT
IN MONTANA**

**[A RISKY RESEARCH
MICRO-READ]**

Midnight in Montana

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Midnight in Montana

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ONE

FBI Special Agent Devyn Nash sucked in a breath and held it. She couldn't take her eyes off the handsome cowboy astride the tall black horse. She had never been to a rodeo or even seen more than passing glimpses on TV, but she felt certain something big was about to happen. The cowboy poised his lasso, and his spirited horse quivered in the box next to the cattle chute.

The cowboy glanced at his partner in the box to his right. Then, he nodded at another man who pulled a lever. A steer bolted out of the chute, and the black horse gave chase. The cowboy swung the lasso in circles over his head and tossed it at the running steer. The loop landed perfectly around its horns, the cowboy quickly pulled the slack, wrapped his rope around the horn of his saddle, and sharply guided the horse left taking the steer with it. His partner swiftly scooped up the steer's two hind legs and his horse skidded to a halt as the black horse pivoted around to face him. With the steer stretched between them, a woman on horseback dropped a flag, and the crowd went wild.

Devyn finally exhaled and clapped and cheered in

sync with the rest of the crowd. She glanced over at her partner, Special Agent Ray Williams. He rolled his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest, clearly not impressed by the two cowboys and their apparent proficient team roping skills.

She and Ray were out of their element. Devyn was a city girl through and through, and Ray was from southern Mississippi, more at home with crawfish and alligators than horses and cows. Both were stationed at the FBI's Salt Lake Field Office, and had been tasked with tracking down who was producing counterfeit twenty-dollar bills and had been distributing them across six western states for the past several years. Their colleagues in the financial fraud unit had been integral in piecing together a viable theory, but now it fell to Devyn and Ray, along with a helpful Wyoming sheriff, Gage Harris, to prove it.

Devyn had gotten very little support from the sheriffs in other counties where counterfeit bills had surfaced. She suspected they found out, probably from Ray, that she was only eight months out of finishing her 20 weeks of new agent training with the FBI at Quantico. Add that to being a woman in her twenties working for the *Feds*, and she wasn't all that surprised that the western lawmen weren't interested in working with her.

Ray's previous partner had received a promotion and moved on. He made it clear on more than one occasion that he wasn't thrilled about having a newbie or a woman assigned as his new partner, and having a

newbie woman was doubly annoying. He also showed little interest in the counterfeiting case and openly resented inheriting the on-going case along with Devyn. Less than seventy thousand dollars in fake bills had been found in circulation throughout sparsely populated states over a two-year span, an amount he thought beneath him.

“Come on, let’s make contact with Gage Harris,” Ray stated.

“He’s still sitting on his horse outside the arena, so we have time to watch the last event. Those bulls look pretty intimidating,” Devyn replied.

“We aren’t tourists trying to enjoy a night out at a small-town rodeo, we have a job to do.”

“Compromise. We watch at least one rider to see what happens, and then we’ll go. I’m anxious to meet Gage in person too, but we should wait until he rides this way so we can follow him to his truck. I don’t know what he drives.”

Ray huffed and sat back down. Devyn really didn’t care what Ray thought, but since he was her second partner in the past eight months, she didn’t think it would look good to lose him too soon. She was already the subject of a lot of ribbing for running off her first partner in just six months.

In her mind, she had done nothing to *run off* Kyle. They were equals, but he’d tried to boss her around, which didn’t set well with Devyn. He was almost as new as she and lacked much of the drive and life experiences that made her a good agent, even though

she was technically a rookie.

Kyle had grown up in a wealthy suburb outside Chicago, had clearly watched too many FBI thrillers, and held an unrealistic vision of what the job entailed. He had also thought the counterfeiting case was beneath him and not at all exciting and glamorous like the cases FBI agents worked on TV. Devyn, on the other hand, had lived overseas when she was a child due to her father's job with Army Intelligence, she spoke four languages, and had an uncanny ability to spot trouble before it happened. She didn't lord it over people, her talent and abilities, but she didn't tolerate being treated like a fool simply because she was young, new, and female.

She had been involved in a number of other cases in her short time with the Bureau as part of a larger team, but the counterfeiting case was the first one where she was the lead. No matter what the case, seeing it through to the end was a point of pride. She never gave up on anything she started. She was competitive and a fighter.

This counterfeit operation did not appear huge on the surface. The counterfeiters had probably laundered money through multiple channels that had not been tied back to them, so it was likely a larger operation than the seventy thousand indicated. But it was still chump change compared to professionals who had printed and distributed millions. The small denominations and the scale of the distribution contributed to this operation being difficult to detect

Kim McMahon

and harder to discern patterns or garner significant attention, but Devyn didn't care how small it was, she wouldn't rest until she shut it down and proved herself to her boss and the Bureau.

TWO

The lights surrounding the rodeo arena were now fully lit in response to the sun setting behind the stunning mountains that surrounded the town. Bull riding was the last event of the evening. Fans who had been wandering around and hanging out at the concession stand were now in their seats, and a hush fell over the rowdy crowd.

Devyn watched as a small wiry cowboy wrapped a rope around his hand, pulled it tight, and then nodded. The chute flew open, and a massive gray bull spun into the arena. The cowboy hung on, with one arm flopping above his head and his legs hugging the muscled beast. For eight seconds, the bull spun, bucked, and kicked, trying everything in its substantial power to dislodge the man on his back.

After the buzzer sounded, the cowboy worked his hand free of the rope and jumped off the bull. He landed on his feet, and two bull fighters moved in, distracting the angry animal and giving the cowboy time to scramble up the arena fence out of reach of the bull's sharp horns. With the rider safe, the crowd erupted into a round of thunderous applause and the

announcer revealed a score of ninety.

"He's on the move," Ray said as he nudged Devyn in the ribs.

"OK, a deal's a deal."

They quickly left their seats and followed the big black horse and its rider to a brown three-quarter ton four-wheel-drive truck attached to a white four-horse trailer. They stood back as the tall man dismounted. He turned, and his smile took Devyn's breath away.

"Sheriff Gage Harris?" Ray asked.

"Call me Gage. You must be Ray and Devyn."

Devyn cleared her throat and quickly recovered from her instant attraction to the handsome cowboy. "Yes. By the crowd's reaction I'm assuming you did really well at whatever you call that."

Gage's laugh was deep, and the sound of it made Devyn's toes curl. She chastised herself for her uncharacteristic behavior. She wasn't normally impressed by an attractive man; in fact, she usually avoided them since many had overly high opinions of themselves.

"You could say that. Colby and I won the team roping tonight, which is very fortunate. Otherwise, we'd have to try again another night. As soon as I unsaddle Midnight, here, I'll go pick up our winnings, and we'll see if your theory is correct."

The high-spirited horse threw up his head and snorted. Startled, Devyn jumped back.

"He's young, powerful, and a real handful right now, but he's basically friendly. Step over here."

Midnight in Montana

Devyn hesitated before taking several steps to reach Gage's side.

"Let him smell your hand."

Devyn held out the back of her hand, and the horse sniffed. Gage then took her wrist and gently placed her hand on the gelding's neck.

"Go ahead and pet him. Don't show any fear. He'll be able to sense it."

Devyn ran her hand down the horse's warm damp neck and was surprised when he seemed to calm down and enjoy the attention.

"Did you hear we won?" asked a young cowboy as he rode up to the group and dismounted from his much shorter horse.

"Yep. This is Devyn and Ray. I told you about them. They're the reason we're here," Gage replied.

"Nice to meet you folks. I'm Gage's right-hand man, Colby Jenkins."

They exchanged greetings, careful not to address each other by their titles. Gage and Colby had entered the team roping event in Montana where no one knew he was a Wyoming sheriff, and they needed to keep it that way.

"I stuck around for the last bull rider so I could find out who won. Here's the list of each event winner you requested," Colby said as he handed a slip of paper to Gage.

"I'll go pick up our winnings while you unsaddle and load the horses," Gage told Colby. "Devyn, you can tag along if you want to pretend to be a rodeo

groupie.”

“Excuse me?” she asked.

“Believe it or not, attractive young women often throw themselves at these, usually hard-lucked and financially-challenged cowboys. There’s even a name for those gals, but some find it a little derogatory, so I won’t use it.”

“Oh, OK.”

Is he saying he finds me attractive? Devyn took Gage’s outstretched hand and kept stride with him as they made their way to the office trailer, trying hard to focus on the case and not the thrill she felt from his touch.

“How come your horse is so much bigger than Colby’s. They kind of look odd together. Since you’re a team shouldn’t they like match or something?”

Gage chuckled. “My job is the header, and my horse needs to be strong enough to pull the steer around so I can get him in a good position for Colby to scoop up his heels. Colby is the heeler and his horse needs to be quick and agile. Besides, I’m a much bigger guy than Colby, so I want a horse that can handle my weight.”

“That makes sense.” Devyn gazed up at him and smiled warmly. She hoped he thought she was just playing the role of adoring groupie, otherwise, she had just made a bit of a fool out of herself.

They stepped inside the trailer, and Devyn stayed close.

“Gage Harris. I’ll be picking up the team roping

winnings for myself and Colby Jenkins.”

Devyn watched as a woman Devyn knew to be Linda Brewster, one of the owners of the B & R Rodeo Company, pulled out a cash box and counted out thirty, twenty-dollar bills. Devyn quickly scanned the office and recognized another woman from her research into the company, Joann Ross, another owner.

“Here you go. That was some fine roping tonight. Where are you fellas from?” Linda asked.

“North Dakota,” Gage replied as smoothly as if it were true.

“Going to stick around and clean up on these locals?”

“Nope, my partner and I are heading to a couple of events in Colorado, so we’ll be pulling out tonight.”

“Well, good luck. The boys around here will be glad to hear you won’t be picking their pockets again.”

Gage nodded and they walked out the door.

“What do you think?” Devyn asked as they strolled back to where Ray and Colby were waiting.

“The fact that they paid cash instead of writing a check is somewhat suspicious, but not unheard of. Most operations use checks to ensure a proper paper trail for their tax records. The payout was an even six-hundred, which is also a little odd. For these types of events the purse is often a percentage of entry fees. I’m not sure I’ve ever won such a tidy sum before. Again, not big red flag, just not all that common.”

“Good points.”

When they reached Ray and Colby, Gage handed

Devyn the bills. She pulled out a counterfeit detection pen and marked the first bill. The mark turned black. She tried four more with the same result.

"Looks like we're right on target. These pens are not always accurate and may give false results, so we'll take the cash back to our hotel where we can examine the bills more thoroughly. We have a UV light there and a scanner to run the twenties through. Once we verify that they are fake, the Bureau will get warrants to search the offices and homes of the four individuals who are putting on this rodeo, one in the eastern part of the state, and one across the border in Wyoming," Devyn said.

"I'm no rodeo expert, but are three small rodeos with six hundred bucks as a top prize big enough for over seventy grand to show up across six states?" Ray asked.

"This size of rodeo wouldn't entice many top cowboys unless they're just passing through, but it is big enough to attract contestants from across the region and neighboring states. So, it isn't far-fetched to see phony money showing up where we have," Gage said.

Devyn put away the pen and secured the bills in her bag. "We've noticed an uptick of new bills surfacing in the summer with a surge showing up over Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, and Labor Day, which are when the biggest rodeos are held. The concentration of counterfeit cash really fell off over the winter, so we felt seasonality was also a connection."

Ray nodded. "No sense hanging out here any

longer. Let's get to the hotel and verify the bills' authenticity."

Devyn smiled at Gage. "Thanks so much for the help. None of the other sheriffs in affected counties were interested in assisting in the investigation, and we certainly don't have the experience in-house to enter and win an event at a rodeo."

"Our pleasure. I want to make sure whoever is printing money that is showing up in my state and county is put out of business. Besides, Colby here was pretty excited about getting paid overtime to do what he loves to do much more than his real job."

Colby just shrugged and smiled indicating his boss was correct, but unwilling to say out loud that he'd rather be a rodeo cowboy than a sheriff's deputy.

"We need to get a move on. As is, it will be nearly midnight before we get home. I'll be in the office by 7:00 a.m. in the morning. If you need me earlier, let me know, otherwise I'll just be ready to assist your agent if and when you get the warrant signed to search the rodeo office. I doubt we'll find anything. It's just a 24-foot travel trailer they use for an office during the season, so I can't imagine they would keep much in there."

"As soon as we verify the bills are fake, we'll be in touch."

"Sounds good. Here's the list of winners. You might follow up with them and see if they also received phony twenties for their efforts. If you need anything else just call, day or night," Gage said as he

winked at Devyn and then shook Ray's hand.

Devyn watched as Gage and Coby walked away, got in the truck, and drove out of the gravel parking lot. She wasn't sure if he was flirting with her because few men ever tried. All she knew for sure was that this man was the first to put a tiny chink in her carefully constructed armor, and he had done it so effortlessly that she hadn't even seen it coming.

THREE

As soon as they arrived at the hotel, Devyn and Ray took the cash inside and started to authenticate the bills. Devyn took the first bill from the stack and held it up to the light, titling it back and forth to see if the ink color of the numeral in the lower right-hand corner shifted like it should. It didn't. None of the borders, printing or text were blurry, and the watermark was impeccable. On those characteristics, she gave the forgers high marks. But she detected no raised printing, the security thread did not glow under ultraviolet light, and the red and blue threads appeared to be surface level only. She sent the financial fraud team a list of the serial numbers and then ran each bill through an advanced counterfeit detector which scanned each bill for multiple security features.

Even without hearing back on the serial numbers, Devyn and Ray had plenty of proof that the bills were fake. Devyn thought the bills were pretty good forgeries on the surface, but Ray claimed he'd seen better. Devyn didn't question Ray's assessment since he'd been an agent a lot longer and had seem more

counterfeit money in his career than she. She was just happy to have verified a source of distribution.

They called their boss, Special Agent in Charge, Gerald Conroy.

“We were right. The counterfeit bills are being laundered through a regional rodeo company. It’s pretty simple, the contestants pay their entry fees with authentic cash, checks or credit cards, and the counterfeiters pay out winnings in fake twenties. Even though the company operates rodeos in only two states, the events attract cowboys from nearby states who then unintentionally launder the phony money,” Ray stated.

Devyn was annoyed that Ray was taking the lead now. He hadn’t been interested in the case and had even laughed at her theory about the rodeo. But she decided to defer to his seniority and kept quiet.

“Devyn has been pursuing this vein for a while and although most of us thought she was on a wild goose chase, I guess she knew what she was doing. Good work. Call it a night. I’ll let you know in the morning as soon as all the warrants are ready. It shouldn’t take long; most of the paperwork is done. I hope to heck we can find the printing supplies and equipment, otherwise we still don’t have much of a case. They can claim that some contestant must have paid his or her entry fee in counterfeit bills and they have no idea where they came from,” Conroy said.

“We do have a list of contestants who won the other events tonight. We probably shouldn’t make

contact until after we execute the warrants, but if they all received counterfeit bills as well, seems that would make it a little harder for them to explain away the quantity,” Ray said.

“That would help our case, but let’s just hope we can find where the bills are being made, then there will be no way the two couples can deny it,” Conroy replied.

“If I were a gambler, I’d bet the printing is occurring somewhere on the Brewster property. The property is bigger and farther away from prying eyes. If I’m correct, I suppose it’s still possible that Cal and Joann Ross could claim ignorance,” Devyn said.

“Maybe they are in the dark. The amount of money being laundered isn’t much if it is being divided by two families,” Conroy offered.

Devyn had already done a lot of research into the B & R Rodeo Company and the four individuals who they suspected were involved. There were three camper trailers that were used for offices, one at each venue. She doubted the money was printed there. The four persons in question were married couples, and each couple owned only their primary residence. She had been unable to track down any second homes or other real estate holdings. The amount of money turning up wouldn’t make any of them rich, it would only supplement the profits from the rodeos and help bridge the gap in the winter.

Cal and Joann Ross lived on the outskirts of town on five acres in a modest ranch-style home with a

basement. They kept several horses, so the property also had a small barn in need of repairs and a couple corrals with sheds for the horses. None of the structures seemed like viable candidates for a counterfeiting operation, though all would be searched. The most viable possibility was the basement of the house.

The other couple, John and Linda Brewster, lived on a small ranch, some forty acres according to the tax records, about fifteen miles from town. The ranch consisted of a house, large fairly new metal building, small older barn, two granaries, several sheds, and a greenhouse. Devyn had studied satellite images of the property and it offered enough terrain and vegetation to give them some cover if needed.

Tonight, she had spotted John hanging out near the bucking chutes all night, and it was Linda who handed Gage his money and seemed interested in him leaving town. Joann was in the office when she and Gage went to pick up his winnings, but she hadn't seen Cal at the rodeo.

"Are the agents in place if we get the search warrants?" Devyn asked.

"We just sent one agent to Wyoming since we know we will get cooperation there from Sheriff Harris. We've got two heading to the eastern Montana rodeo, which again should be sufficient since in both cases we're only talking about searching a couple of travel trailers outside of business hours. I have five agents heading your way. I'll leave it up to you to

divide up the agents in the most efficient way, and once you notify local authorities, hopefully they will offer up more resources.”

“They haven’t seemed too interested in finding out the truth so far, but we’ll do our best to get their cooperation and assistance,” Devyn said as they ended the call.

“Good work, Nash,” Ray said as he left the room.

It was the nicest thing Ray had ever said to her. She still doubted they’d ever be friends, but maybe they could find a way to work together.

FOUR

Devyn woke early. She suspected it would be hours until the search warrants were signed, but she was wide awake and feeling antsy. She left her room and found a nice walking path. When she was far enough from the nearest building to avoid being overheard, she pulled out her cell phone and dialed the number she had programmed in for Gage Harris.

"Sheriff Harris."

"Good morning. You weren't kidding about getting into the office early. How was the drive home?" Devyn asked.

"Slow. There's a lot of wildlife on the roads at night in this area and pulling a trailer with horses really lengthens the time and distance needed to stop without injuring a horse and swerving is not an option."

"Sorry I kept you out so late."

"No problem. I'm a team player. Keep me out as late as you like anytime."

Devyn lost her train of thought for a brief second. He kept saying things like that, and it confused her. She shook the words out of her head and focused on the real reason she had called.

"All the twenties were fake. The paperwork for the

search warrants was drafted last night and submitted to the judge first thing this morning. We're just waiting for the judge to sign off. As soon as my boss, Special Agent in Charge Gerald Conroy, calls, we're ready to go," Devyn replied.

"Is your agent already here?"

"Yes, he'll tie in with you as soon as the warrant arrives. We also have two agents standing by in eastern Montana who will tie in with local law enforcement, but I don't expect any trouble or anything to be found. We have five agents in addition to Ray and me standing by here, and we anticipate getting assistance from the local authorities to search both residences at the same time so no one will be tipped off. I'm hoping Ray will take the Ross place and I'll take the Brewster place."

"What's your gut say?"

"The Brewster place is bigger, farther out of town, away from prying eyes, and has more buildings. The house isn't huge and doesn't have a basement, but there is a large metal building, a small older barn, a greenhouse, and two granaries."

"The Brewster place definitely seems more likely. I'd put my money on the house or metal building since I imagine the work area needs to be in a clean and relatively dust-free environment," Gage said.

"The counterfeit bills aren't great, but they would need some fairly expensive equipment to get the job done, so I'm with you on the house or metal building."

Devyn couldn't remember ever having such a

productive conversation with a colleague. Gage treated her as an equal, and ever since their first phone call six months ago, he had been nothing but polite, professional, and helpful.

“Was everyone accounted for last night?” Gage asked.

“No. I didn’t see Cal Ross. I don’t know if he would be running one of the other rodeos or if he was just somewhere behind the scenes.”

“I’ll check around to see if he’s in the area. The rodeo here has a local manager, but I suppose the owners check up on them fairly often since it isn’t far away. It would definitely be good to know if he’s in town before we execute your warrant.”

“Thanks. I wish the residence searches were in your county. You’ve been great to work with. It’s always helpful to have local resources you trust.”

“It’s been my pleasure, and I was happy to finally meet you in person last night. You definitely didn’t disappoint. I hope you’ll keep in touch after we tie this up. I think we’ve made a pretty good team to this point, and I’m always willing to bounce ideas around with you if you need an objective listener.”

“I’d like that.”

Devyn wasn’t sure what he meant by, “you definitely didn’t disappoint” and “I hope you’ll keep in touch.” She was terrible at reading if a man was interested on a personal level.

“I’d better get back to the hotel in case the boss called.”

“Devyn?”

“Yes?”

“Be careful. These may seem like simple folks out here, but they don’t take kindly to federal law enforcement. It is pretty much a given that both couples will be armed and may even put up a resistance.”

“Thanks for the warning, but I’ve already considered it, which is why I want Ray to take the Ross place since it’s the less likely of the two. I grew up watching my back and identifying trouble before it happened. I was twelve when I spotted a car bomber outside a western-style market on a busy street in a city prone to violence in the middle east. I alerted my mom, and we made it out the back of the store just as the bomb detonated. No one in the store was killed, but I was unable to warn those on the street in time. Besides, I was a twelve-year-old American girl, who would have believed me?”

“Sounds like you probably have some pretty interesting stories. I’d like to hear those sometime.”

“I generally don’t share personal stories from my past much, but I may make an exception just this once.”

“I hope you do.”

“Thanks again,” Devyn said as she disconnected the call and slowly made her way back to the hotel.

FIVE

Devyn spotted Ray loading his bags into their car outside the hotel.

“Have you heard back from Conroy?” she asked.

“The warrants should be finalized within the hour. I’ve called the local sheriff’s office and made an appointment to meet with the sheriff in about thirty minutes. I already checked out since I anticipate we’ll be on our way back to Salt Lake tonight. We either find something or we don’t.”

Devyn had a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach that it wouldn’t be that easy, but just nodded and headed to her room to fetch her already packed bag and the supplies they had used for testing the bills the night before.

After checking out, she and Ray drove to the sheriff’s office. The greeting they received from Sheriff Matt Ecker was less than enthusiastic.

“Agent Nash, I presume?”

Devyn wasn’t sure why the presumption didn’t sound all that flattering.

“Yes, and this is my partner, Special Agent Ray Williams.”

“I assume you’re still chasing imaginary counterfeiters through the countryside?”

“With all due respect, Sheriff, there has never been any doubt that there is fake money floating around your state as well as the neighboring states. That money was not printed by fictional characters. The real people making and distributing phony twenties are nearing the end of their counterfeiting career,” Ray stated sternly.

Devyn was shocked since he joked about her foolishly chasing big city criminals through the rural west just as much of the rest of the office. The recovery of counterfeit bills was real, but everyone else thought they were coming from a big city. Devyn was the only one convinced it was a small-time regional operation.

“So, you’re saying you finally have proof?”

“Enough to search the suspects’ properties. The search warrants should be coming through any minute. We assume we will have your full cooperation and assistance in executing the warrants?” Devyn stated.

“I was hoping that your counterfeiters were operating from a distant city and the money was just showing up here, but I guess that was just wishful thinking. What do you need?”

“We will be searching the two residences of the four suspects simultaneously, so we’d like two of your deputies to back me up and two to back up Ray unless you have more or think we need more. Shortly after we start searching the properties in your county, we have agents in place to search properties in two other towns.”

"How soon?" Sheriff Ecker asked.

"Just as soon as the warrants are approved and you can pull the resources together." Devyn replied.

"I certainly hope you're wrong. This is a pretty tight-knit community. Let's get this over with as soon as we can." The Sheriff picked up the phone and asked the dispatcher to call all deputies and ask them to return to the office.

"My deputies can be ready in an hour. I have four on duty, and I'll go as well. Now, are you ready to tell me who and where we are searching?"

Devyn's phone buzzed. She looked at the text and exhaled. She didn't have to stall any longer.

"That's our boss. Do you have a secure fax where he can send copies of the warrants?"

She texted the number to Conroy and looked up at Sheriff Ecker.

"We verified that winnings were paid out last night at the rodeo in counterfeit bills. The warrants are to search the Ross and Brewster properties along with the office trailers here, and at the rodeos they run in the eastern part of the state and in Wyoming," Devyn replied.

"How many agents do you have?"

"Five in addition to me and Ray. I'm thinking Ray, an additional agent, and two of your deputies will go to the Ross place. I'll take the remaining four agents and any you can spare to the Brewster place. I'm assuming the Brewster place is the most likely candidate due to its location, size, and number of

buildings.”

“Sounds like a solid plan. I don’t anticipate you’ll get any resistance from Cal and Joann, and I agree *if* counterfeit money is being printed, the Brewster place would make more sense. John has always been a hot head. He’s not likely to cooperate with authorities, especially feds. I’ll bring two deputies, and maybe I can talk some sense into him and keep things from escalating. If John digs in, Linda will back him up, and watch out for their two boys. They’re seventeen and twenty and chips off their old man’s block. I’ve had my share of trouble with those two since they were in high school. They’re both too smart for their own good. The oldest went away to college for about a year and a half, dropped out, and came home. Again, *if*, your suspicions are correct, he’s probably the brains behind the operation.”

Devyn’s earlier apprehension grew. Sheriff Ecker only reinforced her gut feeling that this simple search wouldn’t be a walk in the park.

“We need to make sure they aren’t tipped off. Is there somewhere we can convene to discuss the plan right before we pull out?” Devyn asked.

“Sure. Our training room is empty. I’ll send my receptionists on an errand. Once she’s gone send your agents in, and I’ll gather my deputies as they arrive that way no one will be any the wiser.”

“Thanks for the help,” Devyn stated.

“I’m still hoping you’re wrong, but until we know for sure, I’ll play along.”

SIX

As soon as the receptionist left the building, Devyn escorted the agents who had been waiting in their vehicles into the sheriff's office training room. She carefully read through the warrant and was satisfied with its content.

Within twenty minutes, four deputies and the sheriff joined Devyn, Ray, and three of the five agents assigned to the mission. Sheriff Ecker called the room to order and had everyone introduce themselves.

"We've been asked for assistance to execute several search warrants. Agents Nash and Williams are the leads, so I'll let them explain."

Devyn dove in, not giving Ray the chance to say anything.

"We'll divide up into two teams. Agent Williams will take one agent and two deputies with him and search the property belonging to Cal and Joann Ross. Everyone else will come with me to search the Brewster place. For a while, we have suspected that counterfeit money was being laundered through the B & R Rodeo Company. Last night we verified that winnings were paid out in fake bills. Those bills combined with other evidence we have gathered

enabled us to get a search warrant for the two properties along with three office trailers. We don't expect to find any printing equipment or cash in the offices, but those will be searched by other agents at the same time just in case anything is kept there."

Devyn watched as all of the deputies exchanged looks ranging from shock to acceptance.

"I see mixed signals from you all," Devyn stated.

"Even though Cal and John are partners in the rodeo, it's hard to picture Cal as a counterfeiter, but nothing the Brewster clan is involved with would surprise us," one of the deputies offered.

"That's the impression I'm getting. Sheriff, please divide up your deputies and Ray and I will focus our teams on the logistics of our particular properties."

Ray took his group to the far corner of the room and pulled out a black and white copy of a satellite image of the Ross property while Devyn took her team and led them to the opposite corner.

"Sheriff, jump in if you have better ideas since I respect your local knowledge, otherwise, this is what I'm thinking. Before the sheriff and I approach the door to serve the warrant, I'd like the deputies to take up positions here and here," Devyn stated as she pointed at features on the satellite image. "Agent Thompson and Barber have been positioned here and here all morning to keep an eye on who comes and goes from the property. Agents Jones and Wilks will follow behind Sheriff Ecker and I in the Suburban. They'll stay in the vehicle when the Sheriff and I approach the

residence. Hopefully, if John Brewster has any plans to resist, he'll be deterred by not knowing how many agents are in the vehicle with its darkly tinted windows."

Devyn paused, giving her audience a chance to chime in or ask questions. When no one did, she pressed on.

"Hopefully, the Brewster clan will comply and allow us to search the house, metal building, barn, greenhouse, and granaries. If he complies, Agents Thompson and Barber and all of the deputies will remain hidden to provide recon and cover while Agents Jones and Wilks search the house and Sheriff Ecker and I search the outbuildings."

"And, if he doesn't?" asked one of the deputies.

Devyn looked over at the Sheriff, wanting him to address his staff.

"If they refuse to comply with a federal warrant, we have to assume they have something to hide, and we will assist the FBI in enforcement. Everyone will wear body armor. Along with automatic rifles, take as many extra clips as you can feasibly carry. You'll be positioned away from the immediate action and likely out of accurate handgun range."

The room fell silent. Even talk of things turning dangerous was probably more than some of these young deputies had bargained for. She hoped things didn't turn deadly, but if it did, she prayed the officers would perform under pressure.

"Agent Thompson has confirmed that John, Linda,

and the two boys are at the residence. He has detected no unusual activity, and he reported that the two brothers are currently in the metal building, Linda is in the house, and John is working a horse in the round corral."

Devyn took out a box and gave each member of her team an ear piece and a small mic to pin on their lapel.

"These should all be programmed to the same frequency. Can everyone here me?"

After they all nodded, she asked them to speak to her in order to verify they could call out as well. Once she was satisfied, she turned to the sheriff.

"If there isn't anything else, let's pull out in thirty."

"I think you covered it. I'll make a call to the police chief and let him know we're serving a warrant, don't expect any trouble, but appreciate if he could stand by just in case."

"Couldn't hurt," Devyn said as they exchanged looks of concern.

"Gear up. We'll rendezvous at the transfer station turnoff in forty-five minutes. From there we'll give everyone time to get into position before Agent Nash and I arrive at the residence."

The deputies left the room. Agents Nash, Williams, and the three present FBI agents stayed behind.

"We'll start searching the Ross place two minutes after we hear from Agent Jones that you've made

contact so that neither party can tip the other off. I suspect our search will go quicker and smoother than yours, so once complete we'll search the trailer at the rodeo, notify the other two sites to do the same, and then head your way," Ray said.

Devyn's cell phone vibrated and she looked down at the message.

"Good news. Gage—I mean, Sheriff Harris—has eyes on Cal Ross over in Wyoming, so hopefully Joann will cooperate. Nonetheless, don't let your guard down."

"Don't plan to. One last chance to swap assignments if you're getting cold feet, even though this may be another false lead anyway," Ray offered.

"Not on your life. This pesky case has been haunting me since I finished training. I want to be there to see it through. My gut tells me we've nailed it."

SEVEN

With all the agents and deputies in place, Devyn and Sheriff Ecker slowly rolled down the gravel road with the dark Suburban trailing behind. It was close to lunchtime, and Agent Thompson verified that John and his two sons had gone into the house about ten minutes ago, probably to eat lunch. Devyn was thankful they were all in one place.

Devyn studied the features of the older two-story farm house. It had seen better days. The overhang on the front porch sagged, and the boards creaked as they walked toward the entrance. She knocked on the door. After several minutes, John answered but didn't open the door wide.

"What do you want?"

Devyn introduced herself, handed him a copy of the warrant, and explained that they intended to search the house and out buildings.

"Get off my property. Step one foot inside any building and you'll regret getting out of bed this morning."

"John, if you have nothing to hide, what's the harm? Besides, under the law, this warrant gives the

agents the right to search your property," Sheriff Ecker stated in a calm voice.

"Like heck they do. Boys, we have trespassers here," John called over his shoulder.

Devyn heard what sounded like wooden chair legs scraping across a wooden floor and she visualized the sons running for their guns.

"Don't make this worse than it has to be," Ecker pleaded.

John slammed the door and Devyn and Ecker ran for cover.

"I assume everyone heard that," Devyn stated into her mic. Agents and deputies on the perimeter, keep them penned in the house. Everyone else stay put and provide cover as needed. The Sheriff and I will head for the metal shop and start the search. If they come out, arrest them."

As Devyn and Ecker ran for the shop, a shot rang out from a second story window, missing the sheriff by inches. Ecker dove behind a tree and Devyn took cover behind a large rusted tractor. The two agents in the Suburban got out and fired at the house. Devyn heard shots ringing out from the back.

"Linda and one of the boys tried to leave out the rear door, but I pushed them back inside," Agent Thompson reported.

"Jones and Wilks, give me cover."

As the two agents fired rounds at the house, drawing the attention of the occupants, Devyn and Ecker made it to the shop. They noticed that one end

held the usual assortment of farm implements and a horse trailer. The other end had a room with a locked door and another room above it.

“Stand back.” Devyn fired at the knob and the door swung open. She peeked in the room, but nothing stood out.

“Give it a closer look while I check upstairs,” she said as she darted up the stairs.

She had to force her way into the second story room as well. When she entered, she had no doubt she had found what the Bureau had been after for years. She was thrilled to be the one who finally solved the case, but she pushed the thoughts out of her mind, not knowing how things were going with the deputies and agents outside.

“The evidence is here,” she stated into the mic. “Everything any counterfeiter could possibly need. Keep them penned for a few more minutes so I can take a closer look, and then we’ll be out to help flush them out and arrest them.” Devyn took out her phone and started snapping photos.

“We don’t have a few minutes,” Ecker screamed. “This place is wired to blow. Get out.”

Devyn grabbed a gunny sack hanging on the railing outside the door and shoved paper, freshly-printed bills, ink, chemicals, and her cell phone inside the bag. She bolted out the door.

“Everyone, move in before they can blow the place,” Devyn shouted as she ran down the steps.

When her foot touched the concrete at the bottom

of the stairs, Ecker was already nearing the exit. Ecker was screaming at her, but she couldn't hear what he was saying over the gunfire erupting outside. She assumed he was just urging her on, so she ran.

As she reached the door, a blast lifted her off her feet and a violent rush of hot air propelled her out of the building. She landed hard on her stomach. The air rushed out of her lungs, but she held tight to the burlap bag.

Her ears were ringing, and she was disoriented. She didn't fight as Ecker grabbed her by her free arm and pulled her behind the tractor, shielding her from any bullets coming from the house. Trying to regain her balance, she listened as Sheriff Ecker called an ambulance and the police chief for back-up.

She fished her cell phone out of the bag and punched in Ray's number.

"Bust them. It's all here. If they claim they didn't know about the counterfeiting happening at the Brewster place, we'll sort that out later."

"Stay here," Ecker stated. "There's a lot of blood on you, and I don't have time now to find out if it's coming from anywhere vital."

Devyn nodded and then winced as pain ricocheted through her head. She put her cell in her pocket and slowly eased her way to a sitting position, where she rested her back against the tractor tire. She wasn't sure where Ecker had gone and didn't try to look. She took stock of her injuries. A piece of glass was embedded in the side of her right thigh. She gently pulled it out and

wrapped the wound tightly with a handkerchief she had in her pocket and hoped that would stop the bleeding. She felt a bump welling on her forehead. With the back of her hand, she wiped a stream of blood oozing toward her eye. Other than a few surface cuts on her arms, she didn't find any serious injuries.

As her head began to clear, she pulled herself up to a crouched position and grimaced as pain shot through her ankle. Glancing around the giant tractor tire, she could see that the agents and officers were having no luck reaching the house. Ecker was flattened in an irrigation ditch, which put him at extreme risk every time he lifted himself to fire, and Jones and Wilks had abandoned the bullet-riddled Suburban for a small grouping of trees that didn't allow them much cover to operate.

Devyn was too far away to add any assistance with her Glock 17. Gaze darting, she searched for something to break the stand-off. Her focus landed on the keys in the ignition of the sturdy tractor. She crawled onto the seat, keeping low and out of sight and was surprised when the old tractor fired to life. She adjusted the level of the steel bucket to shield her body from any incoming bullets, put the tractor into gear, and headed straight for the house.

Her plan must have been clear to her colleagues, because as she came abreast of Jones and Wilks, they jumped onto the hitch drawbar and crouched down. Devyn almost laughed when she thought about how ridiculous this looked. Despite trying to get every

ounce of speed out of the ancient machine, if felt as if they were barely bouncing along.

Soon, the Brewsters realized what she was doing and started firing at the behemoth machine. Bullets pinged off the steel bucket and did nothing to slow her advance.

“Hold on,” she screamed above the roar as the tractor bounced onto the front porch and busted through the front door.

Jones and Wilks rolled off and took cover in the living room.

Devyn’s foot frantically searched for the break, but it wasn’t where she expected it to be. She ducked as the tractor plowed on, destroying everything in its path, throwing splintered wood and furniture high in the air. She let off the gas and located the break. The tractor came to a stop in the kitchen just as it broke out the back door and sunk through the porch’s rotted wood.

Thompson crept through the back door and scooped her into his arms and placed her on the floor behind the woodstove, sheltered from errant gunfire.

“Keep your head down,” he whispered as he crept up the stairs to the second floor.

Seconds later, a deputy entered through the same demolished door. He smiled at her and hustled up the stairs after Thompson.

Devyn closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When she opened them, all the shooting had stopped. She heard cursing and scuffles, indicating at least some of the Brewster clan were alive and being arrested.

Next came the sounds of sirens, she couldn't tell how many, but she hoped one belonged to an ambulance.

"Here she is," Ecker shouted as he knelt down next to her. "I thought I told you to stay put."

"I don't have the patience for a lengthy stand-off."

"Can you stand and walk?"

"Probably with a little help."

She put her arm around Ecker's shoulders and let him help her stand and they limped out of the house. She watched as the entire Brewster family was cuffed and shoved into patrol cars. Glancing around she saw that all deputies and agents were accounted for and she sighed with relief. Fake money wasn't worth anyone dying over.

She turned as Ray's car skidded to a halt. He jumped out and jogged over to her.

"Are you OK?"

"Likely a concussion, a broken ankle, I'll need stitches in my thigh and maybe a few in my head, so I've had better days, but sadly, I've had worse."

Ray chuckled and shook his head.

"I suppose all our evidence got blown up."

For the first time since she let go of it and got on the tractor, Devyn remembered the burlap bag.

"Not all of it. Thompson, go grab that burlap bag laying there in the dirt. It should have enough evidence to make the counterfeiting charges stick. What's not in the bag, I at least had time to photograph," she said as she dug her phone out of her pocket. She swayed, starting to feel weak, and her head was throbbing.

Kim McMahon

“I hate to have the EMTs waste a trip all the way out here. Could you send one my way?”

“My pleasure. That way I won’t have to listen to you gloat all the way back to town about how you were right and everyone else was wrong,” Ray replied.

EIGHT

Devyn thought she must be dreaming. She remembered arriving at the hospital, having her ankle set, getting stitches in her thigh and forehead, taking some really great pain meds, and falling asleep. As she slowly emerged from her rest, her eyes focused on a tall man with hazel eyes and wild sandy hair. His skin was tanned and a little weathered, clearly from a life lived outdoors.

She tried to scoot up in bed and winced in pain.

“Whoa, not so fast.”

As the fog in her brain cleared, she recognized the voice.

“What are you doing here?”

“I was with your agent down in Wyoming when he got the call to arrest Cal Ross, and we heard about the fun you all were having over here, “Gage said. “Since I was only an hour and a half away, I decided to come back and see how you were doing and submit my official account of how we obtained the counterfeit twenties last night. Besides, considering an awful lot of those fake bills showed up in my county, I have a stake in this.”

“Not that I’m complaining, but I mean what are you doing here in the hospital. Did something happen to my partner?”

“With you a little out of commission at the moment, Agent Williams is working on the reports, briefing your boss, and then he planned to check back into a hotel. I offered to look in on you and let him know when you’re clear enough to talk about what happened so he can finish some of the paperwork. Apparently, you’ve suffered a concussion among other things, and the doctor wants to keep you overnight for observation. They plan to do a CT scan shortly.”

Devyn groaned. She hoped that Ray didn’t downplay her role, but she had to admit that even the thought of standing up and walking made her stomach feel queasy.

“How’s your memory? Should I let Agent Williams know you’re ready to talk?”

She thought for a moment and felt that she hadn’t lost any cognitive function and was thinking clearly. “Sure, let him know.”

Devyn listened as Gage placed the call.

“He’ll be here in about fifteen minutes, so I’d better shove off. As much fun as this has been, I’m getting a little behind at the office.”

“Thanks for everything. We wouldn’t have been able to get the evidence so discreetly that we needed in order to obtain a search warrants without your help, and thanks for checking up on me.”

“My pleasure. As I said earlier, call anytime, no

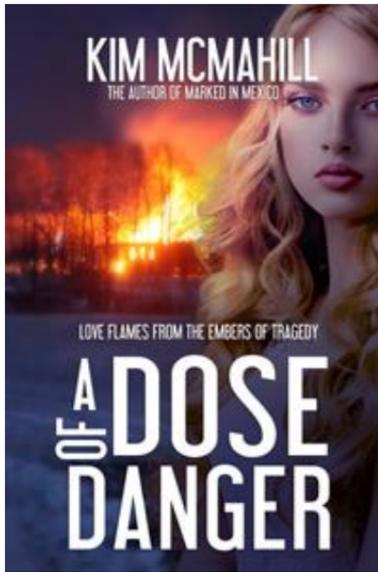
Midnight in Montana

case or investigation needed. And, I would love to hear the story sometime about the tractor, sounds like you're a woman after my heart." He winked and strode out the door.

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A Dose of Danger



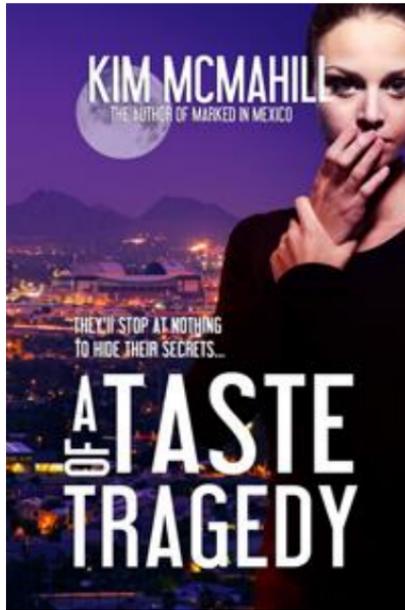
When researcher Grace Talbot and her team discover a possible solution for weight loss they become targets of a group dedicated to controlling the multi-billion dollar a year diet-product industry.

Her unsanctioned testing methods bring tragedy to the family ranch and the attention of the local sheriff's

deputy.

With her colleagues either dead, missing, or on the run she soon realizes she must trust the deputy with her life, but can she trust him with her heart?

A Taste of Tragedy



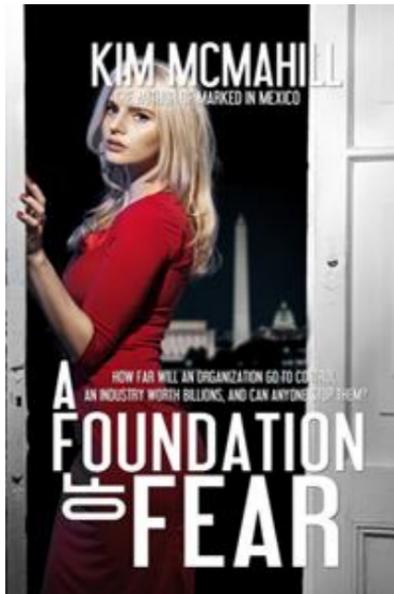
Morgan Hunter sacrificed everything for her career. She had yet to encounter anything she wasn't willing to do to succeed...until now.

When she uncovers evidence that the healthy foods she's been hired to promote may be dangerous, she must reevaluate her priorities. As questions mount and the body count rises, she finds herself caught in the

cross-hairs of an organization that will stop at nothing to hide its secrets and protect its profits.

With no one else to trust, Morgan is forced to seek help from the man she drove away, but whom she never stopped loving...

A Foundation of Fear

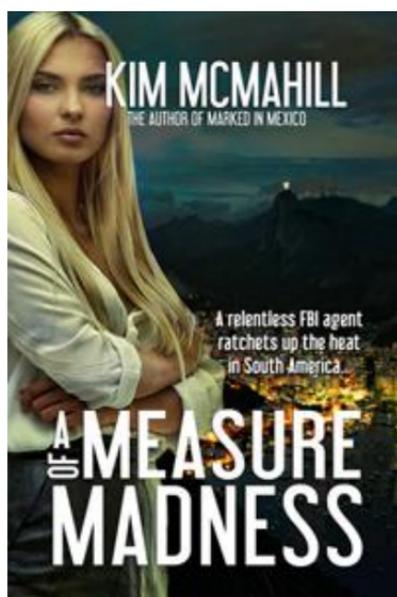


FBI Special Agent Devyn Nash is obsessed with taking down Coterie, a deadly group out to control the multi-billion-dollar-a-year diet-product industry. The FBI's plan to expose Coterie places Devyn's best friend and her partner's fiancé in the crosshairs of this ruthless organization. Can Devyn protect her friend and bring the coldblooded killers to justice before they strike

again while distracted by injury, a sexist bully, and a long-distance relationship with a handsome Wyoming sheriff?

Lobbyist and Coterie assassin Sofia Wilks wants nothing more than to regain control of her life. Sofia knows Devyn is nipping at her heels, but the FBI agent isn't the worst of her fears. She is drawn to a man who has the power to destroy her.

A Measure of Madness



FBI agent Devyn Nash's pursuit of a deadly organization heats up in this fourth installment of the Risky Research series.

The FBI locates the mastermind behind Coterie, but attempts to bring him in result in a shootout that sends Coterie's members scrambling for cover. When Devyn's partner is left fighting for his life in a Puerto Rican hospital, she becomes more determined than ever to bring them to justice.

Devyn's decision to ignore her orders puts her job and her relationship with Sheriff Gage Harris in jeopardy, but she is unwilling to allow the syndicate responsible for so much death to live out their lives in paradise.

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