

NAMELESS

By

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Chapter One

Thursday, September 7th, 11:35 a.m.

Key West, Florida

23 hours, 25 minutes remaining...

Waking up dead would have been preferable to waking up with this screaming throb inside his skull.

Ryan McBride cracked open his eyes and blinked to focus. Morning light barged into his bedroom through the slits in the blinds. "Damn." He licked his lips and swallowed back the shitty taste in his mouth.

A few seconds passed before he dared to sit up, and still he regretted the move. He reached for his half empty pack of Marlboros and parked a cigarette in one corner of his mouth then lit it. Gratefully inhaling the noxious chemicals necessary for tolerating his continued existence, he stifled a coughing jag.

Die, you son of a bitch. Cigarettes were doing their part. The irony was if he'd given one damn about living, he'd be dead by now.

He got up, waited for the room to stop spinning before taking a step. A muffled sigh drew his bleary gaze back to the bed. He scratched his bare chest. Who was the redhead tangled in his sheets? With effort he vaguely recalled picking her up at the club. Barbie or Becky. Something like that.

Maybe he'd think of her name later. Right now he had to take a major piss. He ambled into the bathroom wishing he hadn't consumed enough alcohol to totally erase his memory since he couldn't recall bringing anyone home -- not even himself. Just one of the many bad habits he'd acquired since moving to the Keys. A hazard of the job. Mingling, blending in. Then again, if he drank enough he slept like the dead and he didn't have to worry about dreaming.

Even the thought of the dreams that haunted his sober nights made his gut clench. His hand shook as he took another drag from his cigarette. Blocking the nightmares required the drinking that resulted in mornings like this.

Considering his downward spiral during the three years since his career at the Bureau abruptly ended, he had decided that, in his case, FBI stood for Fucking Bad Idea. It was a shame it had taken him ten years of active duty to realize that. Just in time to be fired by the biggest prick carrying a badge.

There were some things a man just couldn't get past.

Ryan McBride this is your life.

What a monumental waste of air space.

More of that damned battering at his skull had him closing his eyes and trying hard to calm the assault between his temples.

Wait a minute.

He struggled to focus enough brainpower to isolate a source.

The pounding wasn't in his head...it was at his front door.

He tossed the butt of his cigarette into the toilet then flushed it. Moving slow to maintain his equilibrium, he followed the trail of abandoned clothing across the bedroom and along the length of the hall. He gave up on finding his boxers but managed to locate his jeans just in time for more of that confounded banging. Dragging them on, he stumbled toward the door, wrenched it open, and glared at the person waiting on the other side.

Female.

Her perfume's subtle fragrance resuscitated his sluggish senses. The tailored navy suit, buttoned-to-the-throat white blouse and rigid posture told him two things right off the bat: professional and uptight.

"Ryan McBride?"

She knew his name. That couldn't be good.

He sagged against the doorjamb, exhausted from the effort of surviving a category IV drunk, and measured his visitor with an assessing look. Dark brown hair cinched in a French twist. Oh yeah, definitely uptight. Wide brown eyes lacking any sign of weariness or cynicism and devoid of the slightest hint of crow's feet. Young, early twenties maybe. Despite the inexperience her age gave away, her determined bearing told him she'd come prepared for battle. The idea stirred his curiosity even as he reminded himself that her appearance at his door had to mean trouble.

"Are you Ryan McBride?" she repeated firmly, drawing his full interest to her mouth.

Nice lips. Voluptuous, pillowy. Made him think of hot, raunchy sex.

“Depends on who’s asking.” He’d spent all that time checking her out and she hadn’t once allowed her attention to stray from his eyes. Talk about discipline. Uptight *and* a control freak.

As if she’d read his mind, she squared her shoulders and drew in an impatient breath. The movement accentuated the slight bulge beneath her jacket he hadn’t noticed before. On the left of her torso just above her waist.

Well, well. The lady was a cop.

What the hell else did he *not* remember about last night?

“I’m Special Agent Vivian Grace. I need to speak with you on an urgent matter. May I come inside?”

A fed. Perfect. Before he could come up with some profound statement that would clarify his position on what the Bureau could do with their need to talk or anything else, a sultry, feminine voice called out from behind him, “Who’s at the door, baby?”

The redhead he’d left in his bed, dressed in slut-tight jeans and a hoochie-mama blouse appeared next to him. She smiled for the agent whose disapproval was written all over her lovely, prim face.

“I can come back in half an hour,” Agent Grace offered crisply.

“Don’t trouble yourself, honey.” The redhead leaned in and kissed his stubbled jaw. “I gotta go anyway.” She dragged her French-manicured fingers down his bare chest as she backed out the door, forcing the agent to step aside. “Call me, baby.”

He watched her strut off toward the yellow Mustang parked next to his aging Land Rover, purse and strappy sandals dangling from her hands. The wicked sway of her hips jogged his memory as to why he’d picked her out of the crowd last night.

Bonnie? Betty? He didn’t have a clue.

McBride straightened away from the jamb. “I need a smoke.” He left Grace standing at the door and went in search of his cigarettes. For about three seconds he contemplated calling Quantico and asking what the hell they meant sending some baby agent-in-training down here to harass him.

Vivian Grace couldn’t be more than twenty-four, twenty-five tops. Probably hadn’t even finished her in-service probationary period. He flicked his lighter, sucked hard, and held the smoke deep in his lungs, mulling over what she’d said. What the hell urgent matter could the Bureau need to discuss with him? Had one of his old cases gone active again? That was doubtful. Every damned case he’d worked was closed with the perp or perps serving time or dead and the victim recovered safely.

Except one.

Pushing the memory aside, he decided there was only one way to find out why she was here. He wandered back to where he’d left her. She hadn’t moved. The good little agent doing her sworn duty, braced and ready for battle.

If this was going to be complicated, he needed a little bracing of his own. “I won’t be any good to either of us until I’ve had coffee,” he warned.

She didn’t object so he headed for the kitchen. If she wanted to continue with whatever she had to say she would follow. The front door creaked closed and her heels clacked on the hardwood.

Persistent, he liked that in a woman.

He scooped the grounds into the basket, added the water and flipped the switch. The smell of fresh-brewed coffee instantly began to fill the air, signaling relief was on the way.

After a final drag, he smashed the cigarette into an ashtray and returned his attention to his uninvited guest who lingered the entire expanse of tiled floor away. “What do they want?”

“A six-year-old girl is missing and --”

“Welcome to the real world, agent,” he cut her off, an abrupt blast of fury churning his gut. What the hell kind of con was the Bureau running on him? “Kids go missing every hour of every day. Your esteemed employer has an entire unit dedicated to finding them. Unless you have reason to suspect I had something to do with the abduction, I can’t fathom what you want from me.”

The bastards fired him, then they had the balls to come running when they hit a case that confounded their elite unit? *Three freaking years later?* And he’s supposed to help them out? No. Fucking. Way.

He didn’t owe the FBI squat.

Though his reaction clearly startled her, his visitor wasn’t ready to give up. Her chin tilted in challenge, she ventured two steps farther into the room, in his direction. The movement momentarily lured his gaze to the shapely calves revealed by her knee-length skirt. Great legs. Probably ran five at the crack of dawn every morning. Well, she could just turn her sweet little ass right around and run back to where she’d come from. He wasn’t in the mood to play whatever the hell kind of game the Bureau had in mind.

“I know your story, McBride. There isn’t an agent alive who hasn’t heard about the legendary Ryan McBride. That’s why I’ve come to you.”

Oh yeah, the *legend*. Another memory he’d drowned with booze.

"I hate to be the one to tell you, but that legend died three years ago, Agent Grace." He reached for a cup, looked to her for any indication she was interested. She shook her head so he filled his own and kicked back a couple slugs of the hot brew. With enough caffeine tainting his veins, he might just reach the point of caring whether or not he survived the day.

"We need your help." Outright desperation flashed in her dark eyes. "You were the best the Bureau has ever had. It's going to take you to save this little girl."

Now there was a seriously *unoriginal* line of bull. He refused to think about the child. This wasn't his case, wasn't his problem. And yet he felt the tension rising, the coiling of emotions he couldn't hope to contain threatening to strangle him. He plunked his cup down on the counter. He didn't need this shit.

"Maybe you didn't pay attention to the last chapter of my story, Agent Grace," he countered, his voice taut with a bitterness he'd tried long and hard, and evidently unsuccessfully, to bury. "They fired me. It got ugly. There's no going back."

"I read the file on your last case," she confirmed. "I'm certain you made the only decision you could based on the facts available to you. Sometimes failure is unavoidable and someone dies. That's the flip side to what we do."

He had to laugh at that. "Deep, agent," he said, patronizing her. "Do you think that matters? Dead is dead."

"Maybe not to you, but to those of us who admire what you accomplished during your career, it matters."

"Tell that to the kid's father" He turned his back to her, braced against the counter and squeezed his eyes shut in a futile attempt to block the images tumbling one over the other through his head. He couldn't do *this*.

"We don't have the luxury of time, McBride." Apparently bolstered by a blast of latent courage, she moved in right beside him as she spoke. As hard as he tried not to react, he tensed. "We have less than twenty-three hours. If we don't find her before then, Alyssa Byrne will die."

Alyssa. The name reverberated through him. He banished it. Couldn't help her. He'd given the Bureau everything he had for ten years. He'd maintained a perfect record. Never failed. Except that once. And the mistake hadn't been his. When the proverbial shit had hit the fan, the Bureau had refused to take the heat. They had needed a scapegoat and he'd been it. A decade of hard work hadn't made a difference any more than his so-called legendary status. Case in point. For nearly a year afterwards, he'd actually expected someone to show up and beg him to return to duty.

No one had shown up. No one had even called.

So he had found other ways to spend his time and fill the void left by the part of his life ripped away from him. He blamed the booze on his current on-again-off-again occupation, but that was just an excuse. The ugly truth was that every time an Amber Alert had been issued he had turned to the one consistent thing within reach to help him forget that he wouldn't be there -- distraction. With enough distraction, he could forget that he no longer made a difference.

That part of his life was over. There wasn't any going back...not for Agent Vivian Grace and all her hero worship...not for Alyssa Byrne and the people who loved her.

Truth was, even if he wanted to go back, he wasn't that man anymore. The pressure of working that kind of case was immeasurable. If he lost his focus, fucked up, someone died. If he wasn't fast enough, smart enough, someone died. He no longer had that kind of nerve, the edge it took to get the job done. The hero he used to be was long gone. Pretending otherwise would be a mistake. The kind he didn't want to make twice in one lifetime.

Nowadays he was just your plain old garden variety coward.

Before he sent the agent on her way, there was one thing he had to know. "Why now?" He couldn't keep the resentment out of his tone; didn't really try. "In three years the Bureau hasn't once acknowledged that I still exist. What makes this case different?"

She searched his eyes, her own still hopeful that he would change his mind. *Not going to happen.*

"The kidnapper," she explained, her voice somber, "asked for you by name. He claims he'll provide clues to facilitate the search for the girl."

That damned headache started bearing down on him again, hammering at his temples. "What kind of clues?"

"Don't know. No you, no clues." She swallowed hard, the effort visible along the length of her slender neck. "No clues, McBride, and the little girl dies."