

Terrorbyte

By

Cat Connor

Chapter One

If That's What It Takes

“Are you sure this is the alleyway?” I stared down the dreary lane, hoping Lee would say no.

The whole place reeked of urine and discarded syringes. With a sense of foreboding, I pulled my badge from my pocket and hung it around my neck by the lanyard. My eyes flicked up and down the close walls of the alley, looking for cameras. I spotted a bracket that may have once held a camera. How handy.

A heavy bulletproof vest hung from my arm. Begrudgingly, I pulled it on. They were uncomfortable and I preferred not to wear one unless absolutely necessary. Lee already had his on. They were definitely better suited to male bodies.

“This is the one she said,” he replied, and slung his badge over his head. Lee didn’t seem in any hurry to venture in.

“This is exactly how I imagined my Saturday morning would be,” I said with a wry grin.

“Yep, me too. Life is good.”

“Where’s the nearest camera?” I asked.

“The bank, beside the alleyway. They have two cameras located on an outside wall, both covering the street.”

“If we don’t find anything we’ll go visit the bank. We might get lucky with their footage.”

Lee nodded. I was tempted to abandon the alley in favor of the bank right off.

I pulled the hair tie from my ponytail, scraped my hair back off my face and retied it higher and tighter. I felt a prickling sensation in the pit of my stomach. Adrenaline surged.

“Ready to rock?”

“Right with you, Ellie.”

I stepped into the deep shade of the brick buildings that surrounded the alley, took a breath of cool air and decided it might be a pleasant place to spend an hour. A blast of strong urine odor hit the back of my throat and I changed my mind.

Lee flipped out his notebook and scanned a few pages. “The girl, Rose Van den Berg, said she looked back and saw a blue door with chipped peeling paint.”

The door nearest me was a rusty red so I continued walking. Lee caught up in two strides and fell into step. The next door was a faded green showing patches of pink undercoat. We glanced at each other and moved on, noting two large dumpsters against the opposite wall just past the green door. At the end of the shadow-shrouded alley were two more dumpsters. I took an unfortunately large breath – stale, foul air caught in my throat, making me choke. I coughed into my elbow, trying to limit the noise and not hack up a lung.

I looked left: a blank brick wall rose up blocking out the sky. No windows or doors broke the monotonous wall. I kicked at discarded fast-food wrappers tangling around my boots.

“There it is.” Lee said. His notebook was gone, in its place a Glock 22.

We were about ten feet from the door. Above our heads were small frosted louver windows. I counted three windows. The door appeared to have an opaque glass panel at the top, but on closer inspection, it was dirt that obscured the glass. I removed my gun from my hip holster: it was time to see if this was the place the girl remembered. The place she said she was held captive and the last place she saw her older sister.

We approached the door with caution. If the shit hit the fan there was no cover. We’d be in the open until we reached the dumpsters.

Lee knocked. We both stood to the hinge side of the door, against the grimy brick.

Inside, someone shouted. The words were unintelligible. Maybe it wasn’t English.

Lee knocked again.

Another voice called out.

Again, I couldn’t understand the words.

I shook my head at Lee.

He reached over and knocked again, this time he followed up with a deep bellow, “FBI. Open the door.”

Noise erupted. Yelling. Shuffling. Panic.

It is peculiar how some people react to us. You’d think the bad guys would learn to control their outbursts and better disguise their guilt. But not so much. Few people we come across are pleased to have us knock on their door.

Lee kicked the door in and stepped inside. I followed. Two men sat calmly at a filthy table. Not a sign of the panic we’d heard.

“FBI. Who else is here?”

They shook their heads. Language flew from the older man’s lips as he gestured wildly with nicotine-stained fingers. Some things are universal.

“English?” I asked.

They shook their heads.

I had no idea what language they were speaking. I took clues from their appearance: swarthy, lined and leathery skin, dark eyes, dark curly hair. Mediterranean maybe. Greek possibly.

I lifted my radio from my belt and called in our backup. Sam and a few other agents, in a concealed position out of the alleyway, were waiting for my call. Lee cuffed the two men and sat them back-to-back in the middle of the room on the rickety chairs.

He showed them the photo of Rose.

“Seen her?” he asked.

One man flinched; the other stared with cold dark eyes. Somewhere in the back, I could hear movement.

“Leave them,” I hissed. “Let’s do it.”

I opened the inner door. A long hallway stretched away from us with a bare light bulb hanging from a wire. It gave off enough light to see four doors in the hall. We stood for a moment, listening.

“To the right,” Lee said. “Could be Albanian.” He cocked his head back towards the other room.

I nodded. I’d considered Greek, so I was geographically close.

I lifted my radio off my belt once more and updated the situation; our backup had already rolled into the alley. A smile flickered across Lee’s face as he heard Sam’s voice in the room behind us. It gave me a sense of security knowing he was there; it was probably the same for Lee.

Lee and I moved fast yet silently. The inner hallway was filled with hot sticky air, the kind of air that hurt to breathe. We located the door from where the noise seemed to be coming. We looked at each other from separate sides of the doorway. I held up two fingers. He nodded.

Lee turned the handle. It wasn’t locked.

A scream bounced off the walls. Lee shoved the door open. In front of us, another swarthy man held a blonde girl against him, one hand clamped on her forehead, his free hand holding a knife to her throat. The blade pressed into the white flesh of her neck. Tears slid down her face. A trickle of red ran down her neck.

I trained my weapon on his head. Lee looked for a body shot, through the hostage if necessary. The girl looked like Rose.

“FBI,” I said in a clear voice. “Drop the knife.”

“No,” he replied and shook his head.

Whatever.

“Have it your way,” Lee snarled.

The girl sobbed. The man’s grip tightened.

My palms were sweaty. He pressed the knife harder against her. I pulled the trigger. It seemed to take forever for the bullet to leave the chamber and hit the mark. A hole appeared in his forehead; his expression didn’t change. He fell very slowly. Lee grabbed the girl and lifted her clear. He took her straight out of the room and handed her to a waiting agent and was back within seconds.

I stepped forward, kicked the knife away from the body, and checked for a pulse. It seemed pointless as a pool of red grew quickly around his head and threatened my boots.

I rifled through the pockets of the dead man. No wallet, no identity information, not even a driver’s license. Being close to him was unpleasant. I felt myself gag as his body odor and the smell from the pooling blood mingled into a cloying stench.

“Nothing,” I said to Lee. “This fucker hasn’t showered for a month. I can’t believe the air in the alley is preferable to being near him.”

Another voice sounded behind Lee. “You okay in there, Ellie?” It was Sam.

“Yep.” I pulled my phone and snapped a picture of the man. “Search the rest of this place and call in the forensic team. Is there an ambulance for the girl?”

“Called already, she’s with the paramedics now. We’re already searching,” Sam replied.

Lee checked his cell phone then spoke to me, "Caine wants to see you, Ellie."

"He text you?"

"Yeah."

"Imagine that?"

Caine had been adamant for the last few years that he wouldn't be texting any of us, ever. In his words, he preferred to call and hear our delightful voices. And here he was texting. The old dog was learning new tricks and life was twisting on the weird scale. I was happy to leave the rapidly building stench coming from the dearly departed. My body craved oxygen, even the urine-filtered air of the alleyway would suffice for now.

I strode through the door, leaving Lee with Sam. They headed off to help with the search. Caine was waiting in the outer room by the alley door. We stood just inside the doorway.

"That kid, she's the sister of Rose Van den Berg. They're Dutch nationals, both reported missing six months ago," Caine said.

"From where?"

"They went missing in Johannesburg."

I sensed a backstory worthy of taking a few minutes to hear. "I'm listening," I said.

"They were traveling with their grandfather from the Netherlands to Johannesburg. At O.R Tambo International airport, immigration officials questioned the grandfather, saying they believed he was trafficking the girls. He produced their travel documents and assured the officials they were his grandchildren. Yet he was told he would have to go to the police station. The girls were not allowed to accompany him but he was guaranteed that customs officials would watch them. He never saw them again."

"Clever."

"When he arrived home, empty-handed, police in the Netherlands told him he was not the first person to fall victim to this particular scam."

"Interpol?"

"That's where we got the information."

We walked out to the ambulance.

"You're okay?" Caine asked. I removed my vest, rotated my shoulders, working out the tension from the adrenaline that had flooded my body before and during the takedown.

I nodded. A wave of relief hit me, knowing we'd reunited the sisters and they were alive. Alive is good. Sometimes it's not all bad news.

"What condition is the body in?"

"You're going to need to use prints to identify the perp," I replied.

"That bad?" He raised an eyebrow.

I grinned. "Nah, he had no identification on him. My bullet hit him right in the middle of the forehead. Plenty of face left for family to view, if he has any here."

"We don't negotiate." His tone conveyed no room for what-ifs. "These idiots need to learn that and learn it well. Was the kid in immediate danger?" We stopped in front of the ambulance, where Caine could see the girl receiving medical attention for a small neck wound. She'd need one or two stitches. I could see a Hudson mask on the gurney

next to her and wished I could reach in and borrow it. Clean, cool oxygen would rid my lungs of the foul air I'd breathed.

"Yes, she was," I replied. I angled my body away from the scene in the ambulance.

He nodded. "Then it was the right call."

"How the hell did they end up in Washington?" I had questions.

"I'm hoping the girls can tell us."

"How'd the first kid escape?" The first two men we came across in the rooms weren't exactly spring chickens, and probably wouldn't be running after anyone. But the knife guy – the putrid smelling man – I knew he wouldn't let his meal tickets escape without a fight.

"She was left alone for a few minutes and discovered the door unlocked," Caine replied.

"That indicates carelessness, and lack of experience in managing teenage kidnap victims, to me."

"An unlocked door? That was one lucky break and one feisty kid."

"Yes," Caine replied.

"Are we handling this?" It didn't seem like a case for Delta A.

"No, I'm passing it over to another team."

It was what I expected. We had dedicated teams that specialized in finding lost kids and dealt with trafficking. A joint task force with ICE sprang to mind. I was immensely pleased to be out of that loop. I'd come across a particularly offensive Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agent during another case. I certainly didn't want to repeat the experience. It begged the question of why we were called out in the first place.

"And we received the call – why?"

"I thought it might have been something else."

I shot him a questioning look.

"Like?"

"We've got an ongoing case." He proceeded to explain. "Delta B team is working on a case involving an Albanian crime syndicate. So far, five dead: all with ties to the Albanians. When the kid described how she and her sister were taken and gave a description of the men that held them, the perps sounded Albanian to me."

The penny poised but didn't drop. Albanians were linked to human trafficking in both the United Kingdom and Belgium but, as far as I knew, here in the United States they were involved in drugs and general thuggery.

"Have the Albanians spread their human trafficking wings to include South Africa and here?" I asked.

"Not as far as we can tell. Everything we've seen so far suggests that this is an anomaly," Caine replied. He seemed certain, yet there was something ticking away under the surface. I could feel it.

My left eyebrow rose. "And, is this connected to Delta B's case?"

Caine's mouth twitched. "Different Albanians, but might be good for some information."

"I take it we're the only team working in Northern Virginia?"

We may all be Delta, but we were often separate teams. Caine was Delta's Special Agent in Charge. He moved between us, helping whichever team needed him. Sometimes we all worked together but mostly the nine of us made up three teams to give better coverage.

"Yes, B is in New Jersey. All the murder victims were found in Long Beach." The sides of his mouth twitched so violently he almost smiled. "C is offering assistance down in Georgia where some market gardener dug up a few bodies."

I checked my watch. I really needed to get going. "I'll write my report then head home," I said.

"We'll all see you tonight," Caine said. "How's Mac coping with the fuss?"

I smiled. "Badly."

"He's probably made the connection between speeches and microphones," Caine said with a massive upper lip spasm.

"I'm sure he has." There was no stopping the smile on my face. Caine twitched his lips into a frightening grimace. "I don't know that we've helped him any by razzing him about the things he said while under the influence."

"I think you'll find it wasn't 'we'," Caine replied, pointing at me, then himself.

"No, it wasn't you," I agreed.

It was me, Sam and Lee. Mostly me. Memories of Mac spaced out on Ketamine, courtesy of the Son of Shakespeare, were never far away. Memories of Mac and his rainbow people amused me on a daily basis; in the main, I kept them to myself.

"Wipe that grin off your face, Ellie. It's hard enough for him to move past calling Sam 'Mr. T' as it is."

Then I saw it. Suppressed amusement. He did find it funny.

"See you tonight," I said.

"Let me know if you need a persuasive escort," Caine said. His voice dropped to barely a whisper. "I'll have Mr. T and his pal, General Lee, pick him up."

I imagined Mac handcuffed and escorted to dinner. It was amusing but possibly necessary.

"Will do."

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