

SOUNDBYTE: CHAPTER ONE

MEMORY MOTEL

A massive thump vibrated through the wall.

I grabbed my Glock from the nightstand. Welcome to Wednesday night in a crappy motel. Noel rolled off his bed, Sig in hand. He shoved his feet into his boots and crept to the window of our motel room. A long day hunting a fugitive named Oswald Randall and the attendant adrenaline made sleep an elusive wisp of an idea. My brain tried to carry on working and my body attempted to relax. It was a fail on both counts. The search would start again in the morning, sleep or no sleep.

I slid off my bed and dragged on my cowboy boots.

“Psst,” I hissed.

“What?” Noel whispered from the edge of the front window overlooking the first floor walkway. He tweaked the cruddy curtain and peered out the small gap.

“Who is it?”

“Can see a back. Staggering. Looks drunk.”

I had two seconds to wonder what a drunken back looked like.

Crash. Glass smashed and sliced the curtains as it fell into the room from the window on the far left of the door.

“Another male,” Noel said, still watching. “Don’t know where he came from but he threw the first guy at our window.”

“We’re not ground floor so there shouldn’t be any through traffic. This could be guests going to their rooms.”

I was glad I’d put my boots on as more glass fell.

“Could be. The fight probably started somewhere else and travelled.”

We’d both seen that before. One drunk who just can’t let things go and follows along looking for an opportunity to taunt the other person some more.

There was another loud crash as an arm broke through jagged glass in the window. Blood sprayed. Both men were yelling at each other. An undertone in one of their voices sounded familiar. I picked him as a Virginian.

Noel flung open the door. “Federal Agents,” he hollered. I moved up on his left, with my weapon in a two-handed grip.

One man was holding his dripping arm. The other punched him in the face then rocked back.

“Stop,” I said and aimed at the puncher’s head.

The bleeding man stepped farther away.

The punchy male lunged at the bleeder. He overreached which nudged him off balance and brought him closer to Noel.

Noel smacked the guy on the side of the head with his elbow. He dropped like a wet sack of manure. With the attacker on the ground and Noel cuffing him, I turned my attention to the bloodied victim. His face was somewhat obscured by his hood.

“Elevate your arm and put pressure on that. I have a first aid kit in the room,” I told him.

Noel used his cell phone and called police and an ambulance while I grabbed the first aid kit. I took a bunch of wound pads, opened them, and then told the man to hold them on his arm. I rolled a small towel into a tight wad and put it inside his elbow, then bent his arm over it. He looked shaky.

“Sit down,” I said, holding his other elbow and helping him to slide down the wall. “Bend your knee up, so you can rest your elbow and still keep your arm up, and folded over that towel.” I figured his arm would get tired. I remembered how tired mine got when I’d needed to do something similar a long time ago.

He nodded. His dark hair inched forward from inside the hood and fell over his face. The way his hair fell sent pangs shooting through my heart.

“Do I know you?” I couldn’t get a clear look at him. He was keeping his face out of the light and head down.

He shook his head.

“You don’t talk?”

He shook his head again.

“That’s funny. Pretty sure I heard you both shouting at each other earlier.”

He didn’t reply.

Noel was watching. He’d been talking to the man he’d cuffed and now held face down on the verandah.

“El, this gentleman told me his name is Nicky. And Nicky thinks your bleeder is a cop.”

“Local?”

“No.”

The guy face down on the verandah spoke, “He’s a pig.”

“And you know this, with no room for confusion?” I said.

“Yeah.” Nicky spat. Spitting face down is never smart.

“Awesome. Assaulting a law enforcement officer will earn you no end of favors.”

A police car pulled into the lot.

“Noel, can you take your man down to the car? I’ll wait here for the ambulance and have a chat with our bleeder.”

I waited until Noel dragged him to his feet and took him away. With them out of earshot, I spoke to the man. The flow of blood had reduced with the pressure on the wound but he was still bleeding.

“He’s gone. Do you have ID?”

He shook his head. Without a free hand, he couldn’t stop his hood from slipping partway off his head and revealing more of his face. Hazel eyes met mine. I knew those eyes.

I was looking at a ghost.

He dropped the wound pads, pulled his hood over his head, and scrambled to his feet. The bloodied towel fell. Blood ran down his hand and dripped off his fingers. I picked up the towel and rolled it back into a tight wad.

“Fold your arm back on this,” I said pressing the towel into the inside of his elbow. “The plan is for the combination of the towel and your bent arm to apply pressure and stop the bleeding.” I grabbed more wound pads and pressed them to his wrist. It was almost impossible to process what I thought I’d seen.

“I’ll be okay,” he said with a hint of a slow drawl in his voice. I’d heard it a million times before.

I wanted to shake him and demand to know who he really was. His face, eyes, voice, all told

me he was Mac.

Impossible.

Was I was face to face with his doppelganger? My body screamed in agony as I fought to control the urge to throw myself into his arms. Nothing made sense. I wanted to slap him and hug him. Shake him and melt into the arms I used to know. I took a breath and focused my energy on reality.

Breathe.

Think.

I plunged my hand into my pocket and pulled out a small vial. Unscrewing the top, I took a deep breath of the healing aroma. I knew the Synergy would ward off a migraine and I expected one to charge through my brain at any minute. I took another deep breath, inhaling the soothing vapor deep into my lungs. With care, I screwed the top back on the small bottle and shoved it into my pocket.

“What’s that stuff?”

As soon as he spoke, I knew what he was doing. He was using a technique I’d used myself hundreds of times to engage a person and help them focus on now.

“Synergy,” I replied. “Aromatherapy for migraines.”

“Does it work?”

“Yes.”

“Where do you get it?”

“New Zealand.” Angry noise from the parking lot below intruded. “I have it sent over.”

I stepped closer to the railing and looked down. It was dark and difficult to see.

“Who makes it?”

I glanced at him then back to the noises below.

“Le’Esscience,” I replied and shifted my concentration to what was happening in the dark. Shuffling. Skin on skin. Hard contact. Grunts. Men tumbled into a pool of light. One of them was Noel. Instinct took over. I aimed at the male fighting with Noel.

“Stop!” I hollered.

“Shoot, bitch!” he yelled back.

The man with me spoke, “What’s happening?”

“The guy with you is causing a problem for my partner.”

“Nicky’s an asshole.”

Nicky, yes, that was his name.

Noel threw Nicky on his ass. He struggled back up. Noel punched him. Reeling from Noel’s blow, he staggered into a pool of light. I got a clear look at his bloodied face and confirmed it was Nicky. Nicky wasn’t wearing handcuffs anymore. Noel drew his weapon. More scuffling. I heard the gun hit the blacktop.

This was not going well.

“You okay, Noel?” I asked, training my weapon on Nicky.

“Sure,” he puffed without looking up. “I’m getting too old for this shit.”

“I can finish this anytime,” I called back.

“I got it,” Noel said as he scabbled across the ground for his weapon. His fingers missing it as Nicky kicked the gun. Noel hauled himself to his feet and took a swing at the guy. His fist connected with jawbone. Nicky’s head jerked.

I saw two police officers approach – neither drew their weapons. Noel made another lunge for his gun. Nicky ran and dove for a cop: In one movement, he’d snatched the gun from the officer’s

holster and spun around to face Noel. The gun in his hand aimed at Noel's chest.

I fired. My bullet punched a hole right in the middle of Nicky's forehead.

"Goodnight, loser," I whispered.

Nicky dropped to the ground with a dull thud. The gun smacked into the blacktop and bounced out of his hand.

"Thanks, El," Noel said as he kicked the weapon away from the man's lifeless body. "Nice shot."

"I'm allergic to fucktards. They make my trigger finger itchy."

And I'm a little worried about the possibility of zombies, so a head shot is the only shot that counts.

Noel nodded.

"Is this our scene or local police?" I asked. I had no desire to have the rest of my night consumed with paperwork and statements.

"I'll figure it out," Noel said.

I turned my attention back to the man I was supposed to be helping.

His voice held the promise of a smile as he said, "You're a hard ass."

I shrugged. Oh, the joy of the questions to come. How did the loser get free of the cuffs? How did he disarm Noel? How did he take a gun off a police officer? But not right now.

"Who do I contact?" I said.

"My handler. Tierney. Jonathon Tierney."

Well, ain't that just peachy?

"Jonathon Tierney. You're CIA?"

I moved back to the railing and yelled down to Noel, "This is ours, this is federal."

"Got ya," Noel replied. I could hear his voice as he explained to police how they could help us as I moved back to the bleeding man.

"I'm working a joint task force," he said.

A joint task force was a familiar story. He moved his arm again. I was ready for the movement this time. I had a thick wad of gauze in my hand, just in case.

"I am trying to help you," I said wrapping my hand around the gaping wound and pushing the gauze hard over the gash. "You need to keep still and keep your arm bent over the towel." I pressed his arm back on itself, with the towel in the crook of his elbow. "If you don't, I will strap your arm back. Got it?"

"Yes, I've got it," he said wincing.

"This is West Virginia, a small town at that. Not the sort of place I'd associate with a joint operational task force. What are you really doing here?"

"Work," he replied. "I can't tell you much more than that. You know how it goes."

"You can't tell me *much* more than that? So you can tell me something?"

"It's a drug operation. Offshore investors setting up drug labs all over the eastern sea board."

"You have a name?" Calling him Mac would be ludicrous.

"Chad." His eyes smiled. "You?"

I heard an ambulance approaching.

"You really don't know?"

"No, I don't."

It was hard to bite back the urge to yell at him that he did know my name and this game he was playing had to stop.

An instant of clarity prevented my outburst. Mac is dead. I *know* that. I took a breath, counted

to five, and said, “Gabrielle Conway. Ellie.”

Flashing red lights drew my attention. I waved at the paramedics as they disembarked from their truck.

“Ellie Conway, *the* Ellie Conway?”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“I’ve heard of you. You’re on Tierney’s list.”

Shitlist, I presumed.

“List?”

“Safe list. You’re someone people like me can approach for help. He trusts you.”

How fortuitous for Chad that he staggered into our motel wall.

“I’ll call Tierney. What do I tell him?”

His fingers closed around mine. “Tell him ... Socrates ...”

Footsteps pounded on the stairs.

“Did you say Socrates?”

Paramedics hurried toward us.

Chad nodded. “Socrates needs extraction.”

A solid block of ice formed where my stomach used to be. I hadn’t heard that name since Mac’s death. Mac used two screen names in our chat room, Galileo and Socrates. Our chat room no longer existed. Galileo no longer existed. Socrates no longer existed.

Someone was messing with me. Tierney was messing with me. But why? To what end. If I’m on his safe list, why let a Mac clone loose where I could stumble upon him? But he didn’t, he couldn’t have known where I would end up while chasing our fugitive.

“We’ll take it from here, Agent,” a paramedic said and unwound my hand from the dressings. “Good job.”

I could feel my blood draining from my head as they moved his hood and shone a flashlight at Chad’s face. He was the spitting image of Mac.

“Pull his other sleeve up,” I said.

Chad shot me a confused glance. The paramedic did as I asked, despite the vocal protests from Chad. Each word he said spiraled through my ear canals, and felt just like they did when Mac spoke them. I recognized a scar on his arm. Everything I’d felt over the last few years, all the pain and the loneliness, churned and coiled inside me. He was turning the key and tightening the spring. The potential for this to end in a bloody mess was high.

“Mac.”

His eyes met mine, and his head shook. My heart broke all over again.

“We’ll take him, ma’am.”

Noel ran up the stairs. Chad pulled his hood back on and sank into a dark pool.

Was there something more to the man who looked and sounded like my dead husband? I could see sanity drifting away. Cerebrally entertaining or mentally hilarious, my ass! I was heading down the slippery slope to full-blown nuts.

“E!”

I shook my head and watched the paramedics wrap Chad’s arm and help him away.

“Where are you taking him?” I said.

“City Hospital, Martinsburg. We’re eighteen minutes out,” a paramedic replied.

Chad looked back at me with his familiar warm eyes. “Call Tierney.”

“I will.”

Noel touched my arm. “You need to clean up.”

I looked at my hands.

Blood.

Blood?

“Cotton swabs,” I muttered and searched the first aid kit. Pawing through it, I contaminated everything I touched without care. I found a pack of cotton swabs and a paper envelope. I swabbed the blood on my hand and sealed the swab into the envelope. On the outside, I wrote my name and the date. For safekeeping, I stashed the envelope in the first aid kit. My intention was to take it to the lab as soon as we were back in Washington.

“What’s that for?”

“DNA.”

“Is he someone?”

I shook my head. This was too nuts even for Noel.

“El?”

“Let’s just get out of here.”

Far, far away from the ghost and the mess.

I walked back into the room, stepping over glass as I did so. I threw my stuff into my backpack. We needed a new room or, my preference, a different motel.

“You and I need to stop winding up in motels in West Virginia. It never goes well, does it?” Noel said, packing.

I smiled. “No, it never does. At least this time nothing exploded.”

“You’re two for two.”

“And both times you were with me ... it’s you. You’re bad luck.” I stopped what I was doing and looked at him for a moment. “What happened out there?”

“That moron had a universal handcuff key in his back pocket,” Noel said, inspecting his torn and bruised knuckles.

That explained how he escaped the cuffs. Handcuff keys are small and concealable. I didn’t remember Noel patting him down but then I was more concerned with Chad and the wound on his arm.

“How’d he get your gun off you?”

“I’m getting too old for this shit, El. That’s how.”

NCIS Special Agent Noel Gerrard was human after all. Imagine that?

Noel’s phone rang. A few moments later, his conversational tone changed. He sounded pissed. I pulled on my jacket. My mind wouldn’t shut up. Every inch of me thought I’d come face to face with my dead husband. It didn’t matter that I knew he was dead. Nor did it matter that I saw his cold dead body lying in the coffin. It was of no consequence to my screwed brain.

My eyes *saw* Mac. It must be true. I talked to him on MSN. I’d seen him step out of the shower in a room at the Marriott. It must be true. I heard his voice right there in front of me. I saw the scar on his arm. It must be true.

And the kicker? Tierney was involved. CIA. Anything was possible. The mere thought of Tierney catapulted me back in time. I knew him well: I worked for him once. Deep dark secrets never stay deep dark secrets. They have a habit of creeping back to the light at the worst possible moment.

Noel was still talking. I think he called my name a few times before I heard him.

“El?” When I looked up Noel was right in front of me.

“What’s up?”

“Car accident. Randall is on his way to hospital, in critical condition.”

“Convenient.”

“Very.”

“What happened?”

“One of the police cars sent here went to pick up the coroner. On his way back, he attempted to stop an erratic driver. The driver took off, there was a short pursuit.” He smacked his hands together. “Car hits tree.”

“He pursued with a civilian in the car?” Incredulousness invaded my voice before I could check it. “Where in hell are we?”

Dark humor filled Noel’s reply, “At the very edge of civilization.”

I shook my head in astonishment. “Where are we headed now?”

“Hospital. I’ll make the arrest if shit-for-brains makes it.”

“It’s that bad?”

“Wasn’t wearing a seat belt.”

“Oh.”

Might have been handy having a coroner in the police car.

Noel was on the phone again. This time I recognized the tone and the instruction, “Grab your gear.”

His team would be there in a few hours, just in case our guy required transport.

As we walked down to our car, I broached the subject of Chad and Tierney. “The other guy, the bleeder. He is one of us. I have to call someone for him.”

“So the ass-hat was right about him being a cop. Do what you have to do.”

He climbed into the car. I pulled out my phone and made the call from the parking lot.

It was a number I knew by heart. Memorized in another chapter of my life. The wait was almost unbearable. Finally, a woman’s voice answered.

“Shangri La Special Services.”

“I have a bird problem.”

“Can you be more specific?” she replied.

“I keep chickens.”

There was a click and then silence. Two breaths, and then another voice.

“Agent Conway, you have another problem?”

My words felt sticky in my throat. “No, but you do.”

“Do I?”

“I have a message for you. Socrates needs extraction. He is injured.”

Without hesitation Jonathon replied, “Can you help him?”

“I already have.”

There was a pause. “Thank you. We will take care of Socrates. Where is he?”

“City Hospital, Martinsburg, West Virginia.”

“I’ll take care of it.” I imagined his beady bird eyes darting across the screen I knew was in front of him, deploying a team to bring in Chad. “How compromised is he?”

“I don’t know for sure.”

“Loose ends?”

“I took care of one, his name was Nicky.” It was inadvertent but he didn’t need to know that. “I don’t know if there are any more.”

“Thank you. Are you well, Agent Conway?”

“I am well,” I replied and hung up. As well as can be expected considering whom I thought I saw.

I slid into the passenger seat and closed the door. My mind was busy pondering the irony that meant Chad turned up outside our motel room.

Noel started the car. "Everything all right?"

"Yeah." Why the hell wouldn't it be? "Let's go see Randall."

I hoped he wasn't pulp because justice needed to be served. A part of me considered that if he was pulp, it had been served. Maybe.

Mac's voice resounded in my head, "Maybe's ass."

How can his dead voice be in my head and be identical to the voice I'd heard from Chad or Socrates or whoever the hell he was? I knew enough to know it wasn't either name he'd given me.

Fifteen minutes later, we found the hospital and were standing in the emergency room. Noel waited to hear back from a doctor regarding Randall's status. I saw the paramedics who picked up Chad.

I stopped one and asked after their patient.

"He's in surgery."

"Any idea how long that will take?"

The paramedic shook his head. His partner mumbled and they both headed off into the night. I looked around for a nurse and found one.

With a flash of my badge, I asked about the patient, describing him but not using his name. I had no clue what name he'd told the paramedics or hospital.

"Let me check for you, ma'am." She tapped a few computer keys. "That patient is John Smith."

I guess that's a step up from John Doe. I jotted his name down in the notebook in my hand but didn't believe for one second it was his real name.

"Got a birthdate there? We need it for our records."

"September 26, 1970."

The pen fell from my hand, clattered onto the floor and rolled away. I watched. It rolled to Noel's booted foot. He picked it up and brought it back to me.

With a grin he said, "Butter fingers."

I tried to smile back but my face didn't move.

"El?"

The nurse looked at me. "Ma'am, are you all right?"

Come on voice. "Of course. Thanks."

Noel grabbed my arm just above the elbow and steered me to a quiet corner.

"What?"

I went for broke on the insanity plea and voiced the crazy thoughts, "The guy with the cut wrist. He's using the name John Smith and his birth date is the same as Mac's."

"A lot of people share birthdates, El."

"Not too many have the exact same scar on their forearm, the same eyes, the same face, the same voice, the same height." Despite trying to control my internal panic, I could hear it in my voice.

Noel and I made our way out of the hospital, away from anyone who could overhear the conversation. We stopped not far from the emergency entrance. There was a small raised garden. The solid edge was just high enough for me to sit on.

"El, Mac is dead."

"Then who the hell is John Smith?" I whispered.

"Didn't you call someone? Can they tell you?"

"I'm confessing to you that I have clearly lost the plot. Let's spread it around."

He smiled. "You got blood." His smile faded. "You really think DNA will come back as Mac?"

"I don't know who he is. All I know is that John Smith looks remarkably like my dead husband."

"All right. We'll get the sample to the lab. Meanwhile, go see what else the hospital has on him and let's get a picture and prints."

"Am I insane?"

"No more than usual, El. No more than usual."

"Good to know."

"I only met Mac that one time." His eyes bore traces of disappointment. "I'm no help here at all."

That one time he met Mac was part of a scenario that would be stuck in my mind for eternity. No matter how much good we did or how many kids we saved. That memory to me would always be the night my husband died.

Noel leaned against the wall opposite me. It was still dark and cool. I couldn't imagine how he thought I was sane after the things I'd told him. It surprised the hell out of me that he hadn't called my boss, SAC Caine Grafton, and suggested an immediate psychiatric evaluation. At that point, it occurred to me that he may have. I wouldn't know until the men in white coats showed up.

And with that, I shuffled sideways into a *Men in Black* scene. The theme song filled me to the point I was singing along. We all know I can't sing. It wasn't going to go well for anyone who valued his or her hearing.

"El, *Men In Black*?" Noel blew out a long sigh. "Really?"

"Sorry."

"You sure you're okay?"

"Never better. My dead husband is having surgery on his wrist and I thought his ashes were buried in Fairfax."

"They are. There is no way that guy is Mac. Think someone might have noticed if he'd come back to life?"

"I'd like to think so. Doctors, nurses, someone in the morgue."

"We'll find out what's going on here, that much I can promise you."

I nodded. "It's the uncanny resemblance that's screwing up my head here."

"They say we all have doppelgangers."

"I know." I should know. It wasn't that long ago that Lee thought I was lying strangled in a parking lot in DC. The woman not only looked just like me but her driver's license identified her as Gabrielle Conway. Discovering her body caused all manner of shit to spray forth and meant I needed to contact Tierney for help.

I stopped and stared up at the stars. A helicopter circled the building then disappeared from sight. By the noise, I'd say it landed on the roof. Someone's night ended badly and required an airlift to hospital.

I was exhausted and empty. I consoled myself with the thought that my life was so *normal* it should be a season of *Days of Our Lives*. There was way too much going on for it to be a single episode. I was sure I should be clutching the back of a chaise longue, dramatically looking into space, while wearing four-inch heels and a designer gown. Any minute the camera would pan out then fade to another scene, with a handsome man looking desperately worried and staring into the flames in a fireplace of some alpine ski lodge.

Sometimes it sucked to have my imagination. This was one of those times. Noel was watching me with curiosity. For a second I could've believed he'd never seen *Days of Our Lives*. But he looked too much like the guy in front of the fire.

A nurse emerged from within the hospital. She looked over at us and beckoned.

“We have an update on Randall,” she said, holding the door open for us. I read her name badge.
Tamsin.

“Thank you, Tamsin,” I said.

She smiled. “The doctor is waiting for you – down the hall, second on your left.”

Noel nodded.

Moments later, we learned Randall died from his injuries.

Closure of sorts. For my case, there was a certain amount of relief. The victims would no longer be required to go through the third degree in a courtroom. His DNA was on file. We knew he committed the rapes, but it remained “alleged” until proven guilty in a court of law. As far as I was concerned, he was a dead serial rapist. Seemed to me it was the best possible outcome.

Down the hallway, the dark night waited. From the darkness, I heard the whine of the engines and the unmistakable *thump* of helicopter rotors.

Tamsin waved us down as we headed to the door.

“Ma’am, I have some news regarding the other man you were asking about. John Smith?”

“That’s him.”

“He was airlifted to another hospital.”

“I didn’t know his arm injury was that severe?”

“Special circumstances, ma’am. They’ve transferred him to another hospital.”

“Do you know where?”

“No, ma’am, only the pilot would know that.” She dropped her voice to a whisper, “All his records were taken as well, and his treatment paid for in cash.”

I nodded.

Gone.

Once our lab processed the blood sample, I would know more. It seemed so simple: Take the blood to the lab. Reality was different. It could be months before I got an answer. Being nosy isn’t a priority. A blood sample with no case number meant I would have to wait until there was nothing else in the queue even with the favors various people owe me. What was I going to do? Push out someone’s time-sensitive blood work and run the risk of letting a rapist or murderer go free for longer? I couldn’t do that.

The voice in my head muttered, “Good luck ever getting an answer from the blood.”

There was no point hanging around. Randall was dead and Smith was gone.

“Home,” I said as Noel held the door open.

“Yeah, I’ll send my team back – they should be halfway here by now.” He pulled out his cell phone and made a call.

We swung back to the motel, my idea. Our short stay at the miserable motel was over but I couldn’t just leave the motel owner out of pocket. I paid for the broken window. It just seemed easier than the owner trying to squeeze cash out of the estate of the dead man or a man who didn’t exist.

Dawn broke with slow deliberation.

In silence, we headed into the daylight.