

KILL SHOT



Romantic Suspense – Print and Ebook

White Knights – Book 2 – February/2018

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Some fears haunt you forever....

As the ballistics and weapon's expert for the FBI's special task force nicknamed the White Knights, Rick Cannon has known the Department of Defense was developing self-steering bullets. Rick feared these smart bullets—which have one hundred percent accuracy that can turn even a novice into a lethal sniper—would eventually end up in the hands of the wrong people. But since the ammunition was still in the development stage, he figured they had plenty of time before that happened. He was wrong. Dead wrong.

Until they become reality.

When a homeless vet is killed with a smart bullet, it's clear that the ammunition has been stolen, and the Knights are called in to find the thief and stop the killings. But they aren't the only ones desperate to find the killer. Therapist Olivia Dobbs is well known for her success in counseling military veterans with PTSD. When she discovers one of her clients moments after he is murdered, she becomes both the FBI's prime witness, and suspect.

Despite the mutual attraction that immediately sparks between them, Rick can't—no he won't—let Olivia interfere with his investigation. But when the sniper trains his rifle on her, Rick must recall all the skills he learned as a Marine sniper to make sure the next bullet fired isn't a kill shot that takes Olivia out.

Chapter 1

Atlanta, Georgia

Tuesday, September 12

10:37 p.m.

Murder

Not a word Dr. Olivia Dobbs took lightly, even if she didn't believe her client's life was in danger. Someone was stalking him, he claimed. Following him. Their sights set on killing. He couldn't give a reason. No explanation. Just a feeling. As his therapist, she couldn't play into his paranoia. It was her job to find a way to get through to him.

She slid closer to him on the park bench to grab his attention. "I know this is a setback, Ace, but we can work through it."

He gaped at her and fidgeted with a bullet strung on a cord that he often grasped during their sessions. "You think I'm flashing back again, don't you? To Iraq. Well, I'm not."

"Please," she said. "Don't throw away years of hard work because of one bad day."

"You don't understand. If they find me, they'll kill me." He shot to his feet and ran a hand over the military haircut that harkened back to his service as a marine. He shoved the bullet into his pocket as his gaze roved over Centennial Olympic Park. Even in the sweltering night air, he shuddered. "I have to leave now, or they'll see us together and think I told you. Then they'll want to kill you, too. I can't let that happen."

"Told me what?"

“Take care, Doc.” He saluted, his gaze lingering for a moment as if imploring her to act on his behalf. “I appreciate everything you’ve done for me.”

“Don’t go. Please. Let me help you.”

He shook his head, the gesture more sorrowful than disappointed, and spun on his red Converse sneakers. Long legs carried him away, his tattered jeans dragging on the brick walkway. He swiveled his head like a searchlight, likely looking for demons he thought real. He ran his fingers through water spurting up from the Fountain of Rings, then scrubbed his hand over his face. At the exit he spun, took one last look, and caught her gaze with eyes pleading for help, then turned up the street and disappeared into the darkness.

She sighed out her disappointment, her breath swallowed by the steamy Atlanta humidity. What a session. If you could even call it that. More like a duck-and-cover exercise on Ace’s part.

He’d been jittery and keyed up, unable to focus. She hadn’t seen him exhibit these classic signs of PTSD hyperarousal since he’d mastered strong coping skills, and she needed additional time to determine the cause of his regression.

Her first mistake had been to meet him at the park, but she’d had no choice. He’d refused to come to her office. Unfortunately, he hadn’t been able to concentrate here. Who could? Not with the sound of gushing water and people lingering in small groups chattering and laughing.

Her second error was letting him take off. He counted on her to help him navigate the scary waters of PTSD, and she’d failed him. Failed big-time. His final beseeching gaze had reinforced that.

What if something happened to him in his delusional state? How could she live with that?

She couldn't. Wouldn't. He deserved more, but what could she do? She reviewed the night, getting lost in her thoughts for how long she didn't know, but finally concluding that she had to go after him.

She headed across the park and slipped past the five Olympic rings, their colorful lights shining through jets of water. Misty spray settled on her face and arms, cooling as it evaporated. At the exit she turned north toward the Salvation Army shelter where Ace often stayed and soon moved into a less desirable and poorly lit area.

Her steps faltered.

Maybe trailing him wasn't safe. Maybe she should go back.

No. She owed Ace her very best. Besides, the shelter was just ahead, and she had pepper spray. Sliding her hand into her purse to cup the cylinder, she rounded the corner. The streetlight's warm glow directed her attention down the way to a man lying on the sidewalk, another man hunched over him. The guy stretched out on his side wore red high-tops.

"Ace?" was the only word she managed to utter as she tried to make sense of the scene.

Was this man in front of her helping, or—

The man swiveled toward her. She searched his face, but his dark hoodie cast thick shadows, obscuring any detail she might have made out. A glint of metal in his hands flashed in the light and caught her attention.

A knife. He had a knife!

She screamed, the sound rolling from her throat and cutting through the silent night. He lurched to his feet. Tall. Over six feet, built and powerful, he started toward her, his knife raised and threatening.

She tried to pull out her pepper spray, but her purse straps tangled around her hand.

The man lunged.

She stumbled back, freed her hand, and heaved her purse at him. It slammed into his face, knocking him off guard.

Run. Now!

She whirled and took off. Running hard. Fast. Rounding the corner and not looking back.

Heavy footsteps pummeled the sidewalk behind her. He was going to use his knife on her. Kill her. Like Ace?

Ace. Poor Ace. Is he really dead?

Her heart clutching, she picked up speed. The street stretched ahead. Deserted, except for a few cars at the next stoplight. She had to reach them.

You can do this.

She pounded forward, moving into a rhythm, but the knife-wielding man was taller, and his footfalls gained on her. She risked a glance over her shoulder.

He'd moved closer. Traveling fast. She kicked into gear. Her legs churned faster than she could manage. Clumsy, awkward, she lost her rhythm, and her foot wrenched in a pothole.

No! Please.

She catapulted forward. Her hands slammed into the unforgiving pavement, and the rough surface sandpapered across her cheek. Pain screamed through her body, but it didn't matter. He would catch her, and she would die.

She listened for the thump of his boots—for him to arrive and stand over her—but heard only a car in the distance behind her.

His footsteps sounded again. Moving fast. Receding.

Lifting her head, she searched. He was gone like a whisper in the night. She collapsed back on the warm concrete to catch her breath.

She was alive! Thankfully alive. But what about Ace? He needed her. She rose to her knees as steps coming from the opposite direction caught her attention.

Had the man circled around?

She shot to her feet, her hands outstretched, ready to defend herself, as she spun.

An Atlanta police officer stood strong and tall, the sight of his navy blue uniform bringing a sigh from deep in her chest. “Are you all right, ma’am?”

“A man. He was chasing me. He had a knife. I think he killed my client, Ace.” Her words came flying out, tumbling over each other. She drew in a breath to calm down and make more sense. “He was going to kill me, too. We have to help Ace. Please come with me. Now!”

“Hey, hey.” The officer held up his hands. “Slow down, okay? What’s your name?”

“There’s no time. Ace might still be alive. We need to help him.” She started down the street.

The officer’s hand came around her arm, stopping her. “Let’s not rush into danger, ma’am.”

“Look. I’m not a ma’am. I’m Ace’s therapist. Dr. Olivia Dobbs.” She extricated her arm and quickly caught the officer up on what had transpired.

He eyed her. “I didn’t see a man.”

“You must have scared him off. Please. We have to help Ace.”

“We will,” he replied. “But we aren’t going on foot. We’ll take my car.”

She didn’t wait for further instructions but started for his vehicle, parked down the street. He trailed her, and she heard him radioing for backup.

At the car he stepped in front of her. “I’m sorry, ma’am, but I have to check for a weapon.”

“What? I’m not armed.”

“Then you won’t mind letting me check so we can get to your friend.”

She didn’t want to be searched, but she also wouldn’t head toward a knife-wielding man without the officer. “Then do it quickly.”

She endured the frisking as onlookers ogled her, but the officer made it quick, as she’d requested, then opened the back door for her. She’d never been in the backseat of a police car—never been searched either—but she wouldn’t argue with him about these points when they needed to get to Ace.

He slammed the door closed. She noticed the lack of handles in the back, locking her in. He gave her an assessing glance as he slid behind the wheel.

“I’m not crazy,” she said. “Ace really is hurt. Just drive and you’ll see. But hurry.”

“Caution is the name of the game, ma’am.” He set the car in motion and ran his gaze down both sides of the street.

Maybe he was looking for the man who’d chased her. She wanted him caught, but helping Ace was more important to her. Finally the car eased around the corner, and she spotted Ace. He hadn’t moved.

“There, on the right,” she said, her heart plummeting. “See? He’s wearing red sneakers.”

The officer shifted into park but left the engine running. “I’ll be right back.”

He grabbed a flashlight and exited the car. She expected him to hurry over to Ace. Instead he made a guarded approach, scanning in all directions. He ran his flashlight over Ace, then jerked his head up to look at the sky. He suddenly bolted back to the car.

“Is Ace okay?” she asked.

“Get down on the floor.” He shoved the car into reverse and gunned the engine.

The vehicle shot backward. Her body catapulted toward the seat divider, her shoulder catching it hard.

She righted herself. “What’s going on?”

“Looks like a sniper, and we’re taking cover.”

“Sniper? But the man had a knife.”

“Trust me, lady. I’ve done several combat tours. There’s no way your client’s injury could be from anything but a bullet. Likely a .50 caliber, and we need to get out of sniper range. If we don’t, you’ll see firsthand the damage one of those bad boys can do.”

*

Washington, D.C.

Wednesday, September 13

1:00 a.m.

Nothing good came from a middle-of-the-night phone call. As Agent Rick Cannon stepped into the FBI’s airport conference room and spotted top-secret binders waiting for his six-person Critical Incident Response team, dubbed the White Knights, he doubted tonight would be the exception.

Add his team leader Max White pacing the room in long, bold strides plus the stone-faced armed guard at the door, and Rick’s feeling morphed into certainty. Something huge had hit the fan. Lives were at stake, and his team would deploy within the hour to minimize the casualties.

Max crossed powerful arms over a massive chest, a scowl drawing down his mouth. A former Army Ranger, Max could intimidate the toughest of guys when he scowled. But not Rick.

At least not on most days. Only because he worked with Max and knew him to be reasonable and fair.

“I’m glad you’re the first to arrive.” He marched across the room to join Rick. “You’ll be taking lead on this incident.”

“Weapons or hostage issue?” Rick clarified so he could mentally prepare for which of his team roles he’d be filling on this mission.

“Weapons.” Max tapped the nearest classified binder. “I can’t read you in until the team is in place and we unseal the documents, but be prepared for your worst nightmare to come true.”

Worst nightmare. Likely an even bigger incident than Rick had first thought. After all, Max wasn’t one for drama. He was a levelheaded and even-keeled kind of guy.

“Take a moment to get your head in the game so when the rest of the team arrives we’re ready to move,” he said before stepping up to a large whiteboard.

He picked up a cool-blue marker, and Rick watched him jot each team member’s name on the board in square, precise letters. After they unsealed the documents and completed a quick briefing, Max would grab the fiery-red marker and note assignments below their names. This procedure was used to keep from wasting valuable time in planning, so the minute their Cessna touched down wherever they were headed, they’d be ready to take action.

Laughter rang out behind Rick, seeming out of place. He turned to see his teammates, cyber expert Kaci North and hostage negotiator Shane Erwin, stepping through the door. Their focus lingered on the binders as they abruptly stilled their laughter.

Forensic specialist Brynn Young trailed behind them. She stopped to stare at the table. Even in the middle of the night, every hair on her head was in place, but she smoothed a hand over it anyway, the only hint she would ever give of her unease.

Kaci pushed up large black glasses as her gaze drifted to Rick. “Looks like it’s going to be a tough one.”

He nodded but didn’t mention he’d take lead. If Max wanted them to know, he’d say something.

Shane continued into the room, and his long strides carried him across the space. He dropped into the chair closest to Max. “Any chance you’ll read us in before everyone gets here?”

Max shook his head. “And there’s no use speculating. I’ll get started as soon as Cal arrives.”

“Right. Cal,” Kaci said, referring to the only wayward member of the team, their bomb expert Cal Riggins. “He won’t be rolling in until the last minute.”

Max checked his watch. “I don’t blame him for taking his time, but the minute these long farewells with the wife interfere with an op, he’ll be reassigned.”

Max often came across as harsh. Not that he had a choice. Their team couldn’t afford to be sloppy, and he held each of them accountable. No matter how tight the group was—and Cal was most definitely one of them—Max would follow through and cut him from the team if need be.

“Get your e-mails and texts out of the way now,” he instructed as he moved to the head of the table. “Our flight’s only about an hour, and we’ll spend every minute in planning.”

Rick took a seat with his teammates. None of them would touch the binders until Max gave the okay to break the seals, but Rick wanted to rip into his packet to see what Max considered a worst-nightmare scenario.

Not that Rick could name just one scenario when people committed atrocious acts all the time. His stint as a Marine Scout Sniper and five years with the FBI had proved that. He could

rattle off dozens, maybe hundreds of horrible things he feared, but honestly, he couldn't narrow down the list to the worst thing.

Let it go. You'll know soon enough.

He changed his focus to his phone until Cal breezed in with a big smile on his face and settled into the nearest chair. Rick wasn't big on smiling, but he couldn't keep his mouth from turning up. Not even with the tension in the room. Since Cal's recent marriage, he'd lost some of his intensity. Not on the job. He was still a guy who had the team's back, and they could count on him. He just smiled a heck of a lot more now, and it was contagious.

"I never knew getting married could slow a guy down so much," Brynn teased.

Cal's smile widened. "Hey, we moved farther away from here is all it is."

Shane rolled his eyes. "Right. Maybe we should start a pool on how long it takes before you call Tara."

Kaci grinned, looking more like a teenager than a woman in her early thirties. "I'll take five minutes after we're airborne."

"Five?" Shane asked. "Nah, he won't make it *that* long."

Max clapped his hands. "Let's get started, but before we do, Shane, put me down for fifteen minutes. Since we're hassling Cal, I figure he'll hold out longer."

Cal shook his head and the team chuckled, but it was a nervous laughter, as Max would soon give the go-ahead to open the binders.

The armed guard poked his head through the doorway and eyed the group, ending the last of the laughter. He was warning them to leave the binders intact and not to remove any of the confidential material. Max gave a firm nod of acknowledgment and the guard closed the door,

sealing them in. The minute this briefing ended, he'd check the binders, then put them in a burn bag to be disposed of at FBI headquarters.

"I don't have to tell you that our briefing is highly classified," Max said. "And you'll curtail any discussion of the material to private, secured locations." He let his gaze travel over the group, pausing at each person to make his point.

"Aren't these directions overkill?" Shane leaned back in his chair. "We've been through so many classified situations that the protocol is second nature."

Max pinned Shane with an intense stare. "You haven't been through anything like this, I assure you."

"So let's find out what *this* is," Rick said, hoping to move things along.

"Open your binders, read the intro paragraph, and then we'll review it before getting into a discussion of the mission."

Rick tore through the seal and flipped to the first page. He read only one line before his mouth fell open, and he shot a look at Max. "Self-steering bullets. Our op is about self-steering bullets?"

"Yes," Max said with deadly calm.

"A horrifying bullet that gives a novice shooter the same skills as a highly trained sniper," Rick grumbled. "You weren't kidding when you said this is my worst nightmare."

"Can someone explain, please?" Kaci asked.

"It's simple, really," Rick said, but if the mission involved these bullets, it would be anything but simple. "The EXtreme ACcuracy Tasked Ordnance program, EXACTO, has done what was once thought impossible. Under the Department of Defense's umbrella, EXACTO created a small-caliber bullet with continuous guidance to target. And don't be confused by my

‘small-caliber’ comment. I mean small only in comparison to a missile. We’re talking .50 caliber here.”

Cal let out a long, low whistle. Second to Rick, Cal possessed the greatest experience and weapons training on the team, so the self-steering bullets weren’t news to him.

“Missile guidance in a .50,” Brynn muttered. “You’re kidding, right?”

“I wish I was,” Rick replied. “And in case you’re not up to speed on rifles chambered for .50-caliber ammunition, this rifle is considered one of the most destructive weapons legally available to civilians in the U.S. The bullets will shoot through armor plate and reinforced concrete.”

Kaci’s face paled. “How does this smart bullet work?”

“The ammo’s paired with a custom infrared scope. The bullets have optical sensors in the tips that communicate with the scope and send signals to fins in the bullet to adjust the path to the target. As long as the shooter keeps the scope trained on the target, the bullet will adjust course to hit the target. Even circling back if needed.”

“So any yahoo with this scope and these bullets could kill a mark without any training?”

Brynn clarified.

Rick nodded. “Takes a special weapon without a rifled barrel, but yeah, anyone on the street possessing these tools instantly becomes a highly accurate sniper and can take out a target at an extreme distance without a lick of training. The record sniper kill for a .50 without the aid of this technology is a mile and a half, and the bullets travel twenty-eight hundred feet per second. Means the shooter would be long gone before anyone figured out where the round originated.”

“Whoa,” Shane said.

Max scowled. “Exactly.”

“Then I’m assuming we have state-of-the-art security for this ordnance,” Cal said, using the common military term for weapons and ammunition.

Max widened his stance. “Yes, but—”

“Wait,” Rick interrupted as their mission became clear to him. “You’re not going to tell us someone stole the self-steering bullets?”

“I’m afraid a rifle, scope, *and* three dozen bullets fell into the wrong hands about three weeks ago.”

“Three weeks ago! And we’re just being called in now?”

“The Department of Defense tried to retrieve the prototype themselves, but failed.”

Rick made strong eye contact with Max. “So our mission is to retrieve this weapon and ammo before someone gets killed.”

“Unfortunately,” Max replied, his gaze uneasy, “someone has already died, and our mission also includes hunting down the killer.”

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