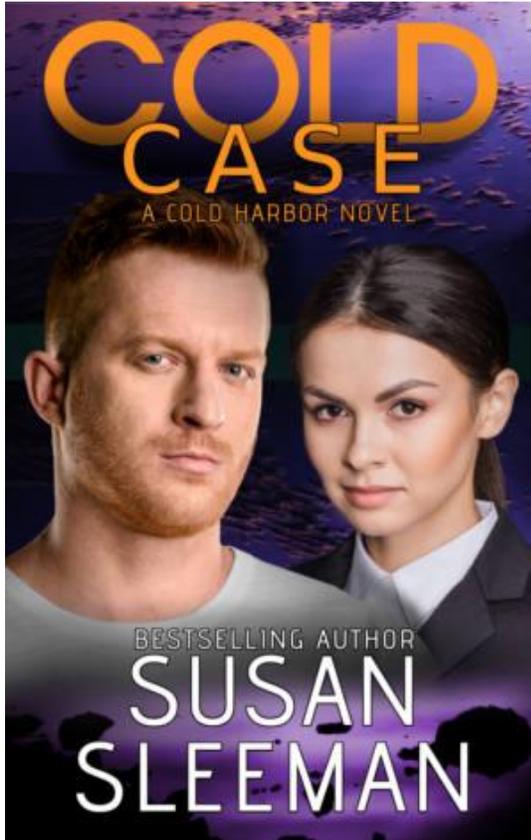


## COLD CASE SNEAK PEEK



**Romantic Suspense** – Print and EBook

**Cold Harbor**– Book 4 – May/2018

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**When her past comes back to haunt her...**

Former FBI cyber security agent Eryn Calloway worked many cyber investigations during her career as an FBI agent and while serving as Blackwell Tactical's cyber expert. But when her computer is locked with ransomware, she suddenly finds herself facing the biggest investigation of all. Failure to solve the case and find the hacker could result in the loss of her very life.

**Can she let the one man who can protect her get close enough to do so?**

Enter former Green Beret, deputy Trey Sawyer who offers to serve as her bodyguard. Trey has been in love with Eryn for a year, but she lost her husband several years ago and isn't ready to open herself to the potential for pain again. She's kept Trey at arm's length and wants to do so now—after all, she can take care of herself. But she has a four-year-old daughter to protect, so Eryn reluctantly agrees to let Trey into her world. But when they're thrown together in a race for her life, she has to combat both a vicious enemy—and the pain from her past. Is Trey trustworthy enough to let him into every area of her life, or is the risk too great?

## CHAPTER ONE

*Cancel your classes or your computer isn't the only thing that will be DOA.*

Eryn Calloway couldn't look away from her computer. Away from the blue screen—the visual known in the computer world as the “blue screen of death,” warning of a fatal system error.

But this warning was different. Very different.

It wasn't a Windows error. Not a virus. Her machine hadn't crashed.

Someone was threatening her life. Here. Now. At the annual Policing in the Modern World Conference where she was teaching computer courses as a representative of her team, Blackwell Tactical.

How could this be?

She was smack dab in the middle of a crowd of law enforcement officers mingling in the lobby of The Dunes Resort and someone wanted her dead.

*Craziness.* She shook her head at the absurdity, but fear had a hold of her stomach and it wouldn't let go.

“Eryn?” Deputy Trey Sawyer's deep voice jolted her.

She whipped around to see him approaching her, weaving through the crowd.

If she hadn't recognized his voice, his red hair would make him easy to find in a crowd. But his voice stood out to her much like a mother instantly picked out her child's voice in a group. Not that Eryn's feelings for him were motherly. Not by any stretch of the imagination.

She filled her lungs with air and connected with his grayish-blue eyes that were often calm and reflective of his easygoing personality. But not today. He looked darkly dangerous and very intimidating.

Every bit of air she'd drawn in whooshed out. She'd never seen this side of him, but man, she liked it equally as well as the laid-back guy.

He ran his gaze over her. "You're as white as a sheet. What's wrong?"

No way she was telling him anything. He was the last guy she wanted to share her problem with.

She reached for the laptop screen to lower it. He shot out a hand and pressed it over hers, halting her movement. His touch amplified the usual tingle of excitement she felt in his presence, and her already stressed-out mind whirled.

She swallowed hard and did her best not to reveal her unease about the hack *and* about seeing him again. They'd danced around their mutual attraction for a year now, and she found him almost impossible to resist. *Almost*. But she managed it so far. The key was to eliminate the time they spent together.

Today was no exception. She would move on as soon as possible, and while he was here, she wouldn't display even a hint of her feelings. Not when she would never let things develop with him. Or any other man for that matter.

He bent forward to stare at the screen and released her hand. He worked the muscles in his strong jaw for a moment then turned his gaze on her, the intensity there making her gasp.

"What in the world is going on, Eryn?"

“It’s nothing.” She tried to sound casual, but she didn’t manage it.

“Right. *Nothing* made all the color drain from your face.” He grabbed a chair and turned it to face her. He straddled the seat and rested powerful arms on the chair back.

She took a moment to look at him. Not a good idea, but then she didn’t have good ideas around him. He wore black tactical pants much like hers, and an Under Armour tactical shirt in an army green color that fit him like a second set of skin, accentuating his muscular build and broad shoulders.

Her gaze wanted to linger there, but she forced it back to his face. She steeled her expression and her voice. “It’s nothing. Leave it alone.”

She closed her computer and started to get up.

He rested a hand on her shoulder, effectively stopping her from rising. She held there, midair, and refused to look at him.

“I can’t let this go, and you know it.” The vehemence in his tone surprised her. Where was the laid-back guy she knew? “Someone is threatening you, and you need help.”

Right. *His* help. She shook his hand off and stood up. He was acting like most guys—assuming she wasn’t capable of taking care of herself. But as a former FBI agent and cybersecurity expert, she was capable. Very capable. She turned to glare at him and walk away, but his eyes were locked on her like a sniper eyeing his target. Leaving without discussing this was pointless. He would trail her and corner her in another location.

She sat back down and lifted her chin. “I can handle this.”

His gaze softened, his eyes bluer now, a striking contrast to his rich red hair. “Why do you always think you need to be so tough?”

She *did* have to be tough in the law enforcement world to ensure that men took her seriously. Fortunately, her male teammates at Blackwell Tactical respected her skills and abilities.

She deflected his question with a wave of her hand. “Why do you have to interrogate me? I said I can handle it.”

He eyed her but didn’t budge.

“Look. I’m a cyber professional and know how to deal with this hack.” She leaned closer so they wouldn’t be overheard in the crowded lobby. “The guy deployed ransomware. You’ve likely heard of the software that locks a computer until the owner pays ransom to have it released. Well in this case, he doesn’t want money. He probably did it to show off. It likely happened when I logged into the unsecured resort network. I’ll restore my machine, trace the hack back to the offender, and turn him over to the authorities. End of story.”

Trey shook his head. “That doesn’t explain why this hacker wants you to cancel your classes, and he’s threatening your life if you don’t.”

Her gut was twisted in a knot over that very thing, but she ignored Trey’s concern. “He’s likely just testing my competency.”

Trey’s eyes hardened to steel. “Or this person really does want you to stop teaching and is going to kill you if you don’t.”

Eryn sat back, putting a wall up between them. “You’ve been in law enforcement too

long for your own good—seeing a problem where one doesn't exist.”

“No.” He planted his hands on the table. “I’m seeing what was right in front of my face before you closed your computer.”

She didn’t know how to respond, so she said nothing.

He made a low sound in his throat like a growl, then shook his head. “Tell me about your classes.”

She wanted to rush up to her room to take care of the computer issue. But Trey was tenacious and wouldn’t let it go until she explained, so she would get it over as quickly as possible. “I’m teaching two classes. One is about how every cell phone is unique and pictures taken on a cell can be traced back to an individual phone due to these unique characteristics.”

He sat up a little higher. “I’ve never heard of that.”

“It’s a new discovery and not readily used yet, but I want detectives to start thinking about the possibilities of how to utilize this element in their investigations.”

“Explain,” he demanded.

At his tone, she thought about refusing, but again, he would keep badgering her until she answered. “Digital cameras are built identically, but manufacturing imperfections create tiny variations in the camera sensors. The variations cause some of the sensors’ pixels to project slightly brighter or darker colors than they should—called pattern noise. It’s not visible to the naked eye but can be found with deeper examination.”

“Very interesting, but worth killing you over?” He shook his head. “I don’t get that.”

“I agree, which is why it’s likely just an attention-grabbing measure.”

“Don’t be so quick to dismiss it without further thought.”

She should’ve known he would keep after it. She would, too. The minute she reached her room. She shifted to stand.

“And the other class?” he asked, stilling her.

She had to appease him. “It’s about the Internet of Things.”

“Is that a new term? I’ve never heard of it.”

“Not new, but fairly recent, I guess. IoT devices are those with on and off switches and connect to the Internet and/or to each other. Things like cars, televisions, phones, and refrigerators.”

“Yeah, I can see that. Computers have invaded our world. There’s a ‘smart’ *everything* these days.”

“I know, isn’t it great?” She chuckled.

He frowned. If he couldn’t laugh at her joke then he really was upset.

“What are you going to do about the hack?” he asked.

“First, I need to get my PowerPoint presentations up and running on my computer so I can teach my next class.”

“Now wait a minute.” He sat forward. “You’re not going to ignore the warning.”

“Wouldn’t you?”

He blinked. “Yeah, likely, but—”

“But you’re not a helpless girl like me and can protect yourself,” she finished for him and crossed her arms.

“Wait, no. I don’t think you’re helpless.”

“But I *do* need protecting.”

He rolled his eyes and ran his fingers through his fiery red hair, leaving it in disarray. “I can’t win here, can I?”

“Honestly, no. I get tired of the double standards in law enforcement. Either I’m as capable as you are or I’m not.”

He clenched his jaw. “You know that’s not all it is. I care about you, and when I care about someone I do my best to make sure they’re safe. Just like you and the rest of your team have each other’s backs. If one of the team members is in danger, the others step up.”

He was right, and she couldn’t argue. He knew the team well. He was good friends with Eryn’s boss, Gage Blackwell who owned Blackwell Tactical. Their friendship went back to their military days when Gage was a SEAL and Trey served as a Green Beret, and they’d worked on a joint team together. And a year ago, Trey helped Blackwell out when someone threatened Gage’s wife. That was when Eryn had met Trey. Since then, he’d attended several of their law enforcement trainings at the team compound an hour up the coast in Cold Harbor.

She didn’t mind acknowledging the team dynamics, but she wouldn’t respond to his comment of caring about her. That would take them through a rabbit hole she didn’t want to go down.

“You’re right,” she said. “We do look after each other and have a strong bond. Maybe stronger than most teams since injuries took us out of our chosen professions. It’s a bond we all share. But we don’t overreact, and *you’re* overreacting, Trey.”

He shot her a testy look. “No. I’m stepping up here like the team would. You’re not going to stop me, so you might as well quit wasting your effort trying.” He jabbed his finger on the table. “You can’t teach the classes.”

“See? You *are* overreacting.” His behavior made her even more stubborn. “I’m not going to back down on that. I’ll be teaching my scheduled classes.”

He jerked his legs back, the muscles rippling against his pant leg as if he was ready to spring from his chair and fight her foe. He grimaced, but it disappeared as fast as it started. He’d been shot in the leg helping Hannah and still hadn’t recovered.

He met her gaze and held it. “You’re not teaching if I have anything to say about it.”

She worked hard to remain calm and not snap at him. “Why would you have anything to say about it?”

“Because someone has to watch out for you.”

“Please,” she said and resisted rolling her eyes. “There are five big strapping guys on our team. They’re all I need.”

“So, you’re going to tell them about this, then?”

She hadn’t planned on bringing it up. Not when there wasn’t proof that this was nothing more than an idle threat. But she wouldn’t tell Trey that. Lying went against her Christian

beliefs, and she wouldn't start now simply to calm Trey down.

He glared at her. "You tell Gage or I will."

Trey wouldn't hesitate to call his buddy Gage. It would be far better coming from her.

"Fine. I'll tell him."

"Today."

She stood and stared down on him. "I'll do it the moment I get my computer up and running."

"How long will that take?"

She rubbed her neck to ease the tension. "If all goes well, a few hours or so."

"Okay, I'll cut you some slack and give you three hours. If you haven't told Gage by then, I will."

She eyed him. "You really are a pain, you know that?"

He smiled, his eyes softening. "A pain who cares about you and doesn't want to see anything bad happen to you."

She blew out a breath. "I appreciate that you care, Trey. I just wish you didn't care so stinkin' much."

\*

Trey didn't like letting Eryn walk away from him when she was irritated with him. For so many reasons it was hard to count. But most of all, he knew she hated it when guys underestimated her

abilities. Was one of her pet peeves actually, and he fell prey to it all the time.

At five-foot-seven, he thought of her as petite compared to his six-foot-four height. A petite and very pretty woman. She had long black glossy hair that she usually wore in a ponytail, but today it was free flowing and swung with each step. She wore her usual black tactical pants and a no-nonsense knit shirt revealing upper body muscles that she worked hard to build and maintain.

She looked tough, but at the same time managed to appear so feminine that the combination did a number on him. Couple that with her big brown eyes, delicate eyebrows, and a full bottom lip that he dreamed of kissing for months now, and he was captivated by her. Smitten—if truth be told.

He got up to keep an eye on her, his right thigh aching with the movement. He'd suffered a gunshot wound to the thigh when he was helping apprehend a thug bent on killing Gage's wife, and Trey had been confined to desk duty since then. He was starting to believe it wasn't going to fully heal, and he would never go back to patrol.

Eryn slowly made her way through the sea of officers lingering between classes, and many of them paused to follow her progress across the room. A stab of jealousy bit into him. Not that he thought she would be any more interested in one of them than she was in him.

She lost her husband four years ago and was solely focused on raising her four-year-old daughter Bekah. Trey had once asked Eryn out, and she said she had no time for a man in her life. But then, there were moments when he caught her looking at him with such longing, he couldn't help but hope she would change her mind if he was just persistent. So he had been. Very persistent because she was so worth it.

But now? Now he needed to lay back. His leg wasn't one hundred percent, making his future employment uncertain. Not a good time to start dating, and he wouldn't want to lead her on. He had to get his mind right about his future job before embarking on a relationship.

He sighed out a long breath. Life was so complicated at times, even with God's guidance. He knew God heard his pleas since the injury and would point him in the right direction, but Trey had never been faced with such a big U-turn in life. God would show Trey the way as long as he kept the lines of communication open and didn't step out before the timing was right. But man, he wanted to step out. Wanted to get back to work. Forget the mounds of paperwork and get back to actively helping others.

He shook his head, clearing his mind, and started through the lobby toward the coffee stand in the corner. His leg throbbed with each step, but he tried to ignore it to smile at the barista as he ordered a black cup of coffee. None of that fancy stuff for him.

"Trey," Gage Blackwell's voice came from over Trey's shoulder.

He turned and schooled his expression so he didn't let on about his worry for Eryn. As much as he'd pushed her, he wanted her to have a chance to explain the situation to Gage.

"What's up?" Trey asked.

"I was hoping I'd run into you." Gage clapped Trey on the back. "How about we sit down for a minute?"

"If this is about the job offer, I'm not ready to go there yet." When Trey had been shot, Gage offered Trey a job on the team. Trey wouldn't mind joining Blackwell, but he couldn't be around Eryn every day. Not with the way he felt about her when she didn't return the feelings.

“Leg’s getting better then?” Gage asked.

“Nah, but after the latest surgery, I still have a few more weeks of PT so I’m hopeful.”

Gage gave him a knowing look, and Trey didn’t like it. Gage suffered a permanent arm injury as a SEAL and was faced with riding a desk or leaving the team. Like most men in spec ops, he didn’t do desk duty well so he left his team. Everyone on Blackwell Tactical had faced a similar situation. Trey was heading down the same path, but not willingly.

“I hope it works out for you,” Gage said. “So this isn’t about a job. Got a minute then?”

Trey nodded. “Let’s find some place quieter.”

He led Gage to the area where he and Eryn had talked. Her face, white against her dark hair, came to mind again, and his gut cramped. He resolved to find a way to get her to agree to let him keep an eye on her until this situation was resolved.

He sat on a plump sofa in a beachy turquoise color and moved around until he eliminated the ache in his leg.

Gage took a seat in a matching plush chair across from him. “Did I mention that I’m looking for a forensic person for the team?”

Trey shook his head.

“Law enforcement training and protection services are still our main focus, but the number of clients needing us to investigate unsolved crimes has grown rapidly. So we need a forensic expert.”

Trey took a sip of the rich black coffee. “Makes sense. Especially since you want to

collect the evidence in a manner that would make it usable in court.”

Gage nodded. “But you also know one of my main purposes of starting Blackwell is to offer injured soldiers or officers a second chance at a job they love.”

“So you’re looking for a crime scene investigator who’s been injured and benched.”

“Exactly. And I’m striking out.”

“Yeah, not too many CSI’s get injured on the job.” Trey rested his cup on his knee. “Did you try the Portland Police Bureau? Their criminalists are required to be sworn officers, and they still work patrol jobs for protests and riots.”

Gage shook his head. “Do you have any contacts there?”

“Yeah, I have a buddy on the force. I can give him a call to see if he knows anyone who fits the bill.”

“Appreciate it, man.” Gage sat back and crossed his feet at the ankles. “I’m a little surprised to see you here.”

“Why’s that?”

“Didn’t think you’d need a lot of training for desk duty.” Gage chuckled.

Trey forced a smile. He hadn’t reached the point where he could joke about his potential loss of career yet. And besides, Trey thought Gage knew exactly why he was here. Why he always signed up for other trainings at Blackwell’s compound, too. Shoot, the whole team probably knew he had it bad for Eryn. He doubted he was very subtle about it.

“Seriously, man, if the leg doesn’t improve enough to go back on patrol, let me know. I’ll always have a job open for you.”

“You don’t have to feel guilty, you know. Just because I was helping you out when it happened.”

“Actually, I credit you with saving Hannah’s life and will always be in your debt, but this is business. I’m smart enough to know you’d be a real asset to the team. But don’t go telling anyone that. I won’t admit to saying it.” Gage grinned, but he looked over Trey’s shoulder, and his smile vanished.

Trey pivoted to see what had changed Gage’s good mood and spotted Eryn storming their way.

“Wonder what’s got Eryn so mad?” Gage mused.

Trey didn’t know, but he suspected it had to do with the threat and computer issue. Maybe she failed at restoring her computer.

She locked gazes with Trey and stormed straight ahead. Her muscular legs took her through the crowd in seconds. Breathing hard, she came to a stop in front of him. She looked like a fierce lion planning to defend her cub, and the wild beauty in her expression got Trey’s heart pumping hard.

“You couldn’t wait, could you?” She locked onto his gaze like a Sidewinder missile. “You had to rat me out.”

“I didn’t—”

“What happened to giving me three hours? It’s been less than thirty minutes.”

“Like I said, I—”

“I thought you were a man of your word.”

“Eryn,” Gage said calmly. “Breathe and give the guy a chance to speak.”

She fisted her hands on her hips and glared at him. “Well?”

“I didn’t tell Gage anything. He asked to talk to me about finding a forensic person for the team.”

“Oh.” Her anger evaporated from her expression, and she seemed to melt right in front of them.

“I thought...” She shook her head. “I’m sorry, Trey. There was no call for doubting your word.”

Gage looked back and forth between them, his gaze questioning. “But apparently there *is* call for me to wonder what the two of you are keeping from me.”

Eryn sank down on the sofa next to Trey. She didn’t seem to realize how close she was sitting to him, but he could feel the heat of her leg resting nearby, and he had a hard time focusing on anything but that.

“I got a ransomware notice on my laptop,” she said, her breathing under control. “And Trey happened to be passing by and saw it.”

“Ransomware?” Gage shook his head. “I can see that happening to others on the team,

but you? I can hardly believe it.”

“I know, right?” She frowned. “I’m never going to live it down.”

“Truer words have never been said.” Gage chuckled. “Is that why you didn’t want to tell me?”

“Sort of.” Eryn glanced at Trey.

He figured her look meant she wanted him to back down about mentioning the warning, but he wasn’t about to do so. He opened his mouth to say that when she faced Gage again. “It wasn’t your typical ransomware warning.”

“How’s that?” Gage’s eyes widened.

“They didn’t ask for payment to release my computer. Not that I would pay it anyway. No point. I back up my machine daily and can restore it with little effort. And this is my travel computer so there’s not much on it anyway.”

“Travel computer?” Trey asked.

“When I do trainings I often have to access unsecured networks like here at the resort. So I don’t want to risk having confidential information on my machine in case I’m hacked.”

“But what if you’re working an investigation?” Trey asked. “Don’t you need access to more information then?”

She nodded. “In that case, I don’t access unsecured networks. I use my phone as a hot spot instead.”

Trey nodded. He'd heard of using a cell phone like a wireless router, but honestly, he didn't know how it worked.

"I've already traced the ransomware," she continued. "My class files were infected. I was on my way to talk to the conference director about it when I saw you two talking." A sheepish look crossed her face.

"You mentioned this wasn't a typical ransomware warning," Gage said.

She nodded. "The threat actor didn't ask for money or Bitcoins. He wants me to stop teaching my classes."

It often seemed like she spoke another language, and Trey always learned something new when he talked to her. "What's a threat actor?"

"The person or entity responsible for a malicious act. They're often called hackers by laypeople, but in the IT world they're called actors."

"Well this hacker or actor or whatever you want to call him says if you don't cancel your classes he'll kill you," Trey added. "Or at least that's what I thought the warning meant when it said you'd be DOA if you didn't stop."

Gage frowned and locked his gaze on Eryn. "And you didn't want to tell me about this—why?"

"Because of the way you're looking at me."

"And how's that exactly?"

"Like you want to lock me in my room and not let me out until this guy is caught. Or

worse, send me back to Cold Harbor for my own protection.”

“Neither of those are bad ideas,” Trey said.

Eryn fired him an irritated look. “I committed to teaching here, and I *will* follow through on that. The officers only have so much money and time for continuing ed in a year, and I won’t make them miss out.”

Gage scrunched his dark eyebrows together. “Then we need to be smart about this. I’ll assign someone on the team to your protection.”

“Who?” she asked. “You, Riley, and Alex are holding classes here. Coop and Jackson are training at the compound. Any change to that would create the same problem.”

“I’m free,” Trey offered. “And glad to step in.”

“Perfect solution,” Gage readily agreed.

“No,” Eryn said. “No. No way.”

“Why not?” Gage asked. “Trey is as capable as anyone on the team.”

“It’s not that.”

“Then what?”

Eryn nipped on her lip, and Trey knew she was trying to come up with anything other than to mention that he had a thing for her.

He could solve that problem for her. “I think she’s worried that I’ve fallen for her and can’t keep my hands off her.”

“We all know that, but so far you seem to be able to control yourself.” Gage grinned.

Eryn frowned. “It’s not funny.”

“I know,” Gage said. “But you’ve got to admit, it paints a pretty interesting picture.”

“Not one I want to paint.” She crossed her arms.

“Look,” Trey said. “If I promise not to even hint at my interest in you other than to make sure you’re safe, will you let me do this for you?”

She frowned and looked like she planned to refuse. Maybe she should. Because even frowning, he wanted to kiss those lips. Still, he couldn’t let her off the hook. “If you won’t think about yourself, think about Bekah.”

She shot him a frustrated look. “Low blow bringing my daughter into this.”

“May be low,” Gage said. “But he has a point. Your mom and Bekah came along on this trip, so you need to think of them, too.”

“I’ll send them back to the compound.”

“How?” Trey asked. “The compound is an hour down the coast and no one’s free to escort them.”

“Fine,” she said, but crossed her arms, her eyes still locked on Trey. “You can be my bodyguard, but you need to promise to keep things professional between us at all times.”

“I promise I’ll do my best.”

“Glad that’s settled.” Gage fixed his focus on Eryn. “The guys and I have a three-

bedroom suite. We'll move out so you and your family can have it. That way the hacker won't know the exact room where you're staying, and it'll give Trey a room in the same suite, too."

"You're right, *if* the hacker doesn't have her under surveillance," Trey added.

"I can't have you give up such a nice room," Eryn said ignoring Trey's comment.

Gage waved a hand. "I only booked a suite so we'd have a place for the team to meet. We can still meet there, right?"

"Of course."

"Good. Then it's settled. I'll text the others to let them know we're moving."

"Bekah's napping so we'll move our things when she wakes up... if that works for you."

"Sounds good."

She stood. "Thanks, Gage. We can always count on you."

Trey got up, and the jealousy that hit him earlier took a bite again. He wanted Eryn to think the same thing about him. He was dependable and reliable and would be there for her every minute she needed him. She could count on that.

She glanced at him. "I suppose you'll want to come with me now."

He nodded and chose not to comment on the fact that her expression said she would rather go a few rounds with a rattlesnake than have him accompany her. He would have his work cut out for him, but he was always up for a challenge.

Especially when that challenge was someone as beautiful and captivating as Eryn

Calloway.

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