



THE MONTANA MARSHALLS

# RUBY JANE

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## *Prologue*

Aw, York just knew this would happen.

Knew he should never have come home. Knew that if he set foot back in America, he'd end up in the back seat of a covert CIA SUV, winding through the back hills of Washington State with a guy who had probably figured out that York knew his secrets.

A guy who wasn't going to slow down to question him, but rather was simply searching for a good place to dump a body.

York's body.

Ex-CIA agent York Newgate hadn't imagined exactly this scenario—the one where he left behind the woman he loved, where he never really got to say goodbye, the one where somehow the happy ending he'd grasped for a wonderful, disbelieving second slipped through his fingers—but he had known, without a doubt, that the CIA would find him.

After all, he knew their tricks.

Knew they were tenacious. And that the driver, former officer Alan Martin, dressed in a suit, with close-clipped dark hair and a pair of aviator glasses, had no intention of “questioning him down at headquarters.”

Liars, all of them.

And York had been one of the very best.

Maybe he deserved this.

“So, taking the shortcut back to DC, huh?” he said now, his knees jammed into the passenger seat in front of him.

Martin glanced at him over his shoulder, not even allowing a smirk at York's attempt to point out the obvious—they were traveling down a remote highway in the middle of the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest.

“I saw a great hike to Bridal Falls a couple miles back. Maybe we should stretch our legs?” York said.

No response.

They'd flex-cuffed his hands behind him, but he could get out of that easily enough. He just needed them to slow down. Last thing he wanted was to take a header off the side of the road, end up in a metal crumble at the bottom of the mountain.

But maybe that would be better than what Martin had planned for him.

York should have put up a bigger fuss at the hospital, but frankly, he'd been so startled by the sight of Martin, a fellow CIA contact, showing up to arrest him, he'd simply conceded.

And of course, RJ's family was there, with all her protective brothers who formed a sort of wall around her. The last thing he wanted was a reason for them to dislike him more.

So he'd gone with Martin, quietly. *Nothing to see here, folks.*

The minute Martin and the other thug he'd brought for backup had locked York in the back seat, the churning in his gut started.

He looked out the window at the thick tangle of pine and underbrush. The sun had dropped behind the mountain, leaving long, jagged shadows along the road.

Yep, they were looking for a place to end him and make him disappear.

Forever.

Sorry, RJ.

The other goon hadn't spoken, not once, but York bet if he did, he might find a Russian accent emerging from his mouth. The man had Russian-street-fighter-named-Igor written all over his scarred mug.

Wow, he'd been all kinds of stupid when he didn't send Martin an uppercut, kick Russian Thug, grab RJ's hand, and run for the hills.

"So, I'm assuming you haven't booked us a cute little Airbnb in the woods?"

"Enough, York," Martin snapped.

"We're not on a CIA holiday at all, are we? This is some off-the-books field trip."

Martin's jaw tightened.

Yes, that made sense. After all, Martin had been working off the books for some time now. Ever since—

Martin slammed on the brakes as he came around the turn.

York barely had time to catch himself on the seat, his hands already loose in the cuffs.

Martin swerved the car into a scenic overlook, the first deserted pull-off they'd come to.

Oh good, now came the fun part.

Martin got out, walked around the car, and opened the passenger door. "Get out."

Right. York noticed Igor got out too. So maybe this was more of a tussle than an execution.

York kept his hands behind him, no need to give away the fact that in about two-point-three seconds, as soon as Martin took a step closer, he was going to slap away Martin's gun, grab his wrist, jerk him forward, and land his knee in his gut a second before he slammed the palm of his hand into Martin's face, hopefully breaking his nose.

Then he'd round on Igor and redirect the fist headed toward York's face, roll, and cut off his breathing with a side-handed hit to his neck. Maybe lock Igor's arm into an arm bar and shove him into the ground before Igor had a chance to figure out what was happening.

York would grab the keys from a bleeding Martin, get in the car, and return to RJ and their happy ending.

But none of that went down quite like he hoped because just as Martin made to grab York by the lapel to haul him to the edge of the overlook, a voice emerged from the trail nearby.

"Hey! Can you help me?"

Oh no. York wanted to turn to the kid—maybe early twenties and wearing an Oregon Ducks football jersey—and shout, *Run!*

He wasn't fast enough. Ducks spotted Martin's gun and froze.

Igor grabbed the kid.

And the what-ifs flashed through York—grab the gun, turn it on Martin—but right then Martin shoved it against York's head. "Good try. Hands up, York."

York raised his uncuffed hands. Aw— "Let him go. He's just a kid."

Igor pushed the kid against the hood of the car. A long metal cross hung down from a leather lanyard around his neck. And the kid must have played football because he had the name Mack on the back of his jersey. He wasn't too keen on Igor holding him down either.

"Let me up!"

"Martin—he's not a part of this," York growled.

Mack wasn't listening to his hostage negotiator because he jerked back in a move he might have seen on *Lethal Weapon* and—hey, it worked!—connected with Igor's nose.

Good kid!

Igor's nose exploded in a spray of blood. He shouted, and then, of course, smashed his fist into Mack's face.

The kid spun and dropped like an anvil. Didn't move. A pool of blood leaked out from where he'd hit the ground.

Martin stared at Igor. "*Seriously?*"

York's moment was gone. Because he couldn't leave the kid here to die—

A car drove by, slowing as if to pull into the overlook.

*No, please—*

From behind, Martin shoved the gun into York's neck. "Get back in the car."

Not. A. Chance.

The car was pulling in, a car top carrier on the top, a couple of children's bikes strapped to the back.

Shoot. York moved toward the SUV.

Igor had grabbed Mack and dragged him to the SUV. Mack dropped like dead weight into the passenger seat behind Igor, and York had a sick feeling.

York glanced at Mack as he got in behind Martin. The kid's eyes had rolled back into his head, his skin pale.

"Gimme your hands," Martin said and York complied, Martin's gun still on him. Igor came around and flex-cuffed him again.

Aaaand, here they went again.

Martin got in at the wheel and pulled out, spitting gravel.

Yeah, the next stop would be the end.

"You didn't have to kill the kid," York said.

"He's not dead," Martin said, but York reached over and pressed a finger to his carotid artery.

Maybe, maybe not. York couldn't tell, but he did get his hands on the kid's lanyard and ripped it with a hard yank from his neck. "I beg to differ."

Martin glanced in the rearview. "Don't touch him."

York gripped the cross in his hand. Looked like something he might make at camp—a couple of nails soldered together. And the lanyard would free him.

*Thank you, kid.*

York wound the lanyard through his cuffs at the wrist, caught one edge of the flexicuff, then clamped the ends of the lanyard between teeth.

“Hey!” Igor shouted and York dodged a cuff to his head.

A couple sawing motions and York was through the cuffs.

“Stop him!” Martin shouted as he went around a curve. He nearly hit a car off to the side.

York exploded. He stabbed the long end of the cross into Igor’s neck as the thug came over the seat, hitting the carotid artery. Blood gushed as Igor grabbed his neck, gasping.

*RJ, hang on. I’m coming back to you.*

York snaked an arm around Martin, held him against the headrest, the bloody end of the cross next to his neck. “Stop the car.”

But Igor was thrashing, grabbing for the wheel, or maybe just help, and Martin had to shove him off. Which made him swerve hard. He banked off the guardrail, over the center line, toward a wall of mountain.

And into the oncoming lane.

Just then, around the corner, a semi appeared, big grille, wide load, and oh, that would make a splat. York leaped forward and grabbed the wheel, wrenching it over hard.

The force turned the SUV, screeching, spinning, around, slamming York against the door.

Right about then, something cold and hard sliced across his side. Maybe the cross, still gripped in his hand.

The SUV smashed against the semi, careening it toward the edge of the road.

York grabbed the door handle and jerked it open just as the car hit the guardrail.

The car went airborne, spinning up, over the edge.

York felt himself tearing out of the door, slipping into the air, his body flying.

Then the world twisted around him as he fell and fell into the tangled forest below.

## *Chapter 1*

Ruby Jane Marshall wasn't a runner. Normally.

Usually, her SOP was to hunker down and hide. Like a rabbit, her little heart pounding in her chest, seconds away from a heart attack.

But as she stood in the kitchen of the rowhouse in DC, sirens haunting the autumn night air, a voice screamed in her head that sounded a lot like York's.

*Run!*

The blaring unsettled the Mayfair neighborhood, lights flickering on in nearby townhomes, and she had five minutes—maybe less—to track down a serial killer.

A killer whose victims included her boss, Sophia Randall.

And maybe the man she loved, York Newgate, although—nope, she wasn't going there.

She simply refused to accept the idea that York could be dead. Not when his body hadn't been conclusively identified.

So running wasn't an option. Nor hiding. Not until RJ tracked down Sophia's notebook and maybe her laptop computer. Anything that might give her a fresh lead on Sophia's death, give her a clue as to why her boss would have been in Seattle.

And most of all, how she ended up in the sights of a Russian assassin.

RJ darted out from shadows behind the fridge where she'd momentarily planted herself when she heard the first mourn of a siren. Of course they'd be coming for her because she *wasn't* a supersleuth or even an action heroine. More like a glorified secretary with the B&E skills of a third grader.

To get into Sophia's place, RJ had broken a window on the ground floor. Climbed in over a plant, which now littered the sofa with its dry-as-dust remains, and tracked her footprints across the formerly white carpet of the guest room and up the stairs to the kitchen and living room area.

Oh, she was definitely going down for this. Jail. Prison. And orange so washed out her complexion, clashing with her dark hair and blue eyes.

But desperate times called for crazy actions and...

*What would York do?*

He was still in her head, those blue eyes looking at her like she could save the world—or maybe just *his* world.

She bumped into a table in the dark and reached out to right the wobbling lamp—

The crash raised gooseflesh and she froze again. She was going to leave a raccoon trail of evidence through Sophia's apartment. But it wasn't like Sophia was around to press charges.

Not since she'd died four weeks ago.

Don't. Think. About—

RJ blew out a breath, trailing her hand down the hallway toward the first door on the right, Sophia's office, working off the scant memory of a casual dinner party a year ago.

Please let Sophia have left behind her journal, the one she always carried, old-style, to jot her thoughts.

The journal had to be here. Viktor Shubnikov, the police detective in Seattle who headed up the investigation, had been kind enough to give her a list of the evidence found at the crime scene.

No journal in Sophia's possession. Just her body, a lot of blood, and evidence of a struggle.

At least her boss had gone down fighting.

Hopefully the journal led to clues about how she ended up in a hotel room in Seattle, her throat slit, clearly having been tortured.

Don't. Think—

RJ drew in a breath and brailled the wall inside the office door. She found a light switch. Flicked it on.

Hello, neighbors. Maybe they would think Sophia had returned.

The sirens faded, and for a moment, she heard her breath, heavy in her chest. Maybe she *hadn't* triggered an alarm...

Still, she needed to add some giddy-up to this snatch and grab.

The tiny office was palatial by DC standards, containing a standing desk, a credenza, and a bookcase. The entire townhouse, a three-story walk-up brownstone, had been renovated in the revived trendy, early-eighties' style—muted gold fixtures, dark wood floors, shaggy white rugs, and cool white driftwood furniture. The office overlooked the lush garden alleyway that ran between the homes.

A deck led out from the office and ran the length of the unit.

She opened the credenza and began to sort through it. Bills, papers, folders, and a printer. Nothing that resembled Sophia's small gray journal.

On the black desk, a dust ring framed the outline of a laptop computer, probably confiscated by a CIA sweep. Another fine wisp of dust over the top of the desk suggested they'd been here some time ago.

Opening the desk drawers, RJ riffled through pens, a checkbook, and leafed through the duplicate pages. She found an entry for a piano tuner, another for the Great Frame Up, a local picture framer. The office sported a few photos of friends and family, but Sophia was single, so no shots of her on a beach with a cute man.

On the wall, however, hung a picture of the astrological clock from Prague's Old Town Square. The picture stirred memories of the last time RJ had been in Prague. She'd been meeting with a man named Roy who had sent her on a trip to Russia and ignited this whole fiasco.



The fiasco in which she'd found herself on the lam through the former Soviet Union, dodging the FSB and Interpol, suddenly named as the lead suspect in the attempted assassination of General Boris Stanislov.

Ex-CIA operative York Newgate had pulled her out of hiding, kept her alive, and secreted her out of the country. Of course, that only led to more trouble when the *real* assassin turned his sights on RJ and then her foster sister, Coco, and then, of course, York. Which only caused Ford, her Navy SEAL brother, to completely overreact and stage his own rescue attempt, one that nearly got him killed.

She could take care of herself. Really.

Nothing in the desk, and RJ stared at the picture.

Maybe...

She pulled the picture off the wall, looking behind it. No safe. No secret compartment. So much for her super CIA analyst skills.

After checking the back of the picture, RJ replaced it on the wall.

She flicked off the light.

RJ had personally searched Sophia's CIA office after VP candidate Senator Reba Jackson had cleared her of the assassination charges. No journal in the small office overlooking the Potomac either.

So, either her murderer had taken it, or Sophia had left it here in her home.

RJ took the stairs up to Sophia's bedroom and turned on the bedside light. The nightstand held a vitamin container, a Kindle, still charging, and some lip gloss.

She gave a scant search through the closet and bathroom, looked in the hall linen closet, and stood in the hallway, heart thumping.

The sirens sounded again, this time closer.

C'mon. *Think*.

She was out of leads. But she desperately needed to track down Sophia's killer if she hoped to find York. Or at least his killer...

No. He had to be alive.

RJ refused to believe the body identified at the accident scene, burned and unrecognizable, belonged to her York.

Of course, the CIA denied even arresting him. Denied knowing the two suits who had dragged him from the hospital in cuffs. Their bodies had also burned in the car accident that had charred the vehicle.

She wasn't stupid—she could spot a cover-up when she saw it. After all, she'd seen every episode of *Alias*.

And somehow—she didn't yet know how, but she'd figure it out—entangled in it all was a Russian assassin named Damien Gustov. An assassin who had followed York from Russia to America.

In her worst fears, Gustov had York. Was torturing him the same way he had Sophia—

Sirens. Nearly deafening, and RJ had a minute, tops.



She came down the stairs and headed for the family room. Light bathed the room as she flicked on a lamp to reveal a leather sofa, fireplace, bookshelf, and an upright piano. A cursory glance at the shelf revealed nothing.

A stack of books on the piano held a lamp. She searched through the books and accidentally hit a number of the piano keys.

Oops. Although...a couple hadn't hit, leaving a dull thud where a note should be.

*Piano tuning.* She remembered the duplicate check. Clearly someone hadn't done their job.

Or...

RJ pulled the books off the piano top and opened the lid.

There—inside, lying on the strings—the weathered gray journal, the corners fraying as if Sophia had brushed her thumb against them too many times, thinking.

RJ grabbed it and shoved it into her inside jacket pocket. Zipped up the jacket.

Red lights flashed through the front windows.

She turned off the light.

Yeah, she should run.

Now.

Clearly the front door was out, so she slipped out onto the deck.

Second story. And below her was the patio, a hedge, and a not-so-sweet landing.

Oh, where was her inner Sydney Bristow when she needed it?

RJ's hands slicked as she threw her leg over the edge of the railing—probably smart cops would run around back, but all the townhomes were connected, so maybe she had a minute or two—

Her hands slipped, and she let out a scream, her grip sliding down the rails to the bottom.

Her legs dangled, maybe eight feet from the patio.

Okay, she just had to let go and drop.

Let. *Go.*

Her hands gripped the bars, frozen, and, see, this was why she wasn't a superspy.

Hiding. So much better.

"Just let go!"

The hiss emerged from the darkness, and for a second, the guttural whisper raked up her fragile hopes— "York?"

How had he—except he *always* showed up when she needed him the most—in the middle of an alleyway in Moscow, on a train, just in time to save her from a stabbing, and even in Seattle, when she walked in on a dead body.

Of course he'd show up now.

"Just let go, sis!"

She gasped as hands touched her ankles.

What? "*Ford?*"

"Yes—c'mon!"

She released one hand, turned and reached for his shoulder, and let go with the other.

He caught her easily of course, his arms thick from hours of SEAL PT. He was dressed in black, wore an earpiece and night vision goggles, and now grabbed her hand. “Run!”

“How—”

“Not now!”

Then they were fleeing down the boulevard between connected rows of townhomes, in and out of puddles of light. He pulled her into an alcove and planted her beside him. “Shh!”

Her heartbeat could give her away, but she said nothing as two figures darted past them, toward the home she’d just escaped.

“What are you—”

He put his hand over her mouth, turned to her ear, just a whisper. “Stay on my six.” Huh?

Then he grabbed her hand again and took off.

They ran across the yard, through a narrow walkway between units, and out into the opposite street.

A van sat parked under a cherry tree and the door opened. Ford pushed her inside. He climbed in after her, pulled the door shut, and they streaked away.

The van’s seats had been removed, so she scooted back along the wall, trying to find herself.

“Hey, RJ.”

RJ stared at Scarlett, the petite brunette who had been Ford’s SEAL team communicator, sitting in the passenger seat.

Next to her, in the driver’s seat, sat Ford’s teammate Trini, a large, dark-skinned man from Trinidad. He drove as if on a casual Sunday drive, his fingers tapping on the window.

“I don’t—how did you—”

“Tate told me what you were up to,” Ford said, pulling off his earpiece.

How did Tate, her overly protective bodyguard brother—okay, they were *all* overly protective—know where she was? Or what she was doing...

“Wait...he’s working with Viktor in Seattle, isn’t he?”

Ford had pulled off his night vision goggles. Ran a finger and thumb across his eyes, then blinked. Looked at her. “I don’t know. I just got a text from him for this address that said you were in trouble and that you needed an exfil.”

She stared at Ford, her eyes adjusting to the darkness, the DC neighborhoods outside the van’s back window sentried by the gnarled limbs of barren cherry trees, their leaves turning to dust in the autumn air. She was surrounded by brick homes, manicured yards, tidy lives.

She’d had a tidy life, once upon a time.

A tidy, safe life where no one needed to rescue—or exfil—her.

“I had everything under control.”

Ford’s mouth tightened around the edges. Even in his all-black attire, she could make out his too pensive pale-green eyes.

See him unmasking her lies.

Except it wasn't a lie.

She got them into this mess.

She was going to get them out.

Besides, "You better than anyone should know that when people try and rescue me, they only get hurt. Or..." And she looked hard at him. "Killed."

Then, with the accuracy of a knife to her heart, Ford took a breath, looked away.

Virtually agreeing.

She deserved that.

Pulling out Sophia's journal, she ran her thumb along the frayed corners.

Yes, she might have started this whole nightmare. But she was going to figure out how to end it.

Without anyone else she loved getting hurt.

*I will find you, York.*

Please, please be alive.